

Executive Privilege Ch. 01

"Ohhh fffff, right there, baby." Wendy's manicured nails dug into the sheets as she lifted her back off the bed. Her long legs wrapped around Jon's lean build, locking her ankles behind his back as she pulled him closer. His tongue explored her freshly shaved lips with more vigor while his fingers circled her nub, every movement drew desperate gasps from her lips.

She lay writhing under him, her long blonde hair fanned out across the pillow as her full breasts swayed to the rhythm of each movement. Two years of marriage had done nothing to diminish their physical chemistry, even if their demanding careers often left them too exhausted for moments like this.

"Ahhh yes, don't stop, baby." Her hands drifted to her chest, fingers ghosting over her sensitive nipples. Her curves were her best asset, the things people noticed first about her. Her tongue slid from her mouth as she rolled the sensitive peak between her fingers. She just wished it wasn't the only thing they noticed. She tried wearing baggy clothes, and different bras, but nothing seemed to work. They were always there, always the only thing people saw. The marketing firm where they worked had quickly discovered the analytical brilliance of Jon and within a few years made him an account manager. As for Wendy, her marketing insight was lost beneath several appreciative looks and double-innuendos. Her innate creativity and intuition about the market were overlooked by the corporate pecking order as she fought her way not to be classified as just another pretty face with a great figure.

"Uhhhnng." The sound escaped her throat. The pleasure continued to build, as her body battled with her her mind for attention. It was one of those few moments when her figure felt like a gift and not an obstacle. She wanted to get lost in Jon's eager attention and forget the frustrations of feeling typecast, silence the voice that whispered she'd never be more than what others saw when they looked at her. Yet another moan filled the air. Wendy refused to let herself be torn from this moment, to allow her body to be desired instead of hiding under the hope of being seen as something more.

Wendy's ocean-blue eyes fluttered shut as her body was racked with pleasure. She ran her fingers through Jon's shaggy hair, tugging him deeper. His runner's build might lack the imposing presence she'd been drawn to in past relationships, but he made up for it in stamina. Those early morning runs were paying off in ways he'd never thought possible.

"Don't stop, Jon," she whimpered, her voice shaking with her need. Her thighs quivered on either side of his face as she tugged him closer, her fingers in his hair tightening with urgency. She rotated her hips into him, her pleas becoming desperate as she chased her release.

The pressure built in her like a volcano ready to erupt. "Oh God, baby," she moaned, her voice rising with each word. "Just like that. ohhhh, fuuuuck!"

Her walls clamped down around his fingers as he greedily savored every drop of her release. Wendy's orgasm rocked the bedroom, causing the walls to quake. Mercilessly, Jon's hungry tongue continued pressing against her core until she pushed his lips off her now over-sensitive lips.

"No more, no more," she pleaded happily, fighting to regain her breath. Jon wiped his mouth with his forearm, his tender kisses peppering up her body before stopping at her neck. The tip of his length brushed against her clit, and she flinched from the overwhelming feeling, still

hypersensitive from her intense orgasm. "Mmm baby." She pulled his lips to hers, savoring the faint, familiar taste left behind. "You are so good at that. You know how sensitive I get afterward."

She felt bad, she didn't want to deny him. She knew he was just as pent up as she was. She could feel it in the way his cock pulsed against her slick entrance. Her fingers found his sensitive sac, squeezing and teasing it with a soft touch. "We can keep going. I don't mind." She felt his sharp intake of breath as he nudged his hips forward causing her to squirm.

He pushed forward, feeling her walls relax around his shaft. Her orgasm had passed and her fiery grip had already started to cool. "No, it's fine." The subtle disappointment in his voice wasn't lost on Wendy. "It's not the same when you're not really into it."

He pressed a soft kiss to her lips before rolling onto his back. She bit the inside of her cheek, her own disappointment washing over her. She half wished Jon would just take her anyway, despite her body's reaction. Although, she certainly didn't mind the chill of the ceiling fan against her drenched skin, and the way it gave her overheated body instant relief.

"You know." Jon rolled to his side, brushing damp strands of hair from her face with tender familiarity. "You could always return the favor."

Her cheeks flushed at Jon's words. Wendy ran her fingers over the sprinkling of hair on his chest, buying time. "You know that isn't really my thing." She pressed a gentle kiss to his shoulder, trying to soften the rejection. "But tomorrow after work, I promise I'll make it up to you. I'll even initiate so we don't end up like this again."

The sincerity in her voice even surprised herself. She really wanted it to be different this time, to be the kind of wife who could match his dedication both in and out of the bedroom. Her limited experiences in college had left her wary - the unpleasant taste, the way her throat would constrict, fighting against her own reflexes. That one attempt with Jon early in their marriage had ended particularly badly, with her nearly getting sick after he finished unexpectedly in her mouth. Since then, they seemed to silently agree on not having her give him oral. He said it was no big deal to him; still, sometimes she saw that longing in his eyes when she'd decline.

Her fingers drummed on his chest: four quick taps, a childhood habit surfacing as she began to feel anxious. The rhythm steadied her racing thoughts, yet she detested the fact that the old compulsion returned. She'd thought she'd left it behind with her modeling career, but here it was again, rearing its ugly head every time she felt guilty.

"I'll hold you to that." He pressed a kiss to her head. "It's probably for the best anyway. Marcus wants me to review those reports before tomorrow's meeting." She watched his silhouette move across their bedroom, illuminated by the warm glow of his desk lamp filtering in from their home office.

"It must be nice having an executive see your worth." She bit the inside of her lip. She hadn't meant for her voice to have such an edge to it. Jon was great at his job; she wasn't questioning that. She just hated how easily the recognition seemed to come his way. She was just as hard-working, just as smart, but Jon was Marcus's golden boy.

"You're brilliant, Wendy." He leaned against the bedroom door, putting on his glasses. "Besides, at least you don't have to stress about the quarterly numbers."

Wendy's fingers tightened in her hair, pulling it into a ponytail as she tried forcing frustration aside; she knew that he didn't mean to be patronizing. "Thanks, babe." It came out more forced

than she intended, but Jon didn't seem to notice as he admired her nude form... predictable. "I don't know how I got so lucky to find a guy like you."

"I could say the same thing." He blew her and kiss then turned and walked to the office.

Wendy reached for her silk nightie, the cold material clinging to her still-warm skin. The soft, cotton sheets were inviting as she settled back and watched the rhythmic sway of Jon's monitor light dance gently across their wall. She had her own presentation to finish, but for now, she allowed herself to drift in the quiet aftermath of their intimacy.

Jon watched out of the corner of his eye as Wendy dabbed at her lipstick in the visor mirror. She didn't wear much makeup, just enough to accent her natural beauty. Despite having been together for the last four years she still managed to take his breath away whenever he looked at her. He put his hand on her leg, the fabric of her navy blue maxi dress riding up just past her ankle.

"Do you think this neckline is too low?" She put her lipstick back in her clutch, adjusting the dress. She cursed her large chest. No matter what she wore, it always seemed to draw attention before anything else.

"You look beautiful," Jon said, squinting his eyes against the glare of the rising sun to turn and admire his wife. His blue button-down brought out the warmth in his brown eyes behind his thick-rimmed glasses; his striped tie was perfectly knotted at his throat. Always put-together, always proper.

"Thanks." Wendy shifted in her seat, nude heels clicking against the floorboard. "Though I'm starting to regret these shoes. The elevator better be working today."

"Relax, you're trying too hard. A big project will come your way soon." Jon's fingers tickled her knee. "You keep this up you're going to make me nervous."

"Right, your big analysis." She forced a smile. "You'll knock it out of the park. Marcus believes in you."

The modest three-story office building of Buckeye Branding Company came into view. Its brick façade was unremarkable among the other downtown Columbus businesses. Jon circled the crowded lot twice before finding a spot near the back.

"At least we're getting our steps in," he joked, but Wendy was already thinking about her aching feet.

Nervous energy buzzed through the office as they entered. The fourth quarter earning report was always one of the most tense meetings of the year. It was typically the one that would determine their end-of-year bonuses and set the tone for the new year. Jon spent most of the night working on the projections for some of their larger clients. No one in the office could see the numbers quite the way he could. He understood market shifts and projection analytics like very few. Numbers told him this was going to be another successful year, perhaps not buy a new house and plan an expensive vacation successful, but successful enough that he wasn't worried.

The fresh aroma of coffee pulled him from his reverie. He gave Wendy a quick kiss at the end of the hallway and then made his way to his office at the far end, while Wendy made her way to the cubicles with the other marketing specialists.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite beauty queen!" Ava called across the office as Wendy set her bag down.

Wendy's shoulders stiffened. "Model, actually. Not a pageant girl." Her tone was light and playful. Ava was one of her favorite people in the office. "And it was one magazine spread that left me feeling—"

"Now that's something I'd love to see." Michael's voice materialized behind her out of nowhere. His presence filled her cubicle, his expensive suit straining against his bulk. But not even the starched material, nor the designer label, could fully mask the way his shirt bunched at his waist, or how his tie accentuated the thick fold of skin around his chin. Sweat beaded on his hairline, despite the aggressive air conditioning of the office, and his thinning hair clung to his forehead. "I bet you were quite the centerfold."

Ava gagged. "Gross, Michael. It's too early for your creeper vibes."

Wendy laughed, but Michael's gaze made her bite it back. Something in the way he looked at her crawled under her skin. She waited until his footsteps retreated toward the break room before muttering, "Maybe if he spent less time harassing women and more time at the gym, he'd have better luck dating."

A sharp intake of breath from Ava told her she'd spoken too loudly. Wendy's stomach dropped as she caught Michael's frame stiffen in the doorway.

"Don't worry about me, sweetheart." His eyes raked over her figure with deliberate slowness. His tongue slid across his lips. "Some of us don't need luck when we have... other advantages." He adjusted his belt, making sure the women caught his inference without hitting them over the head with it.

"Gross." Ava shuddered as they gathered their notebooks. "I don't need that image in my head this morning." She held her hands wide apart, raising her eyebrows suggestively. "I can only imagine the type of women that find him attractive."

"Stop!" Wendy swatted her arm playfully. "You're terrible."

"That guy gives me the creeps. You'd think after three marriages he'd learn how to talk to women."

"I guess there's a reason they all ended in divorce."

Marcus's authoritative tone cut through the playful banter. "Conference room in five, everyone." He barely broke his pace as he passed. "We still need to get through the quarterly numbers if we are going to get out in time for the party tonight."

"Oh shit." Wendy gathered her things and started heading toward the conference room. "I totally forgot that was today."

"Please tell me you at least got your gift. Who'd you draw?"

Wendy groaned. "Jon. And after last night..."

"What happened last night?" Ava appeared at her side, clutching her notebook to her chest.

"It wasn't anything serious." Wendy hushed her voice, her face a shade redder. "I may have finished a little early. Like before he even got started." Ava's laughter made her bury her face in her hands.

"You're a one and done kind of girl too, huh?" Ava asked through her giggles. "When it happens with David I usually let him finish in my mouth. He loves it."

"Yeah, that's not really my thing." Wendy's face grew hotter; she immediately regretted starting this conversation.

"Girl!" Ava's eyes lit up with mischief. "This is perfect. Write him a sexy IOU. Tell him he gets one night where you'll do anything he wants, no questions asked." Her eyes locked with Wendy's "And you can't say no. It will make him feel more confident and get you out of your comfort zone you prude." She bumped Wendy with her hip. "Besides with Michael making comments like that all the time, you need to get used to working on your gag reflex."

"Ava!" Wendy glanced around the hallway. "I'm not a prude. I just know what I like and what I don't." She lowered her voice already feeling uncomfortable about having this type of conversation in the office. "Besides, if I wrote a note like that I would get fired."

"By who? Michael?" Ava waved her hand dismissively. "Please. And Marcus would never let him touch his golden boy's wife. Besides, it's Jon we're talking about. He'll read the first line, turn bright red, and stuff it in his shirt pocket before anyone notices."

Wendy laughed despite herself. "You're probably right. He still blushes when he sees me in my bra and panties."

Ava gave Wendy a playful once-over. "With boobs like that, I'd blush too."

They were still giggling as they entered the conference room, too caught up in their conversation to notice Michael standing just outside the door. His expression darkened as he absorbed every word. So that's what they thought of him, was it? He was just some gross divorcee that they couldn't look at without gagging. His fingers absently toyed with the Secret Santa assignments in his pocket. He'd show them who would be laughing soon enough.

Wendy leaned against the back wall of the conference room, fidgeting uncomfortably in her heels as the quarterly meeting wore on. Her conversation with Ava replayed in her head as the sound of chairs sliding across the tile floor bounced off the walls. A dozen chairs surrounded the heavy oak table, each occupied by department heads and project leaders, positions that felt increasingly out of reach.

Michael Reynolds dominated one end of the table. The fifty-something-year-old commanded the room with the easy assurance of someone who'd long since learned that power trumped appearance. His salt-and-pepper hair and widening waistline were worn like badges of a man who knew his authority came from something far more lasting than physical appeal.

"The OSU account." He clicked to the next slide; his voice fell with the line on the graph. "We're looking at a projected 12% decline. Their football program has been in a slump, especially against Michigan. Brand engagement is down across the board."

The observation snapped Wendy out of her haze. She'd noticed the same trends in social media engagement, had even mentioned it to Jon last night while he worked. But he'd dismissed it,

barely looking up from his spreadsheets. Now Michael was saying the same thing, and it gave her a sense of validation she didn't realize she wanted.

"Actually," Jon's voice cut through her memory, "my analysis shows something different." He adjusted his glasses, pulling up his own slides. "If we consider the admission rate, population density, and how much the markets have withstood traditionally-"

"You're just flat out wrong," Michael cut in, leaving no room for debate. "Some of us have been in this market long enough to understand what drives loyalty. While your... numbers," he drawled the word like it truly was meaningless, "are certainly thorough, they miss the fundamental human element. The passion. The culture." His hand cut through the air like a football coach drawing up a last minute play, each gesture deliberately measured to command attention. "But by all means, please, continue explaining sports marketing to someone who's been doing this since you were learning long division."

The dismissive tone caused Wendy's stomach to clench. Her eyes met Michael's for a moment, a smirk forming on his lips when she didn't immediately look away. She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to shield herself from his knowing smirk. She'd seen that kind of casual dismissiveness before, in photographers who could reshape a room's energy with a single word, in directors who commanded without raising their voice. Jon's data-driven certainty suddenly felt naive in comparison.

"Numbers don't lie." Jon spoke with the same academic certainty that usually reassured her. He launched into a detailed analysis of demographic shifts and market penetration rates, his hands sketching graphs in the air. Wendy watched the room's eyes glaze over, even as her own mind caught the patterns he was missing. He didn't understand the emotional resonance of losing to a bitter rival, the wounded pride of longtime fans, the complex psychology that statistics couldn't capture. The same intuitive understanding that Michael had voiced minutes earlier, though the way he looked at her made her wish she didn't share his insight.

"Tell that to their season ticket holders." Michael's laugh was thunderous and Wendy found herself smirking despite herself. He was right. If Jon had listened to her last night then he wouldn't be getting embarrassed. Michael's fingers drummed against the table as Jon launched into a detailed analysis of demographic trends, and for a moment Wendy imagined herself at the table delivering the same speech but with similar data as Michael's. Was her analysis really better than Jon's? As good as the Director of marketing?

Another authoritative shout by Michael brought her back into the meeting. She watched the color rise in Michael's neck, his jaw clench in a way that made it seem like he was ready to fight to the death on this issue.

"The seasonal fluctuations show a clear correlation-" Jon began, but Michael cut him off with a wave.

"Tell me, Wendy," Michael's voice cut through the air, making her jump. Every head in the room turned to her. She was parched. People who didn't have a seat at the table typically didn't speak during these meetings.

"When creating social media content, do you read the reports on demographics first or take a pulse of the comments section?"

One-two-three-four, her fingers pressed against her thigh. She silently counted in her head as she waited for her racing heart to slow. The question came out of left field. The intuitive kind of marketing she did but could never quantify for Jon.

"I... I start with the engagement patterns," she admitted, well aware of Jon's look of surprise. She cleared her throat, forcing herself to stand a little straighter. She didn't want this moment to pass her by. "Jon's numbers are right." She saw him smile and sit up straight. For one fleeting second, she thought of leaving it there.

She turned to Michael, who wasn't just looking at her but studying her, waiting for her to deliver the kill shot that Jon seemed oblivious to. Butterflies erupted in her stomach, but she pressed on. "But we should also consider the emotional response of our audience. A loss to a rival like Michigan isn't just a statistic. It's a blow to identity. Recovering loyalty isn't about the next season. It's about rebuilding trust, pride. That's where we need to focus our engagement strategy."

"Exactly." Michael's approval felt like a shot of espresso, even as Jon's dismissive head shake made her chest tighten. "That's the insight your husband's algorithms keep missing." Michael winked at her before launching into another point. The approval sent a very unexpected warmth through her body. Why did validation from someone who repulsed her feel so... alive? The thought sent her shifting uncomfortably in place, all too aware of how her body had betrayed her conscious disgust.

"Gentlemen." Marcus stood from the table, cutting through the confrontation. "You both make excellent points. Jon's data is solid, but Michael's market intuition shouldn't be dismissed. We'll base projections on the median of your figures."

The green in Michael's eyes seemed to burn brighter than usual. He nodded his head slightly in agreement, but Wendy knew that he had won the battle. His gaze swept the room, passing over Wendy where she stood in the shadows. She looked hastily down at her notebook, suddenly aware of just how intensely she had been watching the exchange.

"Great work, both of you," Marcus summarized. "Now, let's wrap this up. We've got a party to prepare for."

The meeting devolved into rustling papers and clicking laptops. Wendy pushed off from the wall, still trying to shake off the residual effect of the confrontation.

"I saw the look in your eye. You agree with me, don't you?" Michael was beside her in a flash, standing just that little bit too close for comfort.

"I um, you made some good points."

"You should speak up more. Prove that you're more than just-" Michael's eyes settled on Wendy's chest and his tongue ran over his lip. "Jon's wife." His eyes cut to hers, and she could feel the burning in her neck. She told herself it was just professional interest that had her so engaged, nothing more. So why did she all a sudden feel so flustered?

"Babe, you coming?" Jon appeared at the conference room door, his pleased expression suggesting he'd somehow missed the entire undercurrent of the meeting. Michael gave her a predatory smile then stepped aside, letting her retreat to her husband while his eyes looked over her body unapologetically.

She needed a drink. Thank God for office parties.

The mirror fogged over with steam as Wendy washed her hair in the bathroom. The heat of the water felt good on her skin, like she was washing the workday away. She did not know why she had felt so dirty after the quarterly meeting, but she'd spent the rest of the day feeling like she needed a shower.

"We're going to be late." Jon's voice came in from under the door. "Marcus wanted to go over the numbers again before the party. After Michael's outburst this morning, he doesn't believe the data."

Wendy rolled her eyes as she let water pour over her face. Her hands slid over her body to rinse off the soap. She let the water cascade over her face as she replayed the events of the day. Michael's face swam into view once more, not his features, which revolted her, but that raw power, the energy radiating from him. The way he demanded attention when he spoke. He had a way of seeing past people's walls and seeing the truth of what was underneath. He'd done that with her. He didn't see her as just a pretty face. He saw the work she did, made her feel validated. A gasp tore from her throat as her fingers brushed her folds, the intensity of her arousal sending a shock through her system. Heat pooled low in her belly, her body responding to... what exactly?

"I cannot believe Marcus is even considering his argument," Jon forged ahead, oblivious to her internal struggle. His voice grated on her nerves, even now condescending, even now still lecturing, still missing the point, still refusing to see her as an equal.

The memory of Michael's eyes on her made her skin crawl, yet her core ached to be touched. It wasn't attraction, couldn't be attraction. The very thought of him made her shudder. But the way he'd seen through her defenses, recognized her potential when everyone else dismissed her. She yanked her hand away, disturbed by the direction of her thoughts.

"...And that's just ridiculous, right?"

Wendy let out a groan of frustration, bringing her fingers to her hair. Did he not even realize she had the same argument last night? Tried to tell him the same thing that Michael did, but he just missed it. "I'm going to be awhile. Maybe you should just go without me.

The other side of the door was silent for several seconds. Wendy wasn't sure if he heard her or not over the water. "You... um, you sure?"

Wendy let out a sigh, suddenly very annoyed with Jon. "Yeah it's fine. I don't want you to be late to see Marcus."

"Oh. Ok."

"Wait," Wendy popped her head out of the shower, remembering the Secret Santa exchange.

"Can you just grab my gift off the table and drop it off when you go? It's the small box wrapped in the candy cane paper."

"Sure. I'll um... I'll see you there," Jon's voice was soft. He could hear the frustration when Wendy told him to go. He just wasn't sure why.

He was halfway out the front door with his jacket clutched in his fist before he remembered the gifts. His mind was still preoccupied with the quarterly meeting. Marcus just needed to see reason. Numbers did not lie, never did. Michael might have decades of experience, but cold hard facts trumped gut feelings every time. He picked up the two presents off the table, barely registering how feather-light Wendy's gift was as he tucked them under his arm. He shouted a quick I love you, though he doubted she heard him over the running water. Then rushed out the door to talk to Marcus.

Wendy stood in front of her closet, hair still damp from the shower, wrapped in a towel while she weighed her options. The dark green wrap dress caught her eye, conservative enough for a work function but still sexy. She slipped it on, examining herself in the mirror. The hem hung just below her knees, offering a professional silhouette that didn't invite the usual unwanted attention. She pulled at the neckline, trying not to make it too obvious she was trying to minimize her cleavage. Even with the tugging and carefully worked adjustments, her chest simply would not stay completely hidden.

"Professional," she told herself, smoothing the fabric over her hips. "Sophisticated." The woman reflected in the glass looked polished and put together, exactly the picture she wanted. A person worth a seat at the table, not standing in a shadow somewhere.

Her fingers quivered slightly, coating her mascara; her mind strayed to Michael's hungry stare from the meeting, the way he'd validated her insight while making her skin crawl. She shook her head and refocused on the perfect wing of her eyeliner. A splash of her favorite perfume and classic black pumps, and she was done.

Across town, Jon entered the office door with both presents tucked under his arm. Christmas music spilled out from the conference room, where the tables had been pushed against the walls to allow more room for mingling. Jon however, barely registered the festive after-hours office transformation in his quest to reach the heap of Secret Santa gifts in the corner.

"Marcus will understand once I take him through the demographic shifts," he muttered, slapping both wrapped packages on the pile with abandon. The candy cane paper crinkled as it fell. The tag fluttered in the artificial breeze coming from a nearby heating vent.

From his seat near the drink table, Michael watched with particular interest as Jon hastily deposited. Ava and Wendy's hushed conversation played in his head over and over. He waited until Jon disappeared down the hall toward Marcus's office, then moved with surprising grace for his size. His thick fingers worked quick, finding the gift with his name on it, swapping its tag with the candy cane-wrapped package. He stepped back and admired his handiwork.

"Let's see how gross she thinks I am now," he said to himself, smoothing his tie. This party was just about to get interesting.

Wendy smoothed her dress out as she entered the building. Her heels clicked on the floor as she second-guessed her choice in wardrobe. Even though her chest well contained, something about it still made her feel exposed. She took a deep breath to calm herself. She was still upset about the quarterly review meeting, about Jon dismissing her. She was just putting herself in a mood. She needed to shake it off and enjoy the party.

Through the open double doors of the conference room, she could see Jon's lean frame, his hands animated as he talked with Marcus. Ava stood with them, her head thrown back in genuine laughter, one hand resting casually on Marcus's forearm as he finished what must have been quite the story. The three of them looked relaxed, comfortable; a sharp contrast to the anxiety in her own life.

"Perfect timing." Michael's voice came from behind her, making her jump. "Walk with me a moment? There's something I'd like to discuss before you join the others."

Wendy stomach knotted as she followed him down the hall into the office. The party noise faded with every step, the hollow echo of their footsteps a stark replacement. Michael's office was just a few rooms away but at that moment, it seemed like miles, its glass walls now shaded for privacy. He didn't turn on the overhead lights, just his desk lamp. The soft glow against his face made him look like a Bond villain. "The OSU account," he said, settling into his chair while leaving her standing. "What did you really think?"

Even though she was expecting the question it still caught her off-guard. Her throat went dry as she weighed her response, her fingers digging into her palm four times exactly in an attempt to temper her nerves. She was loyal to Jon, and she didn't want to say anything that would harm his standing, but a part of her couldn't shake the feeling that this was her opportunity to finally be seen. "The figures look good," she said judiciously, searching Michael's expression. "Jon's numbers are always spot on."

"But?" Michael prompted, leaning forward.

"But you're right, about the human aspect." The words tumbled out before she could stop them. "Football culture here isn't just about statistics; it's religion, tradition. The trajectory will probably flatten once you factor in brand loyalty and emotional investment." She took a deep breath. It felt good to get it out. She felt lighter, like she just left a confessional. "We should adjust our marketing strategy accordingly."

A satisfied smile curled Michael's lips. "Finally, someone who understands both sides of the equation." His eyes locked with hers. "It's a pity your talents are so... underutilized around here."

Something in the way his gaze raked over her body made the hairs on her arms prickle. Despite the modesty of her dress, she felt exposed under his gaze. Heat crept up her neck as she remembered his earlier comments about her modeling days.

"I should probably—"

"There's a new contract coming our way." He rose from his chair, his bulk making the roomy office feel small and cramped. He walked toward her with measured steps, deliberate. "I need someone with your..." His eyes held hers as he inched closer. "Instincts." His gaze drifted from hers briefly making her wish she'd worn a turtle neck. "Is that something that may interest you?"

He was close enough now she could smell the cheap cologne he heavy-handedly applied. "Absolutely," she blurted out a bit too quick.

A wave of guilt immediately washed over her. The word had escaped before she could consider its implications. Would this opportunity have gone to Jon if she hadn't been so quick to agree? She hadn't really undermined him, had she? They were partners, for crying out loud, and here she was, making career decisions without even discussing it with him. "I probably should get

back to the party," she said, suddenly needing to be near her husband. To remind herself of who she was, who they were together. "Jon will be wondering where I am."

"Of course," he cut her off smoothly. "Goodnight, Wendy. I have a feeling things are about to get very interesting around here."

She made her way back to the group, her heart lightening as Jon's familiar smile greeted her. She slipped her arm around his waist, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Hey, handsome," she whispered, needing the comfort of his warmth.

"There you are!" Ava threw her arms around them both, the scent of vodka cranberry on her breath. "Where have you been hiding?"

"Just got here," Wendy said, squeezing Jon's side. He was already turning back to Marcus, his mind clearly still on their earlier discussion. The familiar ache of being second to his work settled in her chest.

"Well, you're here now," Ava grinned, linking their arms. "And you look gorgeous in that dress. Come on, I was just about to get another drink." She caught sight of Michael standing by his office watching them and she rolled her eyes in disgust.

As they made their way to the bar, Wendy turned back to look at her husband, still deep in heated discussion. She turned away, squaring her shoulders. "Make mine a double," she told Ava, the weight of Michael's proposition heavy upon her mind.

Two hours and several vodka cranberries later, the party had reached that sweet spot between professional gathering and actual celebration. The overhead lights had been killed, Christmas music hummed from hidden speakers, and Michael tried catching unexpected women under the mistletoe.

Even Jon relaxed, his prior intensity had mellowed out under the fine scotch and the fact that Marcus had finally consented to have another look over the numbers before arriving at a conclusion. He sat with one arm casually thrown across Wendy's narrow waist lovingly.

"Time to exchange gifts!" Marcus exclaimed while clapping his hands. "Take your chairs, people. Tim, you're first."

Ava pulled Wendy down beside her onto the small couch, jostling shoulders to get settled.

"Watch this," she whispered, unable to contain her gleefulness as a young intern named Timothy from IT approached the gift table. "I got him something special."

"It says it's from Ava," he said to the room before he ripped into the paper with the confidence you'd expect from a barely legal intern. Timothy's face ran the gamut from confusion to shock to mortification as he pulled out the gift card. The golden 'Naughty & Nice' logo gleamed under the party lights. "I... um... thank you?" he stammered as his face turned several different shades of red.

Ava dissolved into giggles beside Wendy, pressing her face into her shoulder to muffle the sound. "His face! Oh my god, his face!"

Several other exchanges followed, mostly bottles of wine and gift cards. Wendy's nerves grew with each opening, her fingers twisting in her lap. When Marcus called Jon's name, she grabbed Ava's arm.

"I took your advice," Wendy said, fidgeting uncomfortably in her seat. "About the IOU." The words caught in her throat as Jon reached for a package wrapped solidly in red paper, nothing like the candy cane print she'd selected.

"It's from Michael," he announced examining the paper before opening it with delicacy ensuring not to rip the paper more than he needed to.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

The room seemed to tip sideways as Jon held out a plain navy tie. Nice enough, but completely and totally ordinary. Completely and totally wrong. Her eyes flashed to the pile of presents, locking onto the familiar candy cane wrapping just as Michael rose from his seat.

"My turn," he said, his meaty fingers wrapping around her gift. Her thumb and index finger found each other in her lap, their tips dancing together in that old rhythm—one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four, the childhood habit taking over as time seemed to slow. He ripped open the paper like a wild animal. "Says it's from Wendy."

One-two-three-four. One-two-three-four. The spinning quickened with her heartbeat as he flipped the lid off the small box, the sound like a shotgun in her ears. One-two-three-four-one-two-three-four-onetwothreefour. This couldn't be happening. His eyes met hers, a predatory gleam reflecting in them. "IOU: One night of making your wildest dreams come true. A 24 hour pass to all of your deepest, and dirtie—"

"I think that's enough." Marcus cleared his throat from the back of the room. "Some of us still remember when office gifts were just mugs and candy, right Michael?" Marcus's intervention came sharp and quick, but did little to stop the laughter and thrown glances at Wendy.

Michael laughed a little too loudly, a little too eagerly. "Thanks, Wendy. This was certainly... unexpected. But, I'm definitely not going to complain." His eyes lingered on her, weighted with implication.

"There's been a mistake," Wendy exclaimed, near hysteria lacing her voice. The alcohol that had made everything warm and fuzzy minutes ago now churned in her stomach. "That was- I mean, the tags must have gotten switched. That was supposed to be for Jon."

She turned to her husband, heat clawing up her neck. "Did you check the tags when you dropped them off? What happened?" The words were coming faster now, the panic rising. "I trusted you with one thing—"

"Hey," Jon's hand found hers, steady and warm. "It was an honest mistake. No one actually thinks that was meant for Michael." But even as he spoke, she could feel Michael's stare burning into her, could see the way his fingers possessively folded the note into his pocket.

Beside her, Ava watched Michael with thin eyes, her playful attitude from early gone replaced by something much darker. She knew Michael had a hand in this, she just didn't know how. Wendy hardly noticed anything at all. She was beside herself, trying to figure out how a gift exchange could turn into the worst, most embarrassing moment of her life. She was drastically spinning out of control. Ava put her hand on Wendy's leg, squeezing it gently but her eyes never left

Michael's. She had to figure out what his end game was and put a stop to it before he hurt her friend.

"Next gift!" Marcus called out a little too brightly, eager for the moment to pass. But Wendy knew something had shifted. Something had been set in motion. She just wasn't completely sure what it was or how to stop it.

Jon's hand closed on hers, protective, reassuring. She squeezed back, despite the voices in her brain screaming to run somewhere and hide. Somewhere that she didn't have to see the hunger in Michael's eyes.

The drive home had been quiet, each lost in their own thoughts. Now, as Wendy removed her makeup in the en-suite bathroom, Jon watched her reflection trying to recall if he'd even glanced at the gift tags before dropping them off. Wendy had said the IOU was meant for him, and of course he believed her, but something about the turn of events gnawed at him.

The memory washed over him like a tornado - a different bathroom, a different time. Five years ago, Olivia had stumbled home from a late dinner with her boss, her smile as radiant as ever as she gushed about the meeting. She'd been drinking, cheeks flushed with wine and success. Jon had fixated on her smeared lipstick, though looking back now, he wondered if he'd imagined that detail to fit his fears.

"Are you sleeping with him?" The words had exploded from him that night, weeks of suspicion finally reaching their breaking point. She'd been working later, going for drinks with colleagues - always with a reasonable explanation that somehow felt like an excuse.

Her reflection stared back at him, hurt and disgust written across her features. "Jesus, Jon, this again?" Her voice had cracked slightly as the tears welled in her eyes. "Why do you always go there? Am I not allowed to be happy when you're not around? Do I need some kind of babysitter? I can't spend my life constantly proving my loyalty to you."

The relationship was over in a week. Jon had been devastated, yet righteously certain - until he saw Kyle at the gym. Kyle had been at the same restaurant that night, had watched the whole dinner from across the room. "Everything seemed completely normal," he'd said, his voice tinged with confusion. "They didn't even hug goodbye."

After that, Jon had tried therapy, desperate to understand his possessive streak. He'd called Olivia to apologize, but by then she'd moved on. He couldn't blame her. No one deserved to have every social interaction analyzed for betrayal. He'd promised himself he'd never be that man again.

And yet...

"Are you happy?" The question slipped out before he could stop it, his eyes fixed on Wendy's reflection.

Wendy lowered the makeup wipe, meeting his eyes in the mirror. "Why would you ask me that?"

"It's just..." Jon shifted uncomfortably. "The card. I saw you disappear into the office with Michael. And then that happened and I just." He trailed off, hating how insecure he sounded.

"Baby." Wendy turned to fully face him and softened her expression with understanding. "I am mortified that happened. You don't actually think I would do that to you, do you? And with Michael of all people?" She reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it gently. "Michael called me to his office because he said they may be closing a big deal soon and he wants me in on it."

Instant relief swept across Jon's face. He couldn't believe how dumb he sounded. Of course, Wendy wouldn't cheat on him, especially not with Michael. He promised himself never to question her again. "A new project? That's great; you finally get a chance to prove yourself." He stepped forward and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"We'll see. I probably blew it with that stupid gift mix-up. I still don't know how that happened. Could the tags have slipped when you were carrying them? You weren't throwing them around or anything, were you?"

Dread filled him as he realized how careless he had been when he put them on the stack of gifts. He was so anxious to go see Marcus, he practically threw them on the pile. Was he the reason for the mix-up?

"I don't see how, but it's possible." He bent down, kissing her cheek. "It will be ok. It's just a silly card. Michael will probably frame it to tease us at the next office party."

The relief in Wendy's eyes tempered him of his anxiety. He was mad at himself for even thinking something so ridiculous. He pulled back, locking her gaze. "So, it was meant for me, huh? Anything I want?"

The shift in his tone caught Wendy's attention, and she turned from the mirror, her earlier insecurities melting into intrigue. "Anything," she purred seductively. She was taken aback by this more assertive version of her husband. The possibilities of what he had in store ran through her head. Was Jon going to tie her up to the bed? Force her to go down on him, even though she hated it? She wasn't sure why, but something about that made heat pool in the pit of her stomach.

He reached for her hand pulling her to the bed. She shrugged off the red silk robe she was wearing and followed him in just her bra and panties. Jon sat on the bed wrapping arms around her back and pulling her toward him. His lips pressed against her ribcage and trailed higher.

"I want you on top," he whispered as his hand slid over the front of her bra sliding the cup down. The chill from the sudden exposure made her nipple hard and she ran her fingers through his hair. "You look the absolute sexiest when you're on top." His kisses danced around her nipple, sending a gasp from her lips. "The way your body moves, the way your chest—" She cut him off, pulling his lips to her nipple as sparks of electricity shot through her. For a moment, Wendy felt a flicker of disappointment at the vanilla request.

But the pure adoration in Jon's eyes pushed the feeling aside and she couldn't deny the growing need building inside her. "Well then, hot stuff, I better get my cowboy hat." She playfully laughed as she pushed him backward onto the bed. She loved the way he looked at her. The way his mouth practically hung open as she reached back and unclasped her bra. She crawled over his legs, her fingers going straight for the button on his pants. "Maybe you deserve an extra special treat since you're cashing in the IOU so early." Her hands slid over the front of his boxers, cupping his length. Jon lifted his hips as eagerly as he could, wanting as little clothing between them as possible.

With his boxers no longer in the way, Wendy let her nails glide up Jon's thigh. She could feel him writhe beneath her touch as she delicately wrapped her fingers around his shaft.

"Ohhh," Jon yelped in surprise. Wendy's palm was cool to the touch, causing him to jump with the unexpected change in temperature.

"Poor baby, is it cold? Want me to warm it up?" Jon saw something in her bright blue eyes, an intensity he'd never seen before. Her thumb circled his tip as she watched his reaction.

Wendy wasn't sure what got into her tonight. Maybe it was the vodka cranberries, or maybe it was that somebody saw what she was truly capable of, not just Jon's wife or the former model, but someone with real insight. The same validation she had been craving in that office meeting now coursed through her veins and made her bold.

For a moment, she contemplated taking him into her mouth, pushing past her usual disdain, and showing Jon just how much more she had to offer. Her face hovered over his lap as she stroked him, her breathing warm against his sensitive skin.

"Tell me what you want," she whispered, her hand working him with growing confidence. She wanted Jon to take control, see her the way Michael had, push her head into his lap without any thought about what he thought she did or didn't want.

"Baby, you don't have to..." Jon's voice had that same cautious tone, like he was working out an equation instead of reading the signals from her body. Ever the analyzer, even in bed.

Wendy bit the inside of her cheek, frustrated by his hesitation even as she appreciated consideration. This wasn't about what she wouldn't do - it was about showing him everything she could do, surprising him the way she'd surprised everyone else in that meeting. If he wanted her to ride him tonight, then she was going to give him the ride of his life.

She straddled him, centering herself above his rigid cock. Her eyes stayed on his as she lowered herself until her wet lips pressed against his tender flesh. Then, she began to rock her hips, rubbing the length of his cock with her pussy.

"Hey there, handsome," she said, rolling her hips with deliberate slowness. "Ready to see what I'm really capable of?"

He moaned at the feel of her heat stroking him.

"God, you feel so good. I'm not sure how long I'll last if you keep teasing me like that." He desperately wanted to control his orgasm, but after not getting to finish yesterday he knew the odds were slim. And the numbers never lie.

She lost herself in the moment, her body undulating above him. Her slick folds slid back and forth, coating him with her desire. His cock grew larger beneath her, thickening and hardening with each movement.

"Are you ready, baby?" Her breath caressed his ear now. Her chest pressed against his, the hair on his chest tickling her nipples. "Are you ready for me to ride you?"

She didn't wait for an answer but leaned down, grasping his cock in her hand to guide the tip to her core.

They gasped in unison as his bulbous head slipped inside her.

"You feel so good, baby. So hard and ready." Wendy wasn't always particularly vocal in the bedroom, but the few times she was, she was always told it added to the experience. For reasons she didn't understand, her body was on fire tonight, she wanted it to be a moment Jon would remember for the rest of his life.

She started to slowly lower herself, easing him deeper inside her. When she felt him bottom out, she rocked her hips in a rhythmic motion, trying to take him that much deeper.

"Uhhhhhh," she purred. "You feel so good. So fucking good." Her eyes fluttered shut as she pressed down on his chest, sitting up straight.

"I can't believe how tight you feel right now," Jon whined, trying to keep his eyes open despite the pleasure coursing through him so he could focus on her magnificent body. "You have to slow down though, baby. I already feel so close."

Her eyes were half-lidded. Her hips continued their dance, gaining momentum with each thrust, uncaring of his pleas to go slower. Fire ignited from her core, every nerve ending alive as she felt her own release start to build.

Jon was in heaven. She felt like a velvet glove drenched in oil. The soft whimpers emanating from her lips only heightened the experience. Her heavy chest swayed back and forth with each motion. He leaned up, catching her nipple in his mouth. Praying the distraction would keep this from ending too soon.

"Yes, yes!" Wendy threw her head back, as Jon's mouth found her nipple. The sensation rippled throughout her entire body. Her hips bucked and swiveled faster, as her orgasm neared. Jon's hands gripped her hips, he wanted to slow her down. He tried thinking of something else, a dead relative, a car crash, his grandma. Nothing worked. He'd never seen her so worked up before.

"Wendy," he gasped, tearing his mouth away from her breast. "Baby, I'm close. You need to slow down."

But Wendy was lost in her own world, her body moving of its own accord. She could feel her orgasm building, the tension in her body coiling tighter and tighter. She leaned back further, placing her hands on Jon's thighs for leverage as she ground against him, his cock pushing deeper inside of her.

"Oh God, baby. Don't stop. I'm going to cum, Jon."

Jon's voice strained. Wendy gripped his cock in a vice-like grip, squeezing him for every bit of euphoric pleasure. "Wendy, I'm going to cum." He nudged her leg to get her attention.

But Wendy was too far gone to care. She could feel her own release just out of reach. She moved faster, her body chasing the much needed release.

"Oh fuck. Oh God, baby, just a little longer. Oh please."

Jon squeezed her hips a bit tighter now, his body trembling with the need to hold back. But he knew it was a lost cause, he was already too far gone. With one final thrust, he yelled out, bucking his hips into Wendy and releasing his seed deep inside of her.

Wendy felt his warmth fill her, but she was still chasing her own release. She began to move faster, desperate to finish with him. But it was too late. Jon's body relaxed beneath her, as his hands relaxed then fell from her hips.

With a frustrated groan, Wendy rolled off him, her body hot as unfulfilled need raged through her. She lay back on the bed, her chest heaving with each breath.

Jon turned to her, a soft smile on his lips. "Well, at least we are even now," he joked to lighten the mood.

When she didn't say anything right away, Jon pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. He could feel her heart still racing, her body still tense. He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I should have held back longer."

Wendy shook her head, her breathing slowly returning to normal. "It's okay," she said. "It's not your fault. I should have listened when you told me to slow down. I'll swing by the pharmacy at lunch tomorrow." The way she said it sounded casual, but inside Wendy was mortified. She'd never been the girl who needed the morning-after pill. She was safe, always careful. "Besides, tonight was about you, not me."

They lay quietly together, Jon's breathing evening out as he started to drift off. Wendy lay awake, aware of every sensation: the cool sheets against her skin, the residual throb between her legs, the hum of unmet need zipping along her nerve endings. She shifted in bed, hoping a change in position might offer some relief.

"I meant what I said earlier," Jon murmured sleepily, pulling her closer. "About the project. You'll finally get a chance to be seen." His words were sincere, but something about the way he said it made Wendy turn to face the wall. Jon didn't seem to notice the frustration, instead he pulled himself closer to her, spooning her back.

Wendy smiled softly in the dark, her frustration still simmering but appreciative of his support. Working with Michael should have felt like a victory, but every interaction with him carried an undercurrent that made her uneasy. Still, he was the first person at work to truly see her potential beyond the surface-not just a pretty face or Jon's wife, but as someone with genuine insight.

Her thoughts drifted to that moment in the party when he'd read the IOU card aloud, that same hungry look in his eyes matching his earlier "centerfold" comment. She pushed the memory aside quickly. Professional recognition didn't make him any less of a creep. This opportunity would require careful navigation, but it was still the break she'd been waiting for.

Jon pressed deeper into her back, his deflated member slick against her butt. She should be satisfied, she told herself. Jon had enjoyed his gift, even if it ended sooner than planned. And wasn't that what tonight was supposed to be about - his pleasure? Still, her body buzzed with residual desire, making sleep feel impossibly far away.

Tomorrow would be different, she told herself, deciding to focus on the positives. Tomorrow she would get a chance to prove herself, be appreciated for her brain and not her face, or worse, Jon's wife. Perhaps then this pent-up energy inside her would find its rightful outlet.

Executive Privilege Ch. 02

Wendy was awake before her alarm went off. She expected to wake up refreshed and ready to take on the day. Instead, her mind was instantly back to the events of yesterday. The embarrassing scene at the Christmas party, Michael's cryptic conversation about a new account, even her evening with Jon left her... frustrated.

She slipped out from beneath the sheets, not wanting to wake Jon. His light snoring followed her as she padded across the hardwood floor on her toes. She was freezing. She wrapped her hands around her shoulders, her nipples straining against the fabric of her nightgown. She couldn't wait until they got some warmer weather.

The shower hissed and stammered to life as she pulled her nightgown off and waited for steam to begin to rise before stepping under the spray. She let out a long sigh, running her fingers through her hair while the hot water pelted her skin. She closed her eyes, letting the water wash away her frustrations and fear of what the day would bring.

"Everything's going to be fine," she told herself, pouring body wash on her loofa and scrubbing her sensitive skin.

Maybe Jon was right, Michael would just laugh the entire thing off, and things would go back to normal. Besides, what could he possibly think would happen with that dumb IOU anyway?

"Ohhh." The coarse fabric of the loofa slid across her chest, surprising her with just how nice the texture of it felt against her chest. Images of Michael leering at her flooded her mind. Her nipple was throbbing for attention. She bit her lip, giving in to the sensation for just a moment before allowing the water to wash away the soap, and perhaps also the shame.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered to herself, lathering up her stomach. Even that simple touch seemed to ignite sparks between her thighs. Wendy peeked her head out of the shower. It was faint, but she could still hear Jon's gentle snores.

"It's his fault," she thought to herself as her hand began sliding lower on her body. "He got me so close last night and then just..." Her mouth opened in shock as her finger slipped across her smooth folds to find them wet from something other than the shower. She considered turning the shower off and crawling back into bed with Jon. He would take care of her and be happy to do so. But she was running low on time, and as attentive as Jon was at times, he was also slow to get her there.

She let her left hand dip between her folds, feeling her warmth as she spread it over her parted lips. "Mmmm, I can be quick." She dropped the loofa to the ground, her right hand cupping her breast roughly, allowing her pointer finger and thumb to pinch the engorged pebble.

This sent an immediate thrill to her core, and Wendy let her fingertip tease her entrance. She'd asked Jon in the past to be a little rougher with her, and he tried, bless his heart. But he didn't have it in him. Jon was a kind, gentle lover.

She pinched her nipple harder, feeling the blood rush to it as she dipped her finger inside her sex. She felt her walls close around her, and her eyes fluttered shut. "Mmm yes, right there," she moaned, squeezing her chest. God, she wished Jon would treat her like this. A second finger joined the first as she imagined Jon pushing her against the wall. His teeth trailing down her neck, across her collarbone, down the swell of her chest until he took her eraser-sized nipple into his mouth.

"Ah, yes. Just like that, baby. Fuck me, Jon. Fuck m-"

The image of Jon disappeared, replaced by Michael. He had her glued to the wall, his large frame practically swallowing her as he fucked her without a care in the world. Wendy's eyes snapped open, her breathing heavy, her fingers still buried deep inside her as she tried to process what had just happened.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" Wendy hissed, shaking her head as if trying to physically remove the image. Yet even as disgust churned in her stomach, she couldn't deny the confusing heat that spread through her.

She thought back to Jon, to his tongue dancing over her clit. "Mmm yes, baby," she moaned, slipping her fingers over the sensitive bud. She could practically feel his tongue pushing past her folds, his lips creating a perfect suction on her clit.

Her pace began to quicken. Her fingers slipping back into her wet, hungry pussy then back out. She brought them to her mouth sucking them eagerly into her mouth, tasting her sweetness. Her tongue ran across the length of her digits, imaging it was Jon... his cock. She wished he tasted sweet like this, wished he would have nudged it into her mouth last night despite her protests.

"Ugh yes, baby. Use me, mmmph, fuck me." She arched her back up from the wall, pulling her fingers from her mouth and slamming them back inside her. Her thumb circled her clit, light flicks that grew harder as her body began to come alive.

The chill of the tile on her back caused her to yelp, her hips driving to match her thrusts. She could feel Jon's hands on her thighs. Holding her in place as he lapped at her juices. "Uggh yes, baby. Don't stop. Don't fucking stop." Her orgasm was nearing, the water beginning to cool as it hit her skin.

Her fingers worked faster, her eyes shut tight as she imagined Jon's tongue boring deeper inside her. But then the fantasy morphed. Jon's gentle grip tightened, his fingers digging into her skin so much it hurt.

"Fffuuu..." Jon's face was gone now, transformed into Michael's sneer. His thick fingers digging into her flesh, holding her in place with an authority that made her pussy drip with need.

"I knew you were the right choice," phantom-Michael growled against her slick folds, his voice reverberating through her pelvis. "Someone who understands commitment."

"No," Wendy gasped, shaking her head violently, droplets spraying from her wet hair. But even as disgust and shame flooded her consciousness, her fingers moved with renewed urgency, her body betraying her mind.

She forced Jon back into her fantasy, desperately focusing on his lean frame, his tender touches, the way he knew how to hit just the right spot. "Jon," she whispered urgently, pinching her nipple harder, the pain grounding her in reality. "Jon, Jon, Jon..."

Her fingers continued to tweak her nipple, the pain combining with the pleasure building between her legs and sending her body into overdrive.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her, making her legs give out from under her. She slid down the tiled wall, her fingers working feverously inside her pulsing cunt. Goosebumps rose on her skin, as she threw her head backward, her ass splashing in the water underneath her. Her legs quivered in front of her, her belly rolling as the assault continued inside her.

"Ohhhh God. Oh fuck, yes, yes. Uggggh."

"Fuuuck," she sighed, pressing the back of her head to the tile, ensuring Michael was the furthest thing from it. She couldn't believe she would think about him during such a moment. She blamed the stress, this was just more proof of how badly she needed this release. She sat on the floor of the shower trying to catch her breath, the sound of the water pulsing against the floor of the tub slowing her racing heart.

Ten minutes later, Wendy stood before her walk-in closet with a heightened sense of scrutiny. Her wet hair dripped down her back as she surveyed the outfits in front of her. Everything had to be perfect today, starting with what she wore.

"Everything okay?" Jon asked, yawning, stretching out his long body. "I could have sworn you were calling me in there." He noticed Wendy's face redden as she considered her choice of attire. *She puts too much effort into what she's going to wear*, he said to himself, his gaze on her heart-shaped bottom as it bounced from left to right, deliberating.

"Oh, um... yeah. Thought I was low on shampoo, but I managed," she replied, not looking back at him. "I need today to go smoothly." Her eyes stayed on the green Roland Mouret dress that fell just above her ankles. The color was strong without trying. She held it against her hips, checking out her body in the floor-length mirror.

"Everything you wear looks great."

He wasn't lying. Wendy really was the definition of natural beauty. He still didn't understand how he'd gotten so lucky with her. One minute he was working on statistical anomalies for a local brewing company while recovering from his breakup, and the next he was having drinks with Wendy, their heads bent together over a baseball betting sheet he'd brought to the bar. She had surprised him once by questioning his margin predictions, her eyes sparkling with satisfaction when he'd double-checked the math and found she was right. That was what had first drawn him to her - not just her beauty, but the way she could cut through his careful analysis with quick, intuitive insights that were usually spot-on. Back then, he'd loved how she'd squeeze his arm whenever he corrected their friends' probability estimates, whispering "you're such a nerd" lovingly in his ear.

"Thanks, babe," her response was automatic. She was barely listening. Instead, she reached for a cream blouse and held it up to the dress. A smile formed on her lips as the combination struck the perfect balance - sophisticated and commanding. Her fingers moved subconsciously to check the drape of the fabric, a habit from her modeling days. She'd left that world behind, tired of being valued solely for how she looked, but she had to admit the instincts it had given her were invaluable. One glance could tell her exactly how others would react to an outfit, what message it would send. Today, that message was she deserved a seat at the table.

She shrugged into the blouse, adjusting the collar as Jon finally dragged himself out of bed. The neckline sat high enough to be conservative, though no amount of careful tailoring could completely disguise her figure. A problem that would haunt her, despite her best efforts.

Jon was a creature of habit when it came to his wardrobe. His closet was bland compared to hers. Everything the same boring color of black, white, and beige on repeat, next to an equally boring stack of khakis. It was efficient, he always said. Time spent choosing clothes was time wasted. Sometimes Wendy envied the simplicity of it, the freedom men had to wear the same thing day after day without judgment.

Right on cue, he appeared behind her, already dressed in his standard Oxford and khakis, fumbling with his striped tie. "Here, let me," Wendy offered, turning to face him. Her fingers making quick work of the half Windsor knot as he settled his hands on her waist. She couldn't help but smile at the warmth of his skin against hers. These quiet moments were when everything made sense, when the complications of work and ambition fell away. If only that clarity could follow her to the office.

"Thank you again for last night," he murmured, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. "I'm sorry I couldn't... you know. Last longer."

A giggle crept out from Wendy's closed lips, pushing aside the lingering frustration she felt last night. "You enjoyed yourself. That's what matters." She smoothed his tie, letting her hand rest briefly against his chest. Her eyes flicked to the clock on the nightstand. If they had a few extra minutes she certainly wouldn't mind taking advantage of her half dressed state and his guilt, but today she was on a mission.

"Still..." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll make it up to you this weekend."

The tenderness of the moment warmed her skin, but Michael's voice echoed in her head - "someone with your instincts" - sending an involuntary shiver down her spine despite Jon's warmth against her. Work wasn't just waiting. Michael was waiting, that damn note probably already framed on his desk.

"Do you think anyone will remember? The gift mix-up?" She turned back to the mirror, grabbing her mascara as an excuse to avoid his gaze. "God, Michael's face when he read that card..."

Wendy's fingers trembled slightly as she applied her mascara, the memory of the event made her stomach flip. The way Michael punctuated every word, the way his expression shifted when his gaze caught hers. She added another coat, steadying her hand, pulling at the collar of her blouse to fan her suddenly overheated face.

"Everyone was half-drunk by then," Jon assured her, already distracted by his phone. "Besides, Michael's probably done something inappropriate to three other people since. No one will even remember."

But Wendy remembered the hunger in Michael's eyes, the way he'd folded that note into his pocket without ever breaking eye contact. She added another coat of mascara, the repetitive motion helping steady her nerves. Power pose, she reminded herself, squaring her shoulders the way she'd practiced in countless casting calls. The irony wasn't lost on her - she'd left modeling to be taken seriously, yet here she was, still performing, still being judged on presentation. Only now the stakes felt higher. This wasn't about looking pretty; it was about looking powerful. About being seen for her mind rather than her measurements, even if Michael's lingering gaze suggested he noticed both.

"Ready?" Jon asked, keys already in hand.

Wendy nodded, grabbing her leather portfolio. "Ready."

As Jon and Wendy made their way into the building, they could already feel the shift in the atmosphere from last night. All of the party decorations were discarded, not a trace anywhere in sight. The floors had a high shine to them that suggested the cleaning crew must have put in

long hours after the event to ensure nothing looked out of place. Wendy grabbed Jon's hand, taking a deep breath as she prepared to face the whispers and sideways glances of the day.

"Well someone looks like they are in bad bitch mode. What's up with the outfit choice?" Ava's smiling face called out from just behind her cubicle wall. "Did Michael go out and promote you after reading the card?"

Ava's voice was light and playful, but as the words fell from her lips Wendy's stomach tightened and her face went pale. "Fuck, I told Jon this was going to happen. I'm going to be the laughing stock of the office now."

"I was just playing with you." Ava's bright smile disappeared in an instant, as she didn't think Wendy was going to be this upset about it. "Honestly, it wasn't even that bad. Had it been anyone else it could have been laughed off. But of course creepy fucking Michael was the one to open it." She placed a hand on Wendy's arm. "How'd that happen anyway? Did you talk to Jon about it?"

"He doesn't know. Even implied I did it on purpose. Like I want to sleep with Michael or something."

"Tell me you're kidding."

Wendy managed to let out a stiff laugh, while she struggled to hold back tears. "Yeah, but it's Jon, you know. He didn't mean it like that. He was just as confused as I was." She stood up straight allowing the emotions to wash over her. "This is all your fault you know," she said with a laugh turning to look at Ava. "You and your slutty ideas about sexual favors."

Now it was Ava's turn to laugh. "Hey, I told you to be a good wife and give your husband a blowjob. It's not my fault you decided to give it to Michael instead." She took a step closer to Wendy so their playful banter couldn't be heard by others still coming into the office. "I'm actually surprised he didn't greet you at the door this morning expecting you to let him cash it in."

"Have you seen him yet this morning? I want to get whatever's going to happen out of the way so we can move on."

"Michael? No, not yet." She glanced around instinctively. "But this is Michael we're talking about. He's not just going to forget about it."

Before Wendy could respond, Jon appeared at her elbow. "I'm going to go fill up my water bottle. Care to join me?"

"I'd love that," Wendy responded thankful to not be discussing Michael anymore.

The industrial water cooler gurgled as Jon filled two paper cups. "Marcus seemed receptive to my demographic analysis this morning. I really think-"

He stopped in his tracks as a large shadow illuminated on the breakroom wall. Wendy cursed her luck under her breath as she turned to see Michael standing in the frame of the doorway his bulk causing him to turn slightly to fit through the passage. "Hell of a party last night, wasn't it?" He tightened the scarlet and grey tie around his neck, his gaze fixed solely on Wendy.

"Morning Michael," Jon offered pleasantly, completely missing that Michael hadn't even bothered to look at him.

"I was just thinking about you two," Michael continued, moving to the coffee machine. His shirt looked more wrinkled than normal, like he'd slept at office. "That creative little gift exchange last night got me thinking - did you know that in some jurisdictions, a written promise like that is considered legally binding?"

And there it was. She was actually surprised his comment was as tame as it was. Michael was usually much more direct in his harassment. Her thumb found her wedding ring, spinning it four times around her finger, the familiar ritual stealing the seconds she needed to respond. By the time she calmed herself, Jon had already jumped in.

"He's actually right," Jon perked up, enthusiasm coloring his voice. "In British Common Law, specifically in cases like *Edwards vs. Skyways*, the courts have ruled that written agreements, even informal ones, can constitute binding contracts. Fascinating stuff really."

Wendy felt her face redden. It was just like Jon to take something so literal. Sometimes she was amazed that someone as smart as him could be so blind to social cues and suggestive undertones.

Michael licked his lips. His gaze turning darker as the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air "See? Your husband gets it." His eyes swept over Wendy's outfit slow enough to make her feel uncomfortable. "I like the wardrobe choice," he said, once he made it back up to her face. "It screams... commitment."

"Good thing we don't live there," Jon chuckled, pressing a quick kiss to Wendy's cheek. "I need to finish that market research for Marcus. See you later?" He was already heading for the door, his mind clearly on work and nothing else.

The whirl of the coffee machine filled the silence left in Jon's wake, its steady hum drowning out the usual office chatter from the hallway. Wendy became acutely aware of how the windowless space seemed to shrink with each passing second. The temperature spiked as Michael took a deliberate step closer, ostensibly reaching for the coffee creamer.

"Yes," he murmured, fingers brushing against Wendy's arm for the slightest second. Where Jon's kiss had been butterfly-light, Michael's touch felt like a brand on her skin. "Good thing indeed."

Michael shifted his weight, somehow managing to take up even more space in the cramped break room. His shoulders seemed to expand as he reached for the coffee, cutting off Wendy's path to the door without obviously moving to block it. The coffee machine sputtered and hissed, the sound oddly threatening in the confined space. Steam rose between them, carrying the bitter scent of burnt coffee that mixed with Michael's stale cigarette breath. She pressed herself against the counter, heartbeat quickening as the cool metal edge bit into her lower back.

"I should go," she managed, proud of how steady her voice sounded despite the sweat beading at the base of her neck. "Lots of accounts to get through."

"Before you go," Michael stepped closer, and the last traces of Jon's innocent kiss evaporated in the suffocating heat of Michael's presence. The counter dug deeper into her spine as she tried to maintain what little distance remained between them. His gut pressed against her arm, the unwanted contact making her skin crawl even through layers of clothing. The coffee machine's drone seemed to intensify, creating a bubble where no one could hear her, no one could intervene.

"Do some research on Fireball Whiskey while you're at your desk." The moisture of his lips brushed against Wendy's ear and she had to keep herself from recoiling. Was Michael helping her right now? "There's going to be a meeting announcement later. Coming prepared with some data would really show the team just how determined you are."

A wave of dizziness washed over Wendy as Michael stepped aside to let her pass. *Fireball Whiskey? Was that the project Michael was talking about yesterday? That's a global powerhouse. If she was on a project like that it could completely change the trajectory of her career.*

Michael caught her hand just before she was out the door. She gasped slightly, the hairs on her arms standing up. "And Wendy," he pulled her slightly causing her to stumble in her heels. "Let's keep this between us. Wouldn't want any whispers about me playing favorites would we?"

All Wendy could do was nod.

"Good girl," he whispered, winking at her. "Let's just keep it between the two of us. Like... other things." He tapped the breast pocket of his shirt gently.

Her legs went on autopilot as she escaped the break room, her fingers digging into her thigh each step with a silent four count. The Fireball Whiskey tip ricocheted through her mind, each bounce illuminating a possibility she'd only dreamed about. A career-making account dangled just within reach. But why was Michael suddenly so eager to help her? Did she make that good of an impression during the quarterly review meeting?

Back at her desk, Chrome's search results populated her screen: "Premium spirits market share continues to grow." "Millennial drinking habits evolve beyond shot culture." "Craft cocktail movement reshapes industry standards." A pattern emerged with each click, each market analysis. While Fireball dominated the party scene, their competitors were aging up, capturing the sophisticated cocktail crowd. Wendy's pen hesitated over her notepad. The obvious move would be to abandon the party reputation entirely, push hard into the premium space. But something about that felt wrong. Fireball's wild spirit was what made them special - trying to become just another sophisticated brand would kill their authenticity. Her pen started moving again, faster now as the idea took shape. What if instead of running from their party roots, they embraced them while reaching higher? Signature cocktails that celebrated their boldness. Partnerships that brought their energy to upscale spaces. Marketing that said you could command the boardroom and still know how to own the dance floor.

She pulled her desk drawer open with a little too much force sending paperclips flying. She would pick them up later. Right now she was determined. Her pen danced across the paper, compiling notes with growing excitement. This wasn't just another account - this was the kind of challenge that could prove she belonged in strategy meetings, not just execution. Her cheeks flushed as she remembered the way Michael had seen through her in the meeting yesterday, recognizing her capabilities when everyone else saw just a pretty face. The same heat that had sent her recoiling from his touch now drove her research frenzy. She hated the way her body reacted to being seen for her mind, especially by someone like... him. But wasn't that exactly what she'd been fighting for? Recognition. Validation. Power.

She click on another tab, drilling deeper into industry trends and competitor growth. If this meeting happened, she'd be ready. Perhaps then they'd finally look at her as the capable, self-starter she'd been so desperate to prove herself to be. The prospect sent a surge of

determination through her, almost enough to overshadow the phantom feel of Michael's fingers against her skin.

Almost.

True to his word, a meeting invite came through for Wendy just after lunch. The details were vague, but it mentioned a new client and assembling a team for a preliminary pitch. Her fingers drummed against her desk as she scanned through the research she'd gathered on Fireball Whiskey. While everyone else would be walking in cold, she'd have insights ready, trends analyzed, target demographics mapped out. For once, she would not be just another face in the crowd. She was going to be prepared. She clicked on the accept invitation, determination welling up, pushing aside all her earlier reservations. She was going to have a chance to prove what she could do and was not going to waste that.

Wendy took up her usual spot on the wall, clutching her notebook full of ideas tightly against her churning stomach. She watched the same usual suspects - account managers, directors, other big-wigs - file in through the glass walls and take their place at the heavy oak table. Jon was one of them, spreadsheets tucked into a folder that sat in front of him. A few knowing glances were exchanged between some of the executives, and she knew Marcus had already briefed certain players - and was quite certain Jon was among them. The realization smoothed her nerves - this wasn't some special treatment from Michael; she was simply getting an equal chance at the game everyone else had been playing all along.

Michael stood at the front of the room, a smug smile plastered on his face while he waited for the last person to file into the room. He had that same arrogant feel about him. It was as if he had grown another foot taller. Michael commanded the room through sheer force of personality, like he was daring anyone to notice how his Italian leather belt cut into his midsection or the way his neck strained against his collar. Even from her seat against the wall, Wendy could feel the change in his energy. The same man who'd cornered her in the break room now radiating an authority that made his physical flaws almost irrelevant. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, turning off the lights for the presentation. "What I'm about to share will transform this company."

The Fireball logo blazed across the screen, but now with an elegance Wendy had never associated with the brand. Wendy chewed on her cheek so she wouldn't smile, she was right. Gone were the cartoon dragons and college bar aesthetics. In their place, rich amber tones and sophisticated typography said something altogether more premium.

"They want to grow up," Michael explained, pacing to the other side of the room. "Move past shot girls and spring break and capture the high-end whiskey business." His gaze swept the awestruck faces of most in the room before he locked his eyes with Wendy. "We're talking global reach, complete rebranding, eight-figure marketing budget."

Jon shot his hand in the air before Michael finished speaking. "The data backs this up. Numbers suggest that the premium whiskey scene is more profitable than the party scene. They should distance themselves from the party scene entirely." He adjusted his glasses, the gesture so familiar it made Wendy's heart ache. "Premium sporting events - baseball, golf - that's where the growth potential lies. My analysis suggests an eight percent increase in revenue if we completely rebrand away from-

"Numbers." Michael cut him off with a wave. "Always with the numbers." He turned to address the wider room. "But what do numbers tell us about desire? About aspiration?"

"The demographics don't lie," Jon persisted, pulling up a chart on his tablet. "Our target market is evolving and-"

"And alienating their entire existing customer base would only hurt their brand in the long term." Wendy's retort surprised even herself, but she couldn't stay silent. Not even when she saw Jon retreat behind his spreadsheets - a defense mechanism she recognized from their second date, when he'd confessed how badly he'd misread things with Olivia. How his certainty that something was happening had destroyed a relationship where nothing actually was. Since then, he'd found refuge in numbers. Data couldn't be misinterpreted like a late night at the office or a friendly dinner with a boss. Statistics didn't leave room for the kind of devastating assumptions that had cost him someone he loved.

Yet, knowing all this, seeing him clutch his pen the way he did each time emotions seemed to threaten that carefully constructed world of facts, Wendy continued on. Her thumb found her wedding ring, spinning it through that familiar four-count rhythm that always steadied her nerves during casting calls. This was her moment. She might hate challenging the very foundation of certainty he'd rebuilt himself on, but it would be worse to let his fear of trusting instincts blind them both. The conference room fell still. She could feel Michael's gaze on her, heavy with expectation. A smirk on his lips suggesting this was exactly what he expected her to do with the information he gave her earlier. Her pulse quickened, but she pressed on, forcing her fingers away from her ring. "Sorry, but these customers aren't just data points. They're brand loyalists. They've made Fireball what it is. Sure, they may see an eight percent spike in growth now, but those college kids won't forget that their favorite whiskey just dumped them one day. And when they grow up and start looking to move to a premium drink, Fireball will be further from their mind as a result."

She moved toward the screen, energy coursing through her veins. She'd never felt this sort of adrenaline rush before. All eyes were on her, and not just because she was beautiful. They were nodding along with her, agreeing with her keen market insight. It was intoxicating. She glanced back at Michael as he gave her an approving nod. She felt her nipples stiffen, probably from the rush of power she currently felt. "Yes, they need to evolve, but not by abandoning their identity. They need to embrace their roots while reaching higher." She was standing at the front of the room now, all eyes locked on her. "Imagine signature cocktails that bring that same bold energy to upscale venues. Marketing that says you can be sophisticated without losing your edge."

Jon's brow furrowed as he glanced between his charts and his wife. "The demographic analysis suggests-"

"Shows us where we could go," Wendy finished. "But not at the cost of who we are. We don't need to choose between premium and playful. We can be both." The words tasted like betrayal in her mouth, even though she knew they were true. This was the first time she'd ever publicly opposed him, and the rush of rightness mixed with guilt made her dizzy.

Michael's slow clap sent an unexpected thrill through her. "Exactly. We're not selling a different drink - we're selling a different version of ourselves." He turned back to the room. "Very good insight, Wendy. This is exactly the type of forward thinking we need on this. Which is why I want you in charge of the creative for this project."

Wendy's mouth fell open. She had expected to be included in the project, of course, but to be in charge of the whole Creative? That was bigger than even her wildest dreams. She looked around the room, expecting dazed faces from everybody, but all nodded in agreement. Except one person.

Jon's head snapped up. Confusion was evident behind his glasses. "But I've already started the market analysis- "

"Which you'll continue to provide," Michael assured him smoothly. "But this campaign needs someone who understands both the numbers and the narrative. Someone who can translate data into desire." His eyes found Wendy again. "Someone who sees the whole picture."

Pride swelled in Wendy's chest, momentarily drowning out the hurt from Jon's reaction. Of all the people she expected to be on her side, she couldn't believe he wasn't. "I. Thank you, Michael. I promise I won't let you down."

"I have every confidence in you, Wendy." Michael turned his entire body toward her, his expression suddenly serious. "But let me make one thing clear. There's going to be a lot of hard work involved. Lots of late nights working directly with me." His features brightened as he patted the pocket of his shirt. "But I suspect you'll have no problem. I know you won't go back on a commitment."

That small act made Wendy's neck burn. Could he be hinting at that foolish gift mix-up? No, she was just paranoid. Michael simply had the habit of saying something that was sometimes a bit vaguely inappropriate. This had to do with work, and recognition of all she could accomplish. If he occasionally made uncomfortable references, well, that was just Michael being Michael. Everyone knew how he was.

Besides, this was exactly what she'd been working for - a chance to prove herself. She wasn't about to let an awkward moment from last night's party overshadow this opportunity. Even if Michael's hand lingered a moment too long on that pocket, even if his smile held something more knowing than professional - she could handle it. She'd have to.

The meeting continued, but Wendy barely heard it. Her mind raced with possibilities, already putting together catchy slogans and images for the campaign. She'd never been part of a project this big, let alone in charge of the entire creative process. She knew this would either make or break her career. If Michael wanted commitment and late nights then that's exactly what she would give him.

She glanced at Jon, who slumped a little lower in his chair. He was upset now, but he'd understand. After all, how many late nights had he spent in the office with Marcus going over numbers and talking strategy? He knew how much she needed this, he'd see it for what it was. Maybe they could spend Saturday at the casino like they used to - settling into their favorite spot in the sportsbook, sharing knowing looks as they watched people bet against probability. She missed those moments, when his analytical mind and her intuition worked in perfect harmony, both of them whispering predictions about which unlucky gambler would ignore the odds next. As the room cleared, she became self-conscious of Michael's presence behind her. "Let's meet up in my office today at three and talk strategy," he whispered, close enough for her to feel the bulge of his stomach on her back. "We'll discuss how to properly... position things."

She nodded, her gaze finding Jon as he gathered his papers with sharp, irritated movements across the room. She hated that he was the one she had to cut down, but she knew she was

right. Jon just wasn't seeing the big picture, he was too focused the data to see what was the most obvious answer.

Wendy waited in the conference room after everyone left, gathering her thoughts as much as her belongings.

The space felt different now - no longer the arena where she'd always been a spectator. She ran her fingers along the polished oak table, allowing herself to imagine her ideas being presented from the head of it rather than her usual spot against the wall. The memory of standing there just minutes ago, commanding everyone's attention, sent another thrill through her body. "Impressive work today." Marcus's voice startled her from her reverie.

He stood in the doorway, a warm smile spreading across his face. "I don't usually say this, but I agree with Michael. Based on what I saw today, you're the perfect person to lead this project. Keep up the good work." With a slight nod, he continued down the hallway, leaving Wendy to process the weight of his words. Was it possible everyone was wrong about Michael? If even Marcus was taking notice then she couldn't help but admit Michael was already doing more for her career over the course of a day than others had her entire time at the company. She checked her reflection in the darkened conference room windows, adjusting her blouse with trembling fingers, still feeling the effects of the meeting rushing through her. She was ready to step into a bigger role, even as part of her wondered about the cost. She had an hour to refine her presentation for Michael, to prove his faith in her was justified.

Jon caught Wendy's arm just outside the conference room, pulling her into the quiet corner by the copier. "Hey, that was... unexpected." His tone aimed for supportive but landed somewhere between confused and defensive. "I didn't realize you were interested in premium spirits marketing."

"I didn't either, until now." Wendy tried to temper her excitement, seeing the hurt beneath his exterior. "It's a huge opportunity, Jon."

"Sure, if Michael actually understands the market." He ran a hand through his hair, already mentally reviewing his data. "But the demographics clearly show-"

"Can you just be happy for me?" The words came out before she could stop them. The excitement she felt just moments ago evaporating right before her eyes. "For once, someone sees me for my skills and not just..."

Jon's face fell. "That's not fair. I've always supported your career."

"By explaining basic marketing concepts to me? By dismissing my insights because all you can ever see is the numbers?"

"I wasn't-" He stopped and took a deep breath. "You're right. I'm sorry. I am happy for you. Really." He pulled her into a warm embrace, his lips brushing her temple. "I just worry about you. It feels like Michael's setting this project up to fail."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Wendy muttered, already turning away. She didn't want to do this right now. She needed to get back to her desk, to be preparing for her meeting later with Michael. She was going to make this the most successful campaign this company had ever seen. Then they'd have no choice but to show her a little respect.

"That's not what I meant!" Jon called after her, but she was already heading for her desk.

Ava was sitting in her cube when Wendy sat back down. "Girl, that was intense." She glanced around before lowering her voice. "But listen, about Michael..."

"Don't start," Wendy warned, sorting through files with more force than necessary. "Jon already thinks this project is doomed. I don't need to hear it from you too."

"He said that?"

"Not in so many words, but... yeah." Wendy saw movement out of the corner of her eye but didn't bother turning around. She was already unlocking her computer determined to prove herself.

She felt Ava behind her and then suddenly she was wrapped in a hug. Her first instinct was to pull away - she was done being seen as emotional, done being the office wife who needed comfort. But as her friend's warmth seeped through her professional armor, something cracked. The tears came silent and hot, frustration and triumph and fear all mixing together as Ava held her, understanding without words the cost of stepping out of Jon's shadow.

"I just..." Wendy's voice cracked as she pulled back from Ava's embrace, wiping her eyes. "My whole life, it's been about how I look. Even in modeling - stand here, smile like this, be pretty and don't speak unless spoken to. Then in corporate it's the same thing. Be decorative, take notes, let the men handle the real decisions."

"Girl, you are so much more than that." Ava perched on the edge of Wendy's desk, her voice softening. "I've seen how that brilliant mind of yours works."

"That's what drew me to Jon in the first place. He was the first guy who saw past the surface, who'd rather debate market trends than just stare at my chest." Her voice softened with the memory. "He still does, really. But he gets so lost in his numbers sometimes, so convinced that data has all the answers, that he forgets to look up and see the human side of things. The side I keep trying to show him."

"And now you had to prove your point by shooting down his analysis in front of everyone," Ava observed, understanding dawning in her eyes.

Wendy's throat tightened. "I didn't want it to happen like that. God, Ava, I wish more than anything it hadn't been at Jon's expense. But he wasn't seeing it - none of them were. None of them except..." Ava shook her head and opened her mouth to speak, but Wendy pressed forward. "I want to build something here, to prove I can lead a project, make real decisions. Show everyone that there's more going on behind this face than they assume. I just... I didn't expect my first real chance would come from having to publicly disagree with my husband."

"You know," Ava traced her finger along the edge of Wendy's desk, "when David first saw my promotion letter last month, he went quiet. Not angry, just... quiet. I found him later staring at our wedding photos, all worried that my success would change us." She smiled softly. "We stayed up all night talking about it. About how supporting each other doesn't mean holding each other back. Sometimes love means watching your partner shine, even if it casts shadows on your own light."

"Jon's not like that," Wendy sighed, though she appreciated what Ava was trying to say. "He doesn't feel threatened by my success - he just genuinely believes the data has all the answers. Like there's no room for intuition or human nature in his equations."

"Speaking of human nature..." Ava glanced around before leaning closer. "About Michael. I know you can handle the work - you're brilliant. But remember Lisa..."

"God, I haven't thought about her in months." Wendy's stomach clenched at the memory of their former colleague. "She just disappeared one day, right? I always wondered what really happened."

"Marcus told me more about it recently." Ava lowered her voice. "Apparently, she started staying later and later with Michael, working on that Hardrock campaign. Got more withdrawn every week. Then that weird resignation letter..." She hesitated. "Marcus said there were never any complaints filed, so there was nothing anyone could do. Michael acted just as shocked as everyone else."

"Lisa was different," Wendy protested, though uncertainty crept into her voice. "She was... vulnerable. New to corporate culture."

"Just... keep your eyes open, okay?" Ava squeezed her hand. "You're stronger than Lisa, but Michael... I don't trust him."

Wendy squeezed Ava's hand back, but her eyes drifted to Michael's office. His eyes were on his monitor a slight smile on his face. He had loosened his tie while clicking through whatever was on the screen in front of him. Whatever he was doing, he was focused and Wendy needed to be as well.

"I appreciate the concern," Wendy said, straightening her spine. "But this isn't about Michael. It's about finally having a chance to prove myself." Her fingers found her wedding ring, the familiar four-count spin grounding her racing thoughts. "Besides, Jon will be working on the account too. Michael may be a creep, but he wouldn't do something inappropriate in front of Jon."

Ava's expression suggested she wasn't entirely convinced, but she nodded. "Just remember, if you ever need to talk I'm right here." She stood, smoothing her skirt. "Marcus asked me to stop by his desk before heading out today. Call if you need anything." Ava gave her friend one final smile before disappearing down the hall.

Now alone, Wendy opened her presentation notes, but her focus kept drifting between Jon's and Michael's offices. Her husband's earlier words echoed in her mind: "Michael's setting this project up to fail." But was he really worried about the project failing, or was he worried about her succeeding without his help?

At 2:45 Wendy gathered her notes, fighting the flutter in her stomach that she told herself was just pre-meeting nerves. She had earned this opportunity. She wouldn't let anyone - not Jon's doubt, not Ava's warnings, not even her own uncertainties about Michael - take that away from her.

Still, as she stood to leave, her thumb brushed against her ring one more time. Four spins, just like always. Some habits were harder to break than others.

Michael's office was darker than she would have liked as Wendy made her way inside. He had drawn the blinds and dimmed the lights while he worked on whatever he was doing behind his desk. The leather sofa that was usually in front of his desk had been pushed aside, creating more space in the middle of the room.

"Shut the door," Michael barked without looking up from his monitor. "Let me finish what I'm doing real fast and we can get started."

The hum of the outside world seemed to disappear as the large door clicked shut. Everything suddenly felt very intimate. She dragged her fingers across her palm as she looked at the pictures Michael had on the wall. Anything to distract her from how alone she felt with Michael. Her gaze caught a picture toward the back of the room. A smile tugged at her lips as she took a few steps to get a closer look. Michael was kneeling on the ground, wearing a pair of jeans and a loose fitting t-shirt. On either side of him were two young boys no older than ten. They were all covered in mud and smiling from ear to ear.

"My nephews," Michael noted from behind her. Wendy spun on her heel, surprised to see Michael so close.

"They're cute." Wendy kept her eyes trained to the floor. The picture was so out of character with how she'd typically seen him that she felt like she had witnessed something she shouldn't have. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you-"

"Happy?" Michael laughed but it sounded rehearsed, mechanical.

"Yeah, I guess so," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Can you blame me?" He sat on the corner of his desk, his eyes never leaving Wendy. "Kids are fun. There's no politics or ulterior motives with them. They just want to play and have fun." He paused and Wendy found herself looking up at him, this wasn't the conversation she expected to have. "Adults are assholes. You always have to guess what it is they are really after. They hide behind bullshit policies and social expectations."

The weight of the conversation suddenly felt heavy. "I guess I can see your point." Wendy shifted her weight looking up at him through a different lens. "childhood does have a certain freedom to it."

"Exactly." Michael's eyes lit up, reminding her of the photo. "They haven't learned to be ashamed yet. Haven't been taught what they should and shouldn't want." His gaze stayed locked with hers, lingering just long enough to make her pulse quicken. "Society hasn't beaten that natural instinct out of them."

Wendy's fingers found her wedding ring, but Michael pressed on, catching her attention before she could spin it. "Take you, for instance. Your instincts in that meeting were spot on. But you hesitated - I saw it. Worried about proper protocol, about stepping on toes." He leaned forward slightly causing her to take a step backward into the wall. "About challenging your husband."

"That's different," Wendy protested, though something in his words rang true. "Being professional isn't the same as being repressed. No one forces you to be an asshole."

"I disagree." Michael stood, his presence seemed to expand, consuming the space between them as she pressed against the wall. "We're taught to silence our desires. To follow rules made by others." His eyes flashed to her ring and she quickly removed her fingers not wanting him to

see how nervous she was. "Being an asshole, as you so eloquently put it, allows people like me to get to the point. No dancing around it."

"Structure isn't always bad," she managed, forcing herself to stand up from the wall despite his closeness.

"No, but neither is letting go sometimes." Michael moved to his chair, giving her space to breathe. "That's what I want for this campaign. Raw honesty. Primal appeal. The kind of marketing that speaks to what people really want, not what society thinks they should want."

His words struck a nerve. This wasn't just going to be a rigid look at the numbers type of campaign. It was going to be full of creativity and attitude. She felt her confidence swell. This was exactly the type of campaign she could excel at. "Like embracing Fireball's wild spirit instead of trying to tame it," she offered.

"Now you're getting it." His smile widened filling Wendy with a sense of accomplishment. "Sometimes the best things in life happen when we stop overthinking and just... be in the moment."

Wendy found herself writing down the note. It felt like the start of a new tagline, she just needed to tweak it a bit.

"Now, your first lesson for the day is all about presence."

"Presence?" Wendy asked arching her eyebrow. She wasn't sure how this connected with the Fireball campaign.

"Exactly." He made his way back around the desk ushering Wendy to the center of the room. "We are going to have lots of meetings with executives over the course of this project. Some of them will be on the phone, but at least a few will require us to travel on site."

"O- on site?"

"That isn't going to be a problem is it?" Michael looked down at her hands studying her as she balled her fingers into a fist. "You can't expect a customer this size to do everything over the phone. Even with video calls there's still a lot you can learn about a person when you're in a room alone with them."

Wendy was finding it hard to breathe. She knew the project would require late nights with Michael and perhaps a couple of hours alone, but did she really trust him enough to go out of town with him? Her mind went back to Ava's warning and the conversation about Lisa. She couldn't remember hearing that they ever went out of town, but she also wasn't close to the project. She could ask Ava, but would that turn into another lecture?

"It's fine," Wendy said, forcing confidence into her voice while her fingers found her wedding ring despite her best efforts. Since stepping into his office, Michael had shown a different side - professional, insightful, even warm when talking about his nephews. Maybe she was letting Ava's warnings and her own prejudices cloud her judgement.

"I'm glad to hear that." He licked his lips as he stepped closer to her. "Now, presence. You'll be doing a lot of speaking and the way you command attention is just as important as the pitch itself."

The words triggered a flood of memories - photographers barking orders, agents critiquing every curve, casting directors treating her like a mannequin to be posed. But Michael's next words cut through the familiar panic:

"You're not here to be looked at," he murmured, his hand settling between her shoulder blades. The touch made her gasp, but instead of the usual urge to shrink away, something else stirred. "You're here to be listened to. To make them see past the surface to the mind beneath."

Wendy's breath caught. In all her years of modeling, no one had ever framed it that way - as taking control rather than being controlled. His palm remained steady against her back, radiating warmth through her silk blouse as her spine straightened instinctively.

"That's it," he encouraged, his voice carrying an intimacy that should have made her uncomfortable but instead felt... empowering. "Own the space. The second they sense weakness they will pounce." His hand lingered on her back just a touch longer than being professional or instructive.

Michael sensed the shift in her energy. He wasn't exactly sure what triggered it, but he knew he had discovered something. "Now," his fingers brushed her collarbone, seemingly adjusting her posture. He studied her face, her hands, the anxiety was gone for at least a moment she was letting her guard down. "The Fireball campaign needs that same balance of strength and sophistication. They're not just selling premium whiskey - they're selling transformation."

A smile formed on Wendy's lips another idea passing through her. "Like their target audience itself," she finished his thought. "Young professionals aging out of shot nights but not ready for their father's scotch."

He took a step back, disappointed to no longer be maintaining physical contact with this beauty, but genuinely impressed with how quick she was catching on. "I knew you'd be the right person for the job." He moved back to his desk, but not before noticing the look of accomplishment on Wendy's face. "Now we just need a slogan we can pitch them. Something to-"

"Evolve your fire."

Michael's face lit up like it was Christmas morning. "What did you say?"

For a moment, Wendy thought she'd said something wrong. She'd never seen Michael smile like that. "Evolve your fire. For the slogan, I mean."

Michael studied her, not with the same predatory stare he usually studied her with, but instead with a look of awe. After several seconds Wendy shifted her feet, the silence growing awkward.

"Picture this," he said coming back around the desk. "We showcase young successful executives, artists. All with a hint of rebellion in their eyes then above them... Evolve your fire."

Goosebumps covered Wendy's body. She could see it. In less than an hour Michael had managed to take just a few off-hand ideas and concepts she threw out and built an entire mental image from it. "Premium and playful," Wendy added with a grin. "We thread the needle between brand heritage and sophistication perfectly." Any hint of discomfort she felt earlier faded into the ether as their new creative energy filled the room.

"But with an edge." Michael stepped closer, enthusiasm making him seem less creepy, more mentor. "Instead of dragons, we use phoenix imagery. Transformation through fire."

"Rising from their old brand identity," Wendy found herself moving toward his desk, caught up in the creative flow. "We could do a whole social campaign about personal evolution stories-

"Brilliant." His hand found her waist as he reached past her for a marker, the touch casual enough she didn't seem to notice. "And here's where it gets interesting."

He sketched rapidly on his whiteboard, ideas flowing. Each concept was brilliant, elevating her suggestions while adding layers she hadn't considered. Wendy found herself drawn in despite her reservations, offering insights that Michael shaped and refined with years of experience. Before long, the room grew even darker as the sun set behind the closed curtains.

Michael loomed behind her at the whiteboard while Wendy made some last minute addition. He was close enough that his breath stirred her hair. Each time she stepped away, he would shift position, always maintaining that suffocating proximity while keeping his movements just professional enough to seem innocent to an observer.

Wendy took a step back nearly colliding with Michael as they observed their handywork. "That's what people like Jon miss with their numbers," Michael whispered, making Wendy realize just how close they were. "Statistics can't capture transformation. Can't measure... desire." His breath was warm against her ear. "But there's something special about you, Wendy. Something tells me you understand it a lot more than you lead on."

A draft must have pushed in through the window, or perhaps it was because it was getting dark. Whatever the reason, Wendy felt a chill creep up her spine. She stepped forward, putting space between them, but Michael simply moved to adjust her stance again. "Confidence," he instructed, hands on her shoulders. "You have to own your power."

"Speaking of owning things," his tone shifted slightly as he circled to face her. The air in the room suddenly felt thicker as Wendy's breath caught. "We wouldn't want you growing a reputation for not following through on promises would we?"

The room grew smaller as Wendy watched Michael move closer to her. His gaze had the intensity of an inferno turning her legs to cement. She knew she should run, but she felt like a deer in headlights, unable to move. A knock on the door broke the tension and Wendy let out a long exaggerated breath. Marcus stood in the doorway, his expression carefully neutral. "Hope I'm not interrupting. Just wanted to let you know I'll be the executive overseeing this project."

Michael's face contorted. It was subtle, but Wendy saw it. There was a history between these two. Something she wasn't sure she wanted to know. Michael's hands slipped off Wendy's shoulders as he stepped back. "Of course. We were just discussing campaign concepts. Wendy already has a lot of great ideas." He gestured toward the whiteboard.

"Wendy," Marcus's voice was gentle but firm. "Would you mind if I borrowed Michael for a moment?"

She nodded, gathering her notes. The work they had accomplished today was nothing short of brilliant and reassured her that she made the right choice taking this opportunity. However, as she exited The Buckeye Building and looked up at the moon hanging low in the sky, she couldn't help but wonder what Michael was going to say before Marcus interrupted. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders making a mental note to bring a coat tomorrow.

Marcus stood at his office window watching as Wendy made her way to her car. He could tell by their reaction that he'd walked in on something between her and Michael, though nothing blatantly obvious. He tracked her until she reached her car. No visible signs of distress in her walk, no obvious discomfort - not yet. But he'd felt the tension when he announced himself in Michael's office. The same tension he'd dismissed nearly a year ago with Lisa.

His jaw clenched. Lisa's transformation had been so gradual he'd missed it. The way her smile seemed to dim with each passing week, her voice growing smaller in meetings, and then her sudden change in style. By the time Marcus realized something was off, it was too late. The resignation letter was already on his desk. He'd vowed not to let that happen again.

Turning from the window, he recalled Ava's worried state just hours earlier. "He's trying something again. I can feel it," she'd said, words tumbling out as she glanced around his office like she expected it to be bugged. "Wendy is too stubborn to listen. She thinks she can handle it, but I keep thinking about Lisa."

Marcus ran his hand over his bald head, pressing fingers into his temples. The Fireball account was too important to pull Michael from, but he'd be damned if he'd let another promising career get destroyed. This time he'd watch more closely. He pulled out a notepad from his desk drawer, jotting down the time and date followed by:

Late meeting just the two of them. Energy felt off when I walked into the room.

He knew he couldn't just go to HR without evidence. He needed concrete details, inappropriate behavior patterns they could use. The Fireball campaign would give him the opportunity to stay close and observe their interactions. Once he'd built a case, he could take it to HR and get some justice for both Wendy and Lisa.

Dinner was already on the table when Wendy got home. Between taking an Uber home so Wendy didn't have to and making dinner, Jon was clearly trying to make amends. She wrapped her arms around his wiry back, breathing in his scent as she felt the stress of the day melt away.

"I really am happy for you," Jon said as he finished putting the sauce on her pasta. "I did some research after our conversation in the hallway." He handed Wendy her plate and they walked toward the dining room table. "Did you know the demographic spread for-"

"Jon." Wendy sat her plate on the table and grabbed his free hand. "Can we not turn this into another lecture, please?" She smiled sheepishly at him. She was drained, and despite all that he'd done to make things right, she was worried he was going to take it a step too far.

He squeezed her hand, genuine confusion on his face. "I'm not lecturing. I'm just trying to be helpful." He returned her smile, though it felt more forced than it should have been. "This is a huge opportunity, and I thought if you understood the market segments-"

"Stop mansplaining marketing to me!" She felt tears sting her eyes. She closed them, counting to four in her head while she tried to control her breathing. "I understand the market and the demographic. I know what I'm doing."

The pain in Jon's eyes was evident, but he managed to smile and nod. "I'm sorry," he whispered as he sat down at the table across from her. "I'm just trying to contribute. To be supportive."

The genuine bewilderment in his expression deflated her anger. He was trying, in his analytically obsessive way. "I know," she softened. "But sometimes I need you to just be my husband, not my marketing consultant."

Jon chewed on the inside of his cheek. This wasn't going like he'd planned at all. He was trying to make amends with Wendy, but in doing so it seemed like he was only making it worse. He looked down at his pasta, steam still rising from the fresh noodles. "Tell me about your vision for the campaign," he said after taking a moment to rethink.

Jon moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. His familiar warmth settled something restless inside her. "You're right. I'm sorry." His lips brushed her temple. "Tell me about your vision for the campaign instead."

Wendy's face lit up as she described the phoenix imagery, the evolution theme, the way they planned to thread that needle between premium and playful. All the ideas that she came up with and Michael helped bring to life. "It's about transformation without losing your essence," she explained, eyes bright with passion. "About growing up without growing old."

He smiled as he watched her. This was more what he had in mind. He could feel himself getting caught up in her enthusiasm as she painted the picture of what he was sure would be a great campaign. Her phone buzzed against the table cloth while she talked about ways they could use "Embrace your fire." She glanced at the screen and saw Michael's name appear. She tried to continue her thought, but the message had derailed her causing Jon to chuckle.

"You should check that," Jon said, nodding toward the phone. "Show him how committed you are to your new role."

Wendy's stomach clenched at his choice of words, as images of Michael tapping on his pocket flashed behind her eyes. Still, Jon's encouraging smile made her reach for the phone.

Michael: Great work today. Your fire evolution concept is exactly what we need. Looking forward to working closer with you.

The double meaning wasn't lost on her. She rolled her eyes, this was the Michael she was familiar with. Her fingers trembled as she typed a more professional response: Thank you. Excited to develop the campaign further.

"Everything okay?" Jon asked, noting her hesitation.

"Just Michael checking in about the campaign," she said, trying to keep her voice neutral. The screen lit up again almost immediately.

Michael: I knew you were the right choice. Can't wait to see how far we can progress things tomorrow.

Jon squeezed her hand. "See? He recognizes your talent. You should answer him - show him choosing you wasn't a mistake."

Wendy stared at the message, caught between her husband's innocent encouragement and Michael's loaded words. She stared at the words on the screen as she fought the urge to spin her wedding ring. Finally, she typed: Looking forward to proving myself.

Setting the phone face-down, she forced a smile for Jon. "Now, where were we?" But as she launched back into campaign details, she couldn't shake the feeling that things with Michael weren't what they appeared to be.

Executive Privilege Ch. 03

Three weeks into the Fireball campaign, Wendy found herself arriving at The Buckeye Building before sunrise once again. The first couple of times Michael had asked her to meet early she'd protested, she didn't like the idea of giving up her free time for work, but Michael had insisted and Jon, sweet, supportive Jon, had doubled down saying it would go a long way to make her stand out. Once she caved on that it became another expectation. Michael had stopped texting her at night asking her to come in early, although he found plenty of other reasons to text her, now it was just expected of her. Yet another adjustment to show her commitment.

She'd decided on a dark blue dress today that went just past her knees. It was loose enough she didn't spend her entire drive over tugging at it, but she still didn't love the way it hugged her hips. The fabric whispered against her legs as she made her way down the empty hallway, her heels, she chose the black ones today, clicked in rhythm as she made her way to Michael's office. She could already see light spilling out of the office signaling he was already there and waiting for her. Her fingers dug at her hip as she walked, four swift strokes of her hand steadying her nerves.

She stopped at her desk just long enough to drop off her coat and check her reflection in her phone camera, yet another habit she'd picked up from modeling. She ran her fingers over the dark circles under her eyes. When this was all over she'd need a proper day at the spa. On top of the early mornings, Michael also had her working late most nights. She couldn't complain though, they were due to deliver their final pitch to Fireball in just over a week and everything had to be perfect. So far, everything had gone perfectly. It turned out that while Michael was demanding, he was also brilliant. Their late nights were mostly comprised of the two of them bouncing ideas off one another until something stuck. From there Michael would help mold it into something truly incredible. Their initial conversations with Fireball were positive. They loved the ideas Wendy presented, she grinned to herself her fingers tingling with excitement, she presented them, not Michael. In fact, he gave her credit for almost all of it. He was there to fire back when he felt like Fireball was overstepping or asking too much. In fact, if it wasn't for his bluntness or sexually charged comments he was a dream to work with.

"Good morning," she whispered, standing in front of his office. Michael was hunched over his keyboard making him look like a much larger version of Quasimodo. His forehead was already slick with sweat despite the fact that it was below freezing outside. His cheeks lifted when he heard Wendy's voice, his eyes darting from the screen in front of him to Wendy. She stood frozen as his eyes traveled up her body, he didn't even try to hide the fact that he was checking her out. The worst part though was that Wendy had grown accustomed to it. She waited through it, like she had every morning for the past three weeks. Better to let him get it over with than waste twenty minutes being lectured about being a prude - a lesson she'd learned the hard way in her first week.

"There she is, America's top model." He slid back from the desk, the chair groaning in protest. Wendy stepped into the office, closing the door behind her as he rounded the desk. "I was just finishing up my executive summary for Marcus." He stopped directly in front of her, his bulk positioned between her and the door - a detail she'd stopped noticing weeks ago, just like she'd stopped questioning why her pulse quickened when he praised her work. The campaign was too important to get derailed by oversensitivity. "He wants us to present the initial strategy this afternoon. Not just the pitch, but everything we have so far. I want you to be the presenter."

Wendy's eyes went wide, the words sent an unexpected thrill through her body. "M... me? But you always do the presentations." This was what mattered - not his occasional inappropriate comments or the way he stood too close. This was about her career, her chance to finally prove herself. The heat blooming in her chest was just excitement about the opportunity. Nothing more. She crossed her arms in front of her stomach, her fingers immediately finding her ring and spinning it. Michael watched the action. She'd done it in front of him a few times now, and while he hadn't asked what it was about he was beginning to get a pretty good idea.

He reached out, placing his hand on her shoulder, his thumb gently stroking it. He felt Wendy tense, but otherwise, she didn't do anything to move his hand away. A good sign. "You'll do fine." He tried his best to sound reassuring, but honestly it was an emotion that was completely lost on him. "It's important people like Marcus see that you're the one leading this project. I'm just the pretty face." This drew a laugh from Wendy, crimson coloring her cheeks.

"Thanks Michael." Her voice was soft, genuine. She reached up touching his hand that was on her shoulder. The contact sent shockwaves through Michael and he felt his groin stir to life. "You've given me more opportunities in just a few weeks than others have in just as many years."

Michael let his hand fall from her shoulder, he had to show patience. He didn't want this one to flame out like Lisa did. "Don't sell yourself short, Wendy. This has been all you. Your brilliance and commitment to doing whatever is necessary to get things done speaks volumes."

Heat washed over Wendy. She hated the way he looked at her, but she couldn't ignore the words he was saying, the conviction in his voice when he said them. Her traitorous body responded: her chest tightened, her pulse quickened, her cheeks flushed. An aching that she had never associated with anything other than... She pushed the thought away wishing she would have stayed in bed with Jon instead. "So what do we need to do to impress Marcus?"

For the next two hours, they dove into the campaign strategy. Michael stood behind Wendy's chair as she clicked through slides. Michael made for the perfect sounding board. She would bounce ideas off of him and he would give detailed responses on how they could or couldn't work. She didn't even flinch as he paced the room before stopping directly behind her, they were in the zone. "The evolution theme resonates with their core demographic," she explained, pulling up market research, "but I'm worried the imagery feels..."

"Generic?" Michael finished her thought. I thought the same thing, we need something more professional. "I know you have ideas, show me."

Wendy pulled up her mock-ups - sleek professionals with hints of rebellion in their styling. "It's missing something. The transformation feels superficial."

"Because you're thinking linearly." Michael leaned closer, his cologne mixing with coffee on his breath. "What if instead of showing the end result, we capture the moment of change?" His fingers brushed hers as he took control of the mouse, his gut pressing into her back while he pulled up reference images. "That split second when someone decides to break free, to become more." His enthusiasm was infectious, and Wendy found herself leaning forward, caught up in his vision.

"Like a chrysalis cracking open," she breathed, ideas flowing faster now. "We show them mid-transformation, that electric moment when-"

"When potential becomes power." Michael's hand settled on her shoulder, a squeeze matching his excitement. "That's exactly it. See? This is why we work so well together. You have the instinct, you just need a little push sometimes to... come out of your shell." He gave her shoulder another squeeze, her skin was soft, he could feel the tension in her shoulders, could almost hear the moan escape her lips as he applied pressure. "You're not afraid to push boundaries. to think outside of the box." His hands left her shoulders, he didn't want to scare her away. "Some people make promises they can't keep. But you..." His eyes caught hers through the reflection on the screen. "You understand the value of... commitment."

A flush crept up Wendy's neck, goosebumps spreading across her shoulders from his contact just moments ago. They worked well together, she couldn't deny that she'd felt more valued in the last month than any other time maybe in her entire life. They worked like this until voices began filtering in from the hallway, other employees arriving for the day. Wendy stood up and stretched, surprised to find her body stiff from sitting so long.

"Morning beautiful." Jon appeared in the doorway, he decided to wear a brown sweater today with a pair of blue jeans. The look made her smile, it was almost the same thing he'd worn for their first date. "Thought I'd catch you here." His smile seemed genuine, but she couldn't help but notice how fast his eyes shifted to Michael and then to her hands. It made her uneasy, but she wasn't sure why. "Want to grab lunch today? Feel like we haven't really talked lately."

"That sounds great. I miss you." Wendy walked toward the door to give her husband a proper hello, but Michael cleared his throat stopping her in her tracks.

"You sure that's a good idea? We have a lot to go over before that meeting with Marcus. You don't want to come across as unprepared, do you?"

Wendy closed her eyes, her shoulders sagging as she took in Michael's response. He was right. This was her first big presentation, she had to make sure everything went right. "Rain check?" she asked, locking eyes with him through her long lashes.

"Sure, of course. The numbers come first, right?" Jon's attempt at lightness fell flat. He lingered a moment longer before disappearing down the hall.

Michael waited until Jon's footsteps faded. "You know, I've been meaning to ask - "How does someone like Jon land a bombshell like you?" Michael asked, closing the door behind them with a soft click that seemed to seal them in their own private world.

She inhaled sharply, her gaze meeting his. "That's my husband you're talking about." She kept her tone light. Michael had a knack for saying something offensive without really meaning to. "Besides, some people care more about just good looks."

She watched as Michael's scowl turned into a smile, but his eyes didn't seem to get the memo. They started dark, angry almost. "Of course, I don't mean any disrespect toward the guy," he lied, walking back over to Wendy. "I'm just not sure he understands people like us."

Wendy couldn't hold back the laugh. "You're putting me in the same category as you?"

"You know what I mean," Michael laughed. "Jon only understands the numbers, not the people. I bet he keeps a spreadsheet about the things you like in the bedroom."

Wendy's face turned three different shades of red. Michael still wore that cocky smile, but she dipped her eyes too embarrassed to meet his gaze. "That's highly inappropriate." Wendy stood

up, attributing the heat that flushed over her body to her anger. Trying to ignore the memory of Jon's actions after the Christmas party and how he seemed to fail to read her body's cues. "If we're not going to talk about the Fireball account anymore then I'm going to head back to my desk.

"Relax, sweetheart. I'm just giving you a hard time. You're going to need thicker skin if you're going to survive with the bigwigs at Fireball." He moved closer, his bulk forcing her to step back toward his desk. "Besides, I'm just stating facts. Jon's smart, knows his numbers. But he'll never make it higher than he is now. Just another senior account manager, a dime a dozen. Not like what you're capable of becoming."

"First of all, don't call me sweetheart." the fire was back in her voice. Her annoyance beginning to over take her professional demeanor. "And Jon isn't a dime a dozen, he's a genius with the numbers. Even Marcus sees that."

Michaels mocking chuckle was annoying, she wanted to slap the grin off his face. "You've got claws, that's good, because-

"And I can take a joke," she interrupted poking her finger into his chest unsure where this bout of self-confidence came from.

Michael barely even flinched. He kept his smile plastered on his face, even when she was jabbing him in the chest. "That's good to hear," he replied, with a calmness that unsettled her. "I'm sure the Fireball execs will love the story about how you gave your boss an invitation to... what were the words you used?" He paused placing his fingers to his chin like he had to think about it. "Oh yeah, make my wildest fantasy come true."

The blood rushed from Wendy's face so fast she felt dizzy. That note - her playful attempt at spicing things up with Jon - now twisted into something darker in Michael's hands. She silently cursed Ava for ever suggesting it. Wendy's fingers rubbed together at a frantic pace. "You... you wouldn't." She tried to match his playful tone, to pretend this was just another one of their professional power plays, but uncertainty crept into her voice.

"Relax," Michael's voice softened as he watched the color drain from Wendy's face. "Your secret's safe with me." His hand found her shoulder again, steadying her as she swayed slightly. "I would never do anything to damage your career. You're far too valuable." The word 'valuable' sent an unexpected chill down her spine. "I just need to know you're committed to... our partnership."

An unwelcomed shiver danced across her skin at his words, the same warmth she'd felt during their creative session crept over her. She should be angry at his implied threat, but instead found herself oddly reassured. He was right - they were doing incredible work together. And if he occasionally said inappropriate things or stood too close, wasn't that a small price to pay for finally being recognized? For having someone see her potential? Still, she couldn't quite explain the way her body responded to his presence, the confusing mix of discomfort, the way her body would react to his praise. It was all very confusing to her. "We should finish the presentation," she said instead, focusing on the familiar comfort of work. Michael's approving smile followed her back to her seat, and she threw herself into the slides, grateful for the distraction from her conflicting emotions. The sooner they impressed Marcus, the sooner everything else would make sense again.

Jon sat in his office, a few doors down from Michael's, staring at his closed door allowing his imagination to run away from him. He heard Wendy's muffled laugh dance down the hall causing him to grip his pen a little too tight.

"She's doing great." Marcus's voice cut through his haze forcing him to break his gaze away from the door and focus on his mentor. The older man leaned against the doorframe, coffee mug in hand, studying Jon's expression. "Wendy's really coming into her own with this campaign."

"I wouldn't know. We've barely talked since she took it on." He turned back to the spreadsheet on his monitor, the cursor blinking mockingly at the top of his sheet. He closed the program grateful for Marcus's distraction. "Michael occupies all her time. By the time she gets home she's exhausted." Jon took off his glasses rubbing his temples. "76 percent of people report burnout from their job. If she's not careful..."

The office door clicked shut. Jon looked up, his brows pressed together as Marcus walked toward him. "Everything alright at home, Jon?" He settled into the chair across from Jon resting his right ankle over his left leg.

Jon hesitated, the sound of another laugh making his stomach twist. "I trust her, I do it's just..." He saw Marcus's eyebrows raise hoping he'd step in and say something. He didn't. "Why's it have to be with Michael. You know he's the reason Lisa quit, right?" He felt his pulse start to rise. Images of his last failed relationship flashing through his mind.

"You know I'm not allowed to talk about Lisa." Marcus's face was stern. He was always so by the book, didn't let things rattle him. It was what Jon admired most about him.

"I know. I try with Michael, I really do. But it's obvious he doesn't like me." Jon shook his head determined not to derail everything he'd built. "Sometimes I wonder if he only picked Wendy for this project because he's pissed that I disagreed with him over the quarterly report. But the numbers-"

Marcus cut him off. He wasn't interested in hashing out the numbers again. "Is this really about Michael or something else?"

Jon chewed on his lip not wanting to admit how right Marcus had been. "She's not Olivia," Marcus said after another few seconds of awkward silence.

"I know, but Michael..." He took a deep breath exhaling through his nose. "Why does every meeting between them have to be behind closed doors? It's not normal." He was louder than he meant to be. The anger and jealousy he worked so hard to keep bottled up was starting to seep out. He needed to make an appointment with his therapist. He'd help Jon work through it.

"I know Michael can be... a lot sometimes." Marcus paused, searching for his words. "But I've seen their work, it's good. It's damn good." He took a sip of his coffee, studying Jon's expression to make sure he heard what he was going to say next. "You need to talk to Wendy. Let her know how you're feeling. You can't let past scars affect your current relationships. Take it from someone who's been married for over 25 years."

"I know, I just... She's already working so hard. I don't want to add to the stress. I'm already being accused of not being supportive." He let out a nervous laugh. He just wanted things to go back to normal, before the Christmas party. "I asked her if she wanted to grab lunch today." He looked up at the ceiling, shaking his head. "Then Michael reminded her about some presentation. You should have seen how deflated she got. He acts like he owns her."

"I've been keeping an eye on the situation," Marcus admitted. "But Jon - you can't let what happened with Olivia cloud your judgment. That kind of suspicion can destroy a marriage."

Jon nodded, guilt churning in his stomach. Here he was, falling into old patterns while Wendy was achieving everything she'd worked for. "I need to trust her," he said, more to himself than Marcus. "She's brilliant at this. I can't let my baggage overshadow her success."

"Trust, but verify," Marcus said quietly. "Watch, but don't accuse. Sometimes our instincts pick up on things our conscious mind doesn't want to see." He stood, straightening his tie. "She has a presentation to the executive team this afternoon. I'll keep an eye on her-make sure she isn't feeling overwhelmed."

As Marcus left, another laugh wafted through the door. Jon's imagination painted the scene - Michael's bulk forcing Wendy back against his desk. He shook his head violently. This was exactly what had happened with Olivia. He'd let his fears spiral until innocent meetings became torrid affairs in his mind. By the time he'd realized his mistake, she was gone.

"I cannot keep doing this," he whispered to himself, though his eyes remained fixed on the door. He had to trust Wendy enough to let her shine, even if it meant sharing that light with someone else.

Even if that someone was Michael.

He opened the drawer of his desk, jostling things around, before finding what he was looking for. The old business card was faded a little, but the number was readable. He really needed to give Dr. Carson a call to let him know he was reverting to some of his old, jealous traits so they could subvert them before he accused Wendy of something he didn't mean.

The fridge in the breakroom didn't have much in it for food, but it did have several bottles of water. Her stomach growled as she grabbed a bottle. Her and Michael had worked straight through lunch, but their presentation for Marcus was done. That was the most important thing. She closed the door with a frustrated grunt. She needed to start packing lunch.

"Hey stranger!" Ava's voice rang out behind her. "I was ready to put out a missing persons report on you. I haven't seen you at your desk all week."

Wendy turned, and saw Ava leaning against the counter, a sandwich in her hand. "Sorry, I've been swamped." She managed a tired smile, her eyes fixing on the food in her hand. "The Fireball campaign is at a critical stage." She winced at her words. She sounded like Michael. He'd said the same thing to her when he started asking her to come in earlier. "I miss our lunch breaks."

Ava held up the other half of her sandwich. The lettuce and tomato hung just over the edge of the bread, the bacon thick and crispy making Wendy's mouth water. "How's it been working with... him?" She couldn't help but roll her eyes at the thought of working so closely with Michael.

The sandwich tasted even better than it looked. The crunch of the bacon and lettuce echoed in Wendy's ears as she closed her eyes savoring the taste. Ava let out a soft giggle causing Wendy to blush. "Sorry, I haven't eaten all day and we worked through lunch," she said, holding her hand to her mouth as she spoke. "It really hasn't been too bad." She took another bite, settling

next to Ava as she spoke. "He really is good at this kind of stuff." She surprised herself with that sentence. Was she seriously defending Michael? And to Ava of all people? Her finger drummed against the cabinet. Four quick taps as if she was ensuring she wasn't in a dream. She felt like she was in the twilight zone, and judging by the way Ava was looking at her so did she. "I mean, he's still Michael of course," she added to sound more... What? Reluctant? Convincing?

Ava nodded but didn't respond right away. She looked over Wendy as if there may be some sort of visible clues to Michael's harassment. When things had gone south with Lisa she seemed more jumpy than normal, and she was never able to look Ava in the eye. So far, Wendy didn't exhibit any of that, although the isolation was a concern. "Has he..." She paused, considering her next words. "I mean, is he being... you know, professional?"

"He's mentoring me," Wendy said, that familiar warmth flooding her chest at the thought of their morning breakthroughs. She set the half eaten sandwich on the counter catching Ava's concerned look. "Do you know how rare it is to find someone who actually sees your potential and not just this?" She gestured toward her chest, the evangelical tone in her voice making Ava's eyes widen.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it." She reached out touching Wendy's arm. "I just know Michael can be... well, a creep." She let out a soft laugh, but Wendy's face remained deadpan, unwilling to join in on the laughter.

"Michael has his flaws, but so does everyone else. I didn't expect that to change when I took the assignment." Wendy took a step back, breaking contact with Ava and letting her hand fall. "He's giving me chances no one ever has."

Ava's face softened, unsure of why her friend was suddenly getting so defensive. "I just worry about you. You seem... different lately."

"Different good, though, right?" Wendy stood up straight, Michael's lessons flooding back - shoulders squared, chin lifted, own your space. The words felt too much like her days modeling but the power behind them was intoxicating. "Everyone else just sees Jon's wife or the former model. Michael actually hears my ideas and challenges me." The overhead fluorescent light flickered. "I'm presenting to the executive team today. Me, not Michael. When's the last time anyone else cared about me enough to give me that kind of opportunity?"

"Wendy," she hadn't seen it before. The hurt in Wendy's eyes, in her voice. They'd always spent their afternoons laughing and telling stories about their spouses. She thought Wendy was happy in that role. Sure, she knew that Wendy felt overlooked but, this felt... it was even worse than she imagined. "You know I'm in your corner, right? And Jon-" She reached for Wendy's hand again but she pulled away. "He's so proud of you. We all see how brilliant you are. Michael isn't the only one who-"

"There's my star presenter." Michael stood in the doorway behind Wendy, his presence somehow larger in the confined space. Wendy felt her body respond - not just straightening but almost leaning toward him, like a flower tracking the sun. Ava watched dumbstruck, why did she care so much about what Michael thought?

"I was just grabbing a quick bite before the presentation," Wendy explained although Michael hadn't asked. She drifted toward him, as if she'd forgotten she was in the middle of a conversation with her friend. *What the hell is happening?* Ava thought to herself as Michael gave her a look of pure smugness.

"The executive team is gathering." His hand found the small of her back, the touch simultaneously comforting and possessive. "Ready to show them what you're capable of? To let them see the Wendy that I see?"

Wendy nodded, already falling into step beside him. She turned as they were walking out the door catching Ava's worried expression but pushed it aside. Her friend didn't understand. She was more than happy continuing to work as a Marketing Specialist where all she had to do was take orders. Wendy wanted more for herself, and Michael was giving it to her.

"Wendy-" Ava called after her, but Michael was already steering her toward the conference room, his hand steady against her back. She reached for her phone, wanting to document just how low his hand was. Surely Marcus would be able to use that. But by the time she fished it out of her purse, Michael was already guiding Wendy into the conference room and closing the door.

"You've got this," he murmured, close enough that his breath stirred her hair as the door closed behind them. "Time to show them you're worth investing in. That you follow through on your... commitments." His fingers pressed slightly harder into her back making her breath catch. "You won't let me down, will you?"

All Wendy could do was nod, not trusting her own voice at the moment. That confused mix of pride and shame was back, washing over her like a baptism. Ava stood in the break room doorway, watching as Michael steered her friend toward the conference room. The half-eaten sandwich sat forgotten on the counter, still warm - a small thing, barely worth noticing really. But it nagged at her like a loose thread that, if pulled, might unravel something she wasn't ready to see.

Wendy was reviewing her notes as Michael got the presentation set up on the large TV. He'd opened the blinds in the room to let the sun in and watched as Wendy stood in front of the window, looking down at the busy Columbus streets beneath her. He knew that look well, she was envisioning it: the power, the success. He could see the fire in her eyes weeks ago when he told her about the project. The same fire he was going to use to burn it all down in a beautiful, triumphant blaze of glory. She looked down at her flashcards, then back out over the horizon.

He watched her as she spun her wedding ring absentmindedly on her finger. He'd seen her do that a few times now, some kind of nervous tic. He'd ask her about it one day, but for now, he was content to catalog it as a weapon to use later.

Wendy's head shot up, her fingers closing into small fists. "Steve, and Brian are coming?"

"Of course." Michael gave her a confident smile and walked toward her. He'd planned for this, knew she'd freak out at the mention of their attendance. It was almost too easy. "You didn't think the CEO and CFO would attend an executive meeting?" He placed his hands on her shoulders, he'd broken through the touch barrier effortlessly, locking eyes with her. "You're going to do great. They're going to be blown away by your presentation, and I'll be right here in case anything goes wrong."

She gave a reassuring smile, butterflies fluttering inside her stomach. *Nerves, it's just nerves, nothing else*, she told herself as Michael exited the room and she adjusted her stance.

Michael heard whispered voices as he approached Marcus's office. He looked around the hallway to ensure no one was watching and did his best to press against the wall. He wasn't the world's most agile man, but the attempt would have to do.

"...you have to do something. We can't let this happen again, especially to Wendy." Ava's voice could barely be called a whisper. Her emotions spilling out of her as she pleaded her case to Marcus.

"I'm documenting everything," Marcus murmured. Michael had to strain to hear him as he pressed closer to the cracked office door. "But we need concrete evidence. HR won't act on suspicions alone, not with someone as important as Michael."

"We have to do something..."

An idea flashed in Michael's head and he dug into the front pocket of his pants, pulling out his phone. He couldn't see much, but if he angled it just right into the opening of the door... perfect. On the small screen, he watched Ava leaning across Marcus's desk, leaning in close to Marcus to try to conceal their conversation. Of course, from this angle the conversation looked much more... intimate. He laughed to himself as Marcus gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze and offered her a tissue. Or was he brushing her hair out of her face and tenderly wiping away a tear? It was so hard to tell from this perspective really. And Michael knew better than anyone context, or in this situation lack thereof, was king.

So they were collecting dirt on him, were they? Well, two could play at that game. He examined the video on his phone. With a couple of edits and some shifting lighting this could go from seemingly innocent to an HR nightmare. He laughed to himself as he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Michael pocketed his phone and cleared his throat, giving ample time for them to react before he made his appearance known. Ava straightened instantly, putting professional distance between herself and Marcus, giving him one last pleading look before exiting his office.

"The presentation's ready when you are," Michael announced as Ava opened the door. He allowed himself a hint of knowing amusement as she studied his face before pushing past him.

"I'll be right there."

Michael nodded, already composing the narrative in his mind as he practically skipped to the other executives' offices. Sometimes the best weapons were the ones they never see coming.

The conference room door opened just as Michael was taking his seat at the table. Jon entered behind Marcus, he held a binder of paper in his arms, no doubt filled to the brim with various data points. Michael's expression darkened momentarily, his gaze darting to Wendy before he softened his expression.

"Sorry Jon, this is an executive meeting. I don't think you're in the right place." Michael's voice carried that familiar authoritative tone that Jon had tried to steer clear of.

"Actually, I invited him," Marcus countered smoothly. "Thought he could help us understand the numbers a little better." His eyes met Michael's, a subtle challenge in his steady gaze. "Given the scope of this campaign, we need all our experts."

Wendy watched the exchange from her position at the end of the table. She could tell there was history between those two, but she wasn't about to ask what it was. Jon caught her eye as he settled into his seat across from her, mouthing a silent "good luck. I love you." The simple gesture calming her racing pulse.

The mahogany conference table stretched before Wendy like a runway, each face turned toward her holding different expectations. She stood at the far end, Michael's bulk an imposing presence to her right, while Brian Fletcher, their CEO, commanded the head of the table to her left. Her thumb pressed against her ring, but she forced her hand down. Not here. Not now.

Across from her, Steve Lawrence, the CFO, looked down at his iPad. She couldn't see what was on it, but she imagined graphs and data sets. All the stuff she saw Jon pouring over every night. Next to him, Marcus sat with his usual composed demeanor, though his eyes seemed to catch every subtle interaction. It felt like he was watching her a bit closer than usual, and she didn't know why. Was he expecting her to fail? She pushed the thought away; she needed to focus. Then there was Jon, his presence both comforting and nerve-wracking. Marcus had invited him to "help with the financial projections," but his encouraging smile steadied her racing heart. She took a deep breath as the presentation came to life on the screen. This was it, her big moment. Her gaze found Michael instinctively - not seeking approval, but drawing on that raw energy he seemed to radiate. She returned his smile, straightening her back and squaring her shoulders. She was ready.

"As you can see from the mock-ups," Wendy clicked to the next slide, her voice growing stronger with each word, "Evolve Your Fire speaks to both our existing base and our aspirational market." The familiar images filled the screen - young professionals with that hint of rebellion in their eyes, the phoenix imagery subtly woven throughout. "We're not asking consumers to choose between sophisticated and spirited. We're showing them they can embrace both."

Steve leaned forward, his interest evident. "And the demographic overlap?"

Wendy's fingers tightened around her clicker. Michael had told her he would ask that. "Our research shows 68% of our current consumers are within five years of entering professional careers. They're not abandoning their bold choices - they're evolving them." She caught Jon's proud smile and felt a surge of confidence. "They want a brand that evolves with them."

"But these projections," Jon's voice cut through her momentum, analytical and precise as he flipped through a couple of sheets in his binder. "The growth curve assumes a 23% retention rate in urban markets, but historical data suggests premium spirits typically see closer to 15% when attempting to bridge market segments." He adjusted his glasses, handing a sheet of paper to Steve. "We could be overestimating our reach by nearly 40%."

The room shifted. Wendy's fingers twitched toward her ring but she forced them still. She'd prepared for questions, but not from Jon. Was he really going to be the reason she failed? Her chest felt tight and she had trouble focusing as everyone in the room waited for her response.

"Actually," Michael rose, his presence expanding to fill the space behind her, "those numbers don't account for our phased rollout strategy." His voice carried a hint of disdain like he was spewing venom directly at Jon. She saw Jon shrink back, watched the paper being dismissed, and something shifted inside her. Jon, her brilliant, analytical husband who'd always been her anchor, suddenly seemed smaller. Not just physically, but in presence. He was just looking to inform, to ensure everyone was on the same page, but Michael showed dominance. Wanted

everyone in the room to know his opinion was all that mattered. It should have made Wendy recoil, but as much as she hated to admit it, it had the opposite effect.

Warmth spread through her body, starting low in her belly and spreading through her. She wanted to believe it was just relief from Michael saving her, but she knew it was more. "We're not just throwing premium pricing at college bars and hoping it sticks. Right, Wendy?"

She caught the gleam in Michael's eye - not just support, but dominance, ownership. Still, it helped to steady her. "Exactly. Traditional premium spirits start at the top and work down. We're building from our base up." She clicked to the next slide, grateful for Michael's save even as her heart ached at Jon's chastened expression. "Which brings us to our rollout strategy."

The regional map filled the screen, and Wendy felt her confidence return. This was her element - the human side of marketing that went beyond pure numbers. "We're starting with a targeted launch across Kentucky, Tennessee, and of course right here in the great state of Ohio. These markets share our brand's DNA - bold spirit meets sophisticated taste." Her voice grew stronger as she detailed their grassroots approach, the local influencer partnerships, the careful blend of premium positioning and authentic connection.

Steve's approving nods spurred her on, driving her to the end of the presentation, along with a round of enthusiastic applause from the executive team. Marcus cleared his throat. "Excellent work, Michael. You've really brought out the best in Wendy."

Something dangerous flashed behind Michael's eyes before he smiled. "It was all Wendy. She's been the one putting in the work and coming up with the ideas." He gestured toward her with practiced humility. "I'm just the pretty face on the team."

Laughter rippled through the room, but Wendy barely heard it. Michael's words sent an unexpected thrill through her. Her stomach flipped, her nipples growing hard - he wasn't just acknowledging her work, he was ensuring everyone else did too. The same man who demanded everyone's respect and attention was stepping back, letting her shine.

"Seriously impressive work," Brian said, his attention fully on Wendy now. "Keep this up, and you'll have my job one day." The other executives chuckled, but his eyes held hers. "We don't often see this level of strategic thinking from someone at your level."

As the room cleared, three distinct energies remained: Jon's uncertain smile as he slunk out the door head hung low, Michael's possessive presence at her shoulder, and Marcus's calculating gaze taking in every detail. Wendy stood suspended between them all, wondering if this was what success felt like - this dizzying mix of triumph and tension, professional pride and personal conflict.

The conference room emptied slowly, handshakes and congratulations blending into a euphoric haze. Wendy's body hummed with residual adrenaline as she gathered her presentation materials, still riding the high of their success. Her pulse fluttered like a trapped bird, every inch of her alive in sensation.

"Did you see Steve's face?" She turned to Michael, eyes bright with triumph. "When I showed those engagement projections? I thought he was going to fall out of his chair!"

Michael crossed the room to the small bar cart, crystal decanter catching the late afternoon sun. "I think this calls for a celebration, don't you?" The amber liquid caught the light as he poured. "To our commitment to your rising success."

Wendy accepted the glass without hesitation, too caught up in the moment to register the deliberate phrasing of Michael's words or the way he only took a quick sip before setting his drink down. He brought his hands to arms, his touch dancing over her skin as he praised her performance. The slow motion in which he moved his fingers felt like electricity on her skin adding to the blissful sensation running through her.

"God, and when Brian started talking about my future potential?" Wendy's hands shook with excitement as she took a long drink. She felt the heat of the alcohol travel down her throat adding a sense of calm to her over-stimulated body. "I never thought - I mean, the CEO complimented me." She let out a small laugh, giddy with accomplishment.

"The way their eyes lit up at your 'Evolve Your Fire' idea..." Michael's voice carried that hint of pride that made her chest tighten. "Not many people can handle that level of scrutiny from the executive team their first time out."

Heat pooled in her core at his words. This was what she'd always wanted - to be seen for her mind, her capabilities. To be taken seriously.

"We were amazing in there." The whiskey's warmth spread through her limbs Or maybe that was just the lingering high of success.

"Not we, Wendy." Michael stepped closer, his presence overwhelming her senses. His fingers brushed hers as he took her glass, setting it aside on the conference table next to his. "This was all you. Your brilliance. Your transformation."

Her pulse thundered in her ears as he closed the distance between them. She could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell the whiskey on his breath. This was wrong. She should run. But her legs wouldn't move, her body betraying her as his gaze dropped to her lips.

"The way you handled their questions," he murmured, close enough now that she could feel each word against her skin. "Even when Jon tried to undermine you with those numbers..." He saw something flash in her eyes, letting the implication hang. "But you showed them all what you're capable of." His fingers closed around her arms, drawing her closer. Or maybe she was drawing closer to him? She wasn't sure; everything was moving too fast. "You had them eating out of the palm of your hand - you're finally becoming who you were meant to be."

Her breath caught, chest rising and falling rapidly as he leaned closer. This was Michael - Michael who repulsed her, who she'd been told over and over again to avoid. Yet here she was, eyes fluttering closed as his breath ghosted across her lips. This was wrong. She loved Jon. *Even as Jon tried to undermine you?* Michael's words replayed in her head. Was that what happened? Was Jon trying to diminish her moment? She couldn't think straight. Between the lack of food, the alcohol, Michael's reassurances, the way he stepped in and saved her. Her lips parted, she could hear her heart pounding in resistance in her ears.

"Has anyone seen Michael?" Marcus's voice echoed down the hallway, footsteps growing closer. "I have some questions about-"

The words shattered the moment. Wendy spun toward the door, her world spinning upside down. She nearly collided with Marcus as he appeared in the doorway, catching herself on his arm.

"Wendy?" Marcus steadied her with a hand on her arm, his gaze taking in her flushed cheeks, the slight tremor in her hands. "Everything alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Fine! Everything's fine." Her voice came out breathless, unsteady. "Just- just celebrating the presentation. But I forgot I needed to beat Jon home and make dinner." The concerned look on Marcus's face let her know the lie didn't get past him, but she rushed out the door before he could question it.

"You were right about the campaign," Michael's voice carried that same seductive power from their presentation. "Sometimes evolution requires us to reach beyond our comfort zone."

The double meaning in his words made her stomach flip. She couldn't look at him, couldn't bear to see that knowing smile or let Marcus read the guilt she knew was written across her face. Her heels struck a desperate rhythm against the tile as she fled.

Marcus watched her retreat, trying to piece together what he'd just walked into. Behind him, Michael began gathering the presentation materials as if nothing happened. But there was something in the way she ran out of the room, in the way he called after her - something that made Marcus reach for his phone, adding another entry to his growing documentation.

What terrified Wendy most wasn't how close she'd come to crossing a line - it was that for one dizzying moment, caught up in the intoxicating mix of success and Michael's validation, she'd wanted to.

She needed to find Jon. Needed his steady presence to wash away this confusion. Needed to remember who she was before Michael had started reshaping her into something she didn't recognize.

Jon's car was already in the driveway when Wendy pulled up. Her hands trembled as she unlocked the door, stepping into their small foyer where Jon's shoes were already neatly placed in the shoe rack. Even as she tossed her keys into the small bowl that sat next to the door, she could feel Michael's touch on her arms. Could smell the whiskey on his breath. How could she have been so stupid? So caught up in the moment that she almost let him... She rubbed her thighs together feeling the guilt of her near indiscretion as she walked inside.

"You're home early." Jon's voice carried from the kitchen, the hum of the dishwasher announcing that he was already cleaning. Her chest ached and she wasn't sure if it was from residual pride or the fact that she nearly blew up her marriage. She turned the corner to see Jon standing by the granite counter they'd picked out together last spring, still in his work clothes, holding a bottle of cheap wine. He had a nervous smile on his face. Oblivious to what nearly transpired with Michael. Probably oblivious to the role he played in it as well. Why did he have to be in the meeting at all? Why did he always have to... That wasn't fair. He was just trying to be a team player. To make sure everyone was on the same page about the data. "I thought we could celebrate your big..."

She didn't let him finish. She didn't deserve his praise. She had to make it up to him. To be better, more present. No more early mornings. No more late nights. The project was going well.

They had all the foundation in place she could start working from her desk again. Her body was on his in an instant, her mouth crashing against his. The wine bottle slipped from his grasp, shattering on the floor. "I need to..."

"We'll get it later," she whispered running her hands across her face, grabbing his glasses and placing them on the counter. she didn't want anything to take them out of this moment. She needed to feel his warmth, his connection. Her tongue pushed past his lips, letting him know she wouldn't be denied.

"But the glass," he protested causing her to groan in frustration. Why couldn't he see how much she needed this? Why did he always have to be so in his head?

"I'll clean it up later," she protested against his lips, fingers already working on his shirt buttons. "Don't talk," she mumbled running her free hand through his shaggy hair. She loved the way Jon's body felt against hers. Like they were equals, so different from Michael's overwhelming presence. The comparison sent an unwelcome surge of heat through her core, making her press harder against her husband, desperate to drive out thoughts of another man's touch.

Her desperate energy caught Jon off guard, but his hands found her waist instinctively - gentle, always so gentle. She tugged on his hair, bringing their kiss deeper. She didn't want gentle, she didn't deserve it. She wished Jon would spin her around and press her against the counter. To rip open her shirt and punish her. Her teeth bit down on his lip hoping he'd get the message. She needed something to match the confused passion coursing through her veins.

"Wendy," he gasped as she pushed him back against the kitchen counter, she could practically hear him trying to process her behavior. The whiskey on her breath, the tremor in her hands, the way she wouldn't quite meet his eyes. She could hear Michael's taunts from earlier as her hands ran across his bare chest *I bet he keeps a spreadsheet about the things you like in the bedroom.*

Her fingers trailed down the front of his body finding the button of his pants. She could feel his hardness straining against it. The heat from it making her moan into his mouth. Her body felt like it was burning from the inside. The heat she'd felt earlier magnified by ten. The liquid in her veins like pure magma.

"I need you," she whispered, and it wasn't a lie - she did need Jon, needed his steadiness to wash away the afternoon's confusion. Needed to prove to herself that what she'd felt in that conference room was just professional excitement mixed with whiskey, nothing more. Her hands shook as she pushed down his slacks, feeling him spring free. She wrapped her hand around his shaft and heard him suck in air. The sounds he made always turned her on, let her know she was doing what he liked.

Without releasing her hold on him she spun around, wrapping her arms around his head and bringing his lips to her neck. "Unzip me." The words came out hard and demanding, a voice of someone used to being obeyed, but Jon didn't seem to notice as he drew her zipper down. The dress crumbled at her feet leaving her in her black cheekies and matching bra.

His lips pressed against her neck, tender kisses that made her stroke him a little faster. She didn't want loving kisses, she didn't deserve them. Her fingers tightened in his hair, urging him closer. Needing more.

"I love you," Jon's breath against her skin felt cool, and the sincerity in his voice nearly broke her. She turned in his arms, claiming his mouth in another desperate kiss. His hands skimmed her sides, his light touch tickling her, but even as she grinded into him.

"Take me right here," she insisted hoping he'd get the hint, her nails raking down his back. She felt him hesitate, felt him trying to understand this new urgency. She grabbed his hand putting it on her butt as she spun around against the cold granite. "I need you to..." But she couldn't finish the sentence, blushing at how silly she must look to him right now.

The kitchen counter bit into her lower back as she hopped onto it, hooking her heels around Jon's hips. His kisses grew more urgent, still not what she needed, but better. His manhood pressed against the front of her underwear making her moan with need as she pulled him into her with her ankles.

Jon's hands settled on her hips. His touch was hesitant, like he knew something was off but he couldn't quite figure out what. She placed her hand between them capturing his shaft in her hand as she began to pump him before wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

"Wendy..." His voice held a question she didn't want to answer. She silenced him with another kiss, rougher than their usual intimacy. Her fingers dug into his flesh as she ground against him, feeling him hard and ready through the thin fabric of her underwear. The friction sent sparks of pleasure through her core, but something was missing. She needed more - needed him to take her, to claim her.

"Please," she whispered, not sure what she was asking for. Her body felt like it was burning up, need and guilt and shame all twisted together into something desperate and raw. She guided his hand between her legs, showing him how much she wanted him. How much she needed this to be different than their usual lovemaking.

Jon's fingers slipped beneath the fabric of her underwear, finding her wet and ready. He groaned against her mouth, as Wendy spread her legs to accommodate him more.

"Please, Jon," she begged, her voice trembling with need. "I need you inside me." She arched into him lifting her hips to help get her point across.

He peeled her panties down her leg, leaving them dangling on her ankle as he pressed his length against her volcanic core. "You're so..."

She didn't let him finish, she didn't want to talk, she wanted him to take her. Her hips rocked against him with a need like he'd never seen coating his member with her juices. "Ahhhhh," the breath Wendy had been holding released from her lungs as his cock found purchase and slide into her with a single thrust. Her walls sealed around him, her legs wrapping tighter around his waist as she pulled him deeper.

Jon's body moved against hers, his thrusts slow and steady. Wendy met his rhythm, her body arching into his. Her hands gripped the edge of the granite as she met his thrusts. She could feel every inch of him, filling her, taking her. But it wasn't enough. She needed more.

She squeezed her eyes shut, focusing on the way his body felt when it met hers, the sound of their flesh slapping together. But behind her closed lids she saw Michael's knowing smile. Her eyes shot open, her arms wrapping around Jon's neck hoping to find the leverage she needed to push him deeper.

"Yesssss, Oh God, baby. You feel so good. So fucking good." Jon's hands gripped her ass, his fingers digging into her soft flesh. He was beginning to work up a sweat as his mouth sought hers out. As their tongues clashed Wendy's eyes drifted shut. Her pussy contracted around him as once again flashes of Michael appeared behind her eyes. She felt the phantom heat of his bulk pressing against her, felt the power roll off of him in waves. Wendy felt the first hint of her orgasm start to build. Her lids snapped back open, desperately wanting to be in this moment with Jon. But the images of Michael refused to fade, his presence in her mind only intensifying the sensations coursing through her body. She felt a pang of guilt, but the pleasure was too overwhelming to resist.

Jon could feel Wendy's body responding, he wasn't sure what had gotten into her but he wasn't going to complain. If this was what success looked like on her, maybe his fears about Michael had been misplaced. Still, something nagged at him, but the way her hips were grinding into him, the way her body seemed to suck him into her, made him unable to put his finger on it.

"Mmmmmffff, don't stop," Wendy's pleading drove him deeper, harder than he usually allowed himself to be. He wanted to give her what she wanted, but that wasn't possible. He wasn't wearing protection, it was the wrong time of the month, they'd need at least a 50% increase in combined income before a baby made sense. He'd run the numbers a dozen times.

"Right there, fuck... just like that." Wendy's nails dug into Jon's flesh as her body began to betray her. Her head rolled back, neck exposed to him, begging him to claim her. The images of Michael had stopped, but she could still feel his presence like a ghost in the room. It helped to drive her forward, to lose control. She wanted to prove to him that Jon was more than enough that their connection was real.

"Uggh," Jon was doing his best to hold it together. Wendy wasn't usually much of a talker, but she seemed to be doing it more and more. Perhaps the confidence she was finding at work was carrying over here. "I can't hold out much longer, baby."

"I'm so close," she warned through ragged breaths, her body arching off the counter to meet Jon's needy thrusts. "Please don't stop." Her mind felt foggy, drunk on the mixture of guilt and pleasure coursing through her. She knew she should tell him to pull out, to be careful, but she needed this - needed to feel completely possessed, consequences be damned. Her legs wrapped tighter around his waist, ankles locking behind his back as she drew him deeper. She bit down on her inside of her cheek as Jon's lean frame slammed into her. She could feel herself teetering on the edge.

"Yes, yes. Oh God. Oh... fuuuuuck," her orgasm hit like a tsunami which should have filled her with elation and joy. Instead it filled her with shock and fear. The images of Michael were back. His body replacing Jon's as he drilled her into submission. Her mind told her she should be repulsed, but instead, her toes curled, her orgasm had already taken hold, and there was nothing she could do about it now. Electricity shot across her skin, drawing a moan from deep in her throat as her body spasmed around Jon.

Her walls pulsed around him, each contraction drawing him deeper as her orgasm crashed through her in waves. The image of Michael was burned into her now, her guilt only intensifying the pleasure coursing through her trembling body. She could hear herself begging, pleading with Jon to fill her, to claim her completely.

"Don't stop, baby. I want it," she whimpered, her ankles locked tight behind his back. "I need to feel you..." But even as the words left her lips, she felt Jon tense, felt him start to withdraw. His mind winning the battle between need and practicality.

"Wendy, we can't-" Jon's voice strained as he pulled free of her grasp. Warmth spread across her thigh as her husband shuddered. Each rope that hit her skin felt like judgement, burning her skin. She had wanted him, needed him, to finish inside her. The sudden emptiness felt like punishment. She blinked her eyes open, all traces of Michael gone from her mind replaced with overwhelming guilt.

"We've got to be more careful." Jon's breath was shallow and raspy, his touch a reminder of what she couldn't have. She felt herself nod, leaning against his shoulder in hopes his familiar scent would ground her. She didn't know which was worse - that she'd imagined Michael while making love to her husband, or that she felt disappointed rather than relieved by Jon's responsible choice.

His tender kisses on her neck caused her to blink away tears. She didn't deserve his love, not after what had almost happened in the office. What had happened in her mind. She watched as Jon cleaned himself up with a nearby dish towel before pulling up his pants. The wine bottle lay shattered at their feet, red liquid seeping between the cracks of their kitchen tile like blood. "We should clean up this mess," Jon whispered in her ear stepping away to grab a broom.

Executive Privilege Ch. 04

"Oh God, don't stop," Wendy's cries bounced off the dimly lit bedroom as Jon ground his hips against hers. Over the course of the last week, things at home seemed to improve by the day. Wendy seemed to find her footing at work, and was back to working normal hours. Not only that, but she seemed to always come home ready for action with Jon. Not that he was complaining, he loved these moments with his wife. He'd read a study recently that couples who had sex at least once a week were more likely to last. If this week was any indication, he and Wendy were going to last forever.

"I love the way you feel," Jon whispered, causing Wendy to wrap her long legs around his back and pull him deeper into her. He felt incredible in this position, so deep and so powerful. Her walls coated his latex covered cock with her juices as her mouth sought his for a hungry kiss.

After her near disaster with Michael last week she had practically cut off all ties with him. Of course, they still had a large project to work on, and she was determined to make that succeed, but not at the cost of her marriage. She had messaged Michael that same night and told him she wanted to find a way to work within normal business hours. Taking it a step further, she even started working primarily from her desk again, only going to Michael's office to prepare for meetings. Overall, it seemed to be working. Michael was a little distant and off-putting at first, but he was professional enough to not push too hard and respect her boundaries (a sentence she never thought she'd say about Michael.)

A nagging worry tugged at the edges of her mind even as Jon's skillful movements built pleasure through her body. The constant communication Michael had always seemed to require of her drifted more and more each day. What had started as a steady stream of emails from him about the Fireball campaign had dwindled to just a couple a day. She understood that after the initial push for launch there would be a cooling off period, but how quickly it happened seemed odd. Ava had tried to tell her that it was probably Michael playing mind games, but she dismissed it. Had Ava always been so petty?

Jon sat back on his knees. From this position he could still make love to his wife while also admiring her chest. His cock pulsed inside her as he watched her chest bounce with each thrust, her nipples, the size of a quarter, stood perfectly erect begging for attention. Attention that Jon was happy to give. He dipped his head while driving his hips forward, taking the nub into his mouth.

"Mmm fuck, that feels so good, baby." Wendy had always found it funny the way Jon paid so much attention to her chest. He was the one person who didn't make her feel self-conscious about it. Sure, she knew he ogled it just as much as every other guy that saw her, but the way he worshipped it during love making made all the difference in the world to her.

Sitting back upright, Jon ran his hands over Wendy's tight stomach. Her eyes were closed, her tongue sliding slightly out from the side of her mouth. Jon knew that meant she was getting close. His testicles began to tighten, he wasn't much further behind her. His fingers continued their descent, running over her freshly shaved pubic mound before finding her clit. He applied gentle pressure at first, he didn't want her to lose her release. Soon, he was rubbing faster, her hips working in circles with his thumb.

Wendy's eyes fluttered open, a smile forming on her lips as she saw the way her husband was looking at her. That look on his face always sent her over the edge. The one of pure love mixed

with unadulterated lust. This was real. This was what she wanted, not whatever confusing pull she'd felt in a moment of weakness inside Michael's office. She pushed thoughts of work, of Michael, of the Fireball account temporarily from her mind, focusing only on the man above her.

"Oooh fuck, oh yes. Right there." She felt his cock continue to pound against the sensitive bundle of nerves in her pussy. Her muscles contracted and she gripped his cock harder as her orgasm began to rise up inside of her.

Her orgasm continued to build as Jon's paced picked up. His thumb applying more pressure to her sensitive clit as her juices covered his hand.

She felt a blanket of sparks wash over her whole body, radiating out from her sex while simultaneously covering every inch of her. She curled her toes and tightened her grip on Jon. "Ah Fuck! Fuuuck!"

The room began to spin as Jon felt her walls constricting against him. "Uuuungh," he bellowed, his cock expanding deep inside of his wife as his orgasm came right on the heels of hers. He felt rope after rope explode from his cock as Wendy's grip continued to massage his sensitive shaft.

"Mmmm, I love you," Wendy whispered, as their shared orgasm subsided and Jon collapsed on her chest. She ran her hand through his hair, pulling him against her body as he kissed her chest. "Thanks for taking such good care of me," she said with a laugh.

Jon nestled against Wendy's chest, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat slowing down was like a lullaby. This was his favorite part, the quiet aftermath when he could turn his brain off and not worry about numbers, or stats. Her fingers threaded through his hair, growing slower as sleep began to claim her. He smiled against her skin, thinking about that study on relationship longevity. He had a visit with Dr. Carson lined up for tomorrow. He would honor the appointment, but right now it felt like an overreaction on his part. Their relationship was solid. He was happy. They both were.

Michael straightened his tie, firing off one last email to Wendy before heading to Brian's office for their weekly check-in. Things had developed nicely with Wendy before she put the brakes on things. He ran through the events in his head, trying to determine what he could have done differently. Had he pushed her too far? He didn't believe so. If anything, he thought he could push her even farther. She had a lot of pent-up anger, anger that Michael was certain he could redirect.

That frustration simmering beneath her polished exterior fascinated him. He'd watched it build every time the executives dismissed her ideas or colleagues treated her as mere decoration. He could tell she spent way too much time getting ready in the morning, looking for outfits to somehow make her less attractive. She saw her attraction as a weakness. He got the impression she had similar feelings about working so closely with Jon. He noticed the flash in her eyes when someone mentioned her being "Jon's wife" rather than acknowledging her own brilliance, that was pure emotional currency in Michael's bank. He'd spent weeks depositing small validations, recognizing insights others missed, creating a dependency on his approval that she didn't even recognize. Her anger wasn't just professional frustration; it was years of being reduced to her appearance while her mind remained untapped potential. And he knew exactly how to weaponize it against her.

He wasn't going to let it get to him. If she wanted to play hard to get then Michael had a plan for that as well. That was why he was so good at what he did, he was a planner. He had contingency plans for every possible situation. Sure, he may not have expected Wendy to pull away so abruptly, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

Michael clenched his jaw, the sting of betrayal gnawing at him more than he thought it would. He'd invested weeks in Wendy, carefully crafted moments of connection, perfectly timed praise, subtle touches that tested her boundaries while maintaining plausible deniability. In a lot of ways she was just like the others. She thought she was better than him. That just because she was hot she could look down on him. He could still hear her laugh as she and Ava shared a joke at his expense. Her comment about him needing to go to the gym. He couldn't wait to show her just how much cardio he had.

There were other things about her though that made her unlike his other conquests. She really was brilliant, this wasn't merely about physical possession. Maybe that was why she kept surprising him. Or maybe it was because she was Jon's wife. Marcus's golden boy. The brilliant, analytical mind who'd dismissed Michael's marketing instincts one too many times. The thought of claiming what belonged to Jon sent a surge of satisfaction through him that rivaled any bedroom triumph.

He rounded the corner toward Brian's office, mentally shifting gears to his executive persona, when the hushed conversation from behind a partially open door caught his attention.

"I'm meeting with her tonight after work. It was hell trying to track her down." The hushed voice of Marcus on the other side of the office door made Michael stop in his tracks. It was still early in the Buckeye building, not many people at the office yet. He peeked his head through the cracked door, but the glare from the sun nearly blinded him. He pulled back, blinking away the sudden blindness as he strained to listen to the conversation.

"It took some convincing, but she's agreed to talk to me. Michael really did a number on her." Michael chewed on his lip. If they were talking about what he thought they were this could be an even bigger problem than he thought. He'd paid good money to make sure Lisa disappeared and didn't cause him any trouble. If Marcus had found her it could ruin him.

"Do you think she'll tell you what happened?" Ava was in there with him, of course she was. Those two had been a thorn in his side for too long. Michael looked at his watch, a silver Rolex given to him by the company after he was promoted to Director. He still had five more minutes before he met with Brian. He needed to come up with a plan.

"You should come with me. I'm going straight from here at five. She may be more at ease with another woman there. It may help her open up more." A low chuckle formed at the base of Michael's throat, as he checked his watch one last time and continued down the hall. They were making this too easy for him.

Sunlight poured in from the open blinds in Brian's office, the light reflecting off Michael's perfectly polished shoes. He looked around the space, he was always impressed when he came to Brian's office. His degree from Ohio State hung behind the chair along with pictures of him with his family.

"There he is." Brian beamed, rising from behind his imposing mahogany desk. "The architect behind our Fireball renaissance. Have a seat." He gestured to the leather sofa in front of the desk. The massive pane of windows beside it framed an impressive cityscape; and, oddly, allowed him to see the scarce dust mites beneath Brian's desk. One day, Michael would have this view for himself.

Michael accepted the invite. "Just doing my part."

Brian took a seat, propping his right leg up on his knee. He wasn't as imposing as Michael, but still had an authoritative air about him. "I had a call with Jack Peterson over at Fireball last week. He couldn't stop talking about the presentation you and Wendy delivered."

Michael sat back comfortably in the sofa, sinking lower into its cloud-like texture. "Jack saw the vision pretty quickly. That's what makes him such an effective partner."

"And Wendy," Brian continued, leaning back in his chair, propping his chin up on his fingers like a steeple. "She's quite the surprise, isn't she? I've seen her around for years, but I had no idea she possessed that level of strategic insight. She really seems to thrive under your guidance."

This time the smile on Michael's face was genuine. Not because he was some proud mentor, but because it meant people were seeing exactly what he wanted them to see. "It's been all her, really. She just needed someone to recognize her potential. I think people just got used to seeing her in Jon's shadow."

Brian nodded thoughtfully. "The way she handled those questions about market segmentation was impressive. You've mentored her well."

"She's been putting in great work. Still trying to find the right balance between home and work, but I'll get her there."

"Understandable," Brian said. "Though timing isn't ideal with the campaign gaining momentum. We need her laser focused on this campaign. I trust you can make that happen?"

Michael shifted in his seat, the leather cracking as he felt beads of sweat start to roll down his back. "I'll see what I can do. She is only a marketing specialist after all. I worry that I'm putting too much on her plate." He paused, looking out the window as if he was deep in thought. Through the reflection he saw Marcus and Ava emerge from his office and head in their direction. "There are also the optics of it," he said, turning back to look at Brian. "I don't want people getting the wrong idea. It's a lot of late nights."

Seconds after Michael spoke Ava and Marcus walked past the open door. Their conversation was hushed, and Ava had a wide grin on her face. Brian's gaze tracked them down the hall, his light smile suddenly hardening. "That's... that's a really good point, Michael. Let me ask you something, and it stays between us."

"Of course." Michael sat forward in his seat, his gut pressing uncomfortably into his knees.

"I've noticed Marcus and Ava spending a lot of time together lately." His eyes shifted back toward the now empty hallway. "You're a lot closer to what goes on out there. People seem to trust you." Michael had to stifle a laugh at just how out of touch Brian was. "Is there anything going on there that I should know about?"

"Marcus has always been dedicated to developing talent," Michael replied, doing his best to look shocked at the allegation. "It's one of his greatest qualities as a leader. You don't think he's..." Michael's eyes went wide like he was just putting the pieces together.

"Maybe I'm just overreacting," Brian sat back in his chair, deep in thought. "You haven't seen or heard anything?"

"No, not that I can think of. I mean there was..." Michael bit his lip glancing out the window. "I mean, I'm sure it was nothing."

Brian drummed his fingers against the desk. "How about you let me be the judge of that?"

Michael nodded, turning back to look at Brian. "Well, I mean, I've seen them leave together a few times after work. I didn't think anything of it. Just assumed they had some important meeting to go to or something."

"Christ," Brian sighed, mulling over this new bit of information. "Someone at Marcus's level should know better." He looked back up at Michael, a look of sadness in his eyes. "I appreciate you being honest with me. I know it's never easy to feel like you're turning on someone you admire."

Michael nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sure it's entirely innocent. I mean, he has a family."

"He's been under a lot of stress lately. Sadly, I've seen it happen one too many times," Brian replied, his concern now firmly established. "I should probably keep an eye on that situation. Let's keep this between us for now."

"I'm sure whatever you decide will be appropriate," Michael offered supportively. "My focus remains on delivering for Fireball."

Brian's smile returned slightly. "I appreciate that. In fact, how do you feel about giving Wendy a promotion? Maybe account manager? It sounds like she's more than put in the work to deserve it. Plus, it would help with..." He glanced back toward the hallway. "Optics."

"I think that's a great idea," Michael said rising to his feet. "Do you mind if I'm the one that tells her?"

"Of course whatever you need. Let's just make sure the project is a success," Brian said, turning his attention to the computer in front of him.

As Michael turned to leave, he caught the reflection of Brian's computer screen in the glass. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like he was looking up Marcus's schedule. Probably trying to figure out if there was any reason for Marcus and Ava to be leaving the office together. He shoved his hands into his pockets as he walked back to his office, whistling softly.

Too easy, indeed.

Wendy sat at her desk, drinking a tall Iced Brown Sugar Oatmilk Espresso with two pumps of vanilla, an extra shot of espresso, and cinnamon drizzle. It was her go-to when she needed a little extra energy, and right now working on the Fireball social media rollout, she needed the extra energy. It wasn't the type of deep strategic planning she'd been doing with Michael, but it needed to be done, and it was her comfort zone. As she skimmed through campaign drafts, she

adjusted the collar of her buttoned-up blouse, a cold breeze coming down the hall causing her to tug her cardigan tighter around her shoulders.

A Lady Gaga song whispered through her headphones, her foot tapping along to the beat. A notification popped up on her screen, bringing a satisfied smile to her face. The marketing department's deep dive research was complete, confirming her instinct about the 25-35 demographic's response to the phoenix imagery. Her hips swayed to the music as she danced in her chair. She wanted to share the good news with Jon, but paused. He was the one that told her the numbers were wrong, he would just argue the research team missed something. She tossed her phone back onto her desk just as Michael's shadow fell across her desk.

Wendy removed the earbud, smiling as she spun around in her chair. "I was just about to message you."

"Was it to tell me you finally finished revising the rollout strategy for Fireball?" Michael's voice was loud. It boomed off the walls of every cubicle in the office, causing people to shift and stare. They'd all heard that tone before from Michael. It was like a car crash you couldn't look away from.

Wendy scrunched her nose, searching Michael's eyes for any clue as to what he was talking about. "What revised strategy?"

Michael let out a huff, his nostrils flaring. Wendy thought for sure she could see smoke billowing from them, like a dragon about to incinerate its prey. "The one I specifically asked you to prioritize. The one I sent you detailed instructions about last Wednesday."

"I never—" Wendy's voice was low, too small for her body as waves of uncertainty washed over her. "You didn't send me anything about revisions."

Michael growled under his breath as he pulled out his phone, shaking his head as he scrolled through it in search of the email. "Wednesday, 2:37 PM. Subject line: URGENT: Fireball Rollout Revisions Required ACTION NEEDED." He turned the screen toward her. "Followed by two more emails on Thursday and Friday when you didn't respond."

The office was eerily silent, except for the sound of Lady Gaga screaming "Poker Face" from the discarded earbud. But Wendy had no poker face, she could feel every eye in the building on her as she turned three different shades of red. She frantically opened her email. No sign of them in her inbox. With growing horror, she checked her spam folder and there they were. Michael's emails buried among discount pharmacy offers and cryptocurrency scams. All with the same words: "ACT NOW", "ACTION NEEDED".

"They... they went to spam." Wendy's hands slid to her legs as she curled and uncurled her fingers against the fabric in her normal four count beat trying to calm her racing heart. "I think when you added action needed it must have triggered something. I'm sorry, Michael I never—"

"Oh so somehow this is my fault?" Michael let out an insidious laugh that turned Wendy's skin ghost white, a look of sheer disappointment on his face. "Everyone told me this account was too much for you to handle, but I didn't listen." He gripped the edge of the cubicle wall. "When you stopped putting in the work, and only started doing the bare minimum this week I should have known."

Wendy's bottom lip started to tremble, tears stinging the back of her eyes. Everyone was looking at her, watching her as she flamed out, just like they knew she would. "Michael please... I... I wasn't saying it was your fault. I just meant."

"It's my fault really." He ran a hand through his greying hair. "when you decided you didn't need my help anymore and you could do it all from your desk... that's when I should have put my foot down. But I didn't. You disappoint me Wendy."

Wendy's cheeks burned as she scrolled through the messages, seeing Michael's increasingly urgent tone across the three emails. The detailed instructions, the timeline, the expectations—all ignored. "I can fix this. I'll work through lunch and—"

"I'll do it," Michael snapped, "like I've done everything else since you decided you could treat this project like any normal nine-to-five." His massive frame seemed to block out the fluorescent lights overhead, casting her in his shadow. "If you don't want this opportunity, if you're not willing to take it seriously and fully commit, I'll find someone who will. I won't risk this account for someone who isn't fully committed."

He turned to leave, and Wendy shot to her feet, anxiety thrumming through her veins. "Michael, wait." Her voice cracked slightly, the tears beginning to slide down her cheek. "I am committed. I've been... I was distracted last week, I'm sorry. You've got my full attention now. Early mornings, late nights, whatever you need. Please, just give me one more chance."

Michael stood with his back to her, his broad shoulders rigid under his expensive suit. Wendy couldn't see the predatory smile that curved his lips as he savored her desperation.

"Please Michael," her tone was soft as she sniffled back more tears. "I won't let you down again. I promise."

"I've got to think of a way to salvage this," he said without turning around. "Marcus wants us in his office at 4:30 to explain exactly what happened." Then, deliberately: "Don't be late."

The silence following his departure was deafening. Wendy slumped back into her chair, fingers finding her wedding ring, spinning it frantically. One-two-three-four. One-two-three-four.

"Are you okay?" Ava whispered, rolling her chair closer. "What an asshole. He didn't need to—"

Wendy shot to her feet again, wiping her tears away with her palms before gathering her tablet with trembling hands. "Not now, Ava. Just... not now."

She darted off to the restroom, wanting to compose herself before seeing anyone else. This was her biggest fear, and most embarrassing moment all rolled into one, with the exception of the gift mix-up with Michael, but this felt worse. This was a direct reflection of her work ethic, her competence. She needed to find a way to get back in Michael's good graces and prove to everyone who had just heard that exchange that Wendy really was up to the challenge. Behind her, Ava exchanged concerned glances with other colleagues, all of them too familiar with Michael's public displays of dominance to be surprised, yet still uncomfortable with this latest target.

Jon drummed his fingers against the leather armrest, staring at the clock as Dr. Carson reviewed his notes. He hated the smell of the building. The combination of old books and fresh paint made it feel suffocating as he fidgeted in the chair. Outside the window, Columbus's business

district hummed with lunchtime activity, with people who hadn't wasted their break sitting in a therapist's office discussing problems that might not even exist anymore.

"I almost didn't come today," Jon admitted, adjusting his glasses. "Things with Wendy have been... really good this week. I think I just got in my head is all."

Dr. Carson's expression remained neutral, with only the slight nod of his head as he studied Jon. At sixty-two, he carried himself with the confidence of someone who'd heard every possible human problem and wasn't easily surprised.

"Yet you're here," Dr. Carson observed, setting his notepad aside. "What made you keep the appointment?"

Jon's gaze drifted to the degrees hanging on the wall. A PhD in Clinical Psychology from Northwestern, various certifications in relationship counseling. All that education, and Jon was using it to solve a problem that might have already fixed itself.

"I made a commitment," Jon finally said, not making eye contact. "The appointment was in my calendar, so I kept it. The statistics on therapy consistency are clear. Patients who regularly keep their sessions show a 43% higher rate of—"

Dr. Carson chuckled warmly. "I see you're still big on analytics, Jon. Some things never change, even after all these years." His eyes crinkled at the corners with affection. "Tell me about the real reason you made this appointment after such a long break."

Jon exhaled slowly, his shoulders sagging. "My wife's boss, Michael."

"Your wife's boss?"

"My boss too, technically. Though he doesn't act like it." Jon's fingers clenched into a fist on the armrest. "When Wendy started working closely with him on this Fireball campaign, she was suddenly coming home late, going in early."

"And why do you think that struck a nerve?"

"It reminded me of Olivia." Just saying her name made his stomach flip. He knew Dr. Carson expected him to say it. There was no sense in dancing around it. "Not that Wendy would ever... especially not with someone like Michael." He rolled his eyes when he said Michael's name.

Dr. Carson tilted his head slightly, like a dog who didn't understand. Except Jon knew he understood, he just wanted to know Jon did too. "Someone like Michael?"

"He's everything I'm not," Jon said with a humorless laugh. "Loud. Aggressive. Physically imposing... like he has no regard for his physical appearance. Completely disregards data in favor of gut instinct." He ran his hands through his hair to calm himself. "And yet executives listen to him. People respect him, somehow."

"You mentioned especially not with someone like Michael," Dr. Carson repeated carefully. "Is there a type of person you believe Wendy might be drawn to?"

Jon opened his mouth to dismiss the question but caught himself. This was why he'd made the appointment, he might as well be honest.

"Someone who's analytical like me, but also has her same creative instincts, I guess," he finally said. "Someone who... understands her." He dipped his head, it wasn't that he didn't think he deserved Wendy. He just hated that he had to try so hard sometimes.

"The last time we talked, you spoke in great detail about Olivia," Dr. Carson noted. "What are your thoughts about her now?"

Jon sat straighter in his chair. "Ancient history."

"Yet you brought her up in relation to your concerns about Wendy and Michael."

"It's different," Jon insisted. "With Olivia, I was just a data analyst, fresh out of school. No real status, no achievement to my name. I couldn't understand why someone like her would be interested in me. So when she started staying late at work, having drinks with her boss..."

"You assumed the worst."

"I created a statistical model," Jon said flatly. "Tracked arrival times, phone usage patterns...", he paused, suddenly embarrassed. "changes in our intimacy frequency."

If the last detail phased Dr. Carson he didn't show it. "As I recall," he interjected gently, "you built what you considered an airtight case against her."

Jon nodded, staring at the pattern in the Persian rug beneath his feet. He wished he was in Persia right now, anywhere instead of reliving all of this. "I confronted her. Laid out all my findings, detail by detail."

"And she revealed she'd been working extra hours for your surprise birthday trip," Dr. Carson supplied. "Not the affair you'd convinced yourself was happening."

"She couldn't understand why I didn't just ask her," Jon murmured, sliding his feet against the rug and watching how the pattern changed slightly. "Said she couldn't be with someone who didn't trust her enough to even ask." He swallowed hard. "By the time I realized what I'd done, she was gone."

Dr. Carson let the silence stretch between them, giving Jon's admission room to breathe. Jon broke his focus away from the rug and brought it to the window. Outside clouds shifted, making the sun stretch further into the office.

"Do you know what catastrophizing is, Jon?"

Jon turned his attention back to the doctor, his eyebrows pinching in thought. "I'm familiar with the term but not the clinical definition."

"It's when we take minor concerns and immediately jump to worst-case scenarios," Dr. Carson explained. "But there's something deeper at work here. You've described Michael as an opposite to yourself; primarily in ways you perceive as negative. Yet you also noted that he commands respect. That executives listen to him despite his dismissal of the data you value."

Jon's expression darkened. "So?"

"So perhaps this isn't actually about Wendy cheating. Perhaps it's about something you fear more deeply."

"Which is?"

"Loss of control." Dr. Carson's words cut through Jon like a knife. "When you couldn't understand what was happening with Olivia, you created a narrative that gave you control over the situation. You didn't even mind if the narrative was painful as long as you had control. You're doing the same thing now."

Jon's breath caught in his throat. The room suddenly felt too small, the chair seemed to be closing in on him, making it harder for him to breathe.

"You've structured your entire professional and personal identity around being the one who knows," Dr. Carson continued gently, ensuring to keep accusation out of his voice. "You have to be the smartest person in the room. Not to prove yourself to others, but to convince yourself that you're in control. After Olivia left, you doubled down on this approach; building a fortress of data and analysis where unpredictability couldn't touch you."

"It's worked," Jon said defensively. "I've built a career on it. A marriage. I'm a changed man. A better man."

"Has it? Or have you created a situation where you need to be right so badly that you're manufacturing evidence to support your fears? You're seeing threats to your marriage that may not exist, just as you did with Olivia."

Jon closed his eyes and took a deep breath, laying his hands flat in his lap. "I trust Wendy. I told you, things have been great lately."

"I believe that," Dr. Carson nodded. "But what happens when things aren't great, and you're not completely sure why? Do you trust yourself to handle uncertainty without trying to control it and fill in the blanks yourself? To accept that sometimes, you won't have all the answers... and that's okay?"

The question was like a weight on Jon's chest. Was that what he was doing? Outside, rain began to spatter against the window, distorting the view of the city beyond.

"I don't know how," Jon finally admitted. "Numbers are safe. Predictable. People aren't." He removed his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "What if I let go of control and everything falls apart?"

Dr. Carson's expression softened. "That's the real fear, isn't it? Not that Wendy will cheat, but that without your analytical framework to make sense of the world, you'll be vulnerable. That you'll be blindsided."

"So what do I do?" Jon asked, vulnerability replacing his usual certainty. "How do I fix this?"

"You start by recognizing that this isn't a problem to be solved, but a relationship to be experienced." Dr. Carson set his notepad down entirely, leaning forward. "When was the last time you just supported Wendy? Not by giving her stats or numbers, but by listening to her problems? Letting her vent without the need to answer or solve the problem for her?"

Jon blinked. "... I'm not sure."

"Perhaps that's where you begin," Dr. Carson suggested. "Not with assumptions or projections, but with genuine curiosity. The same curiosity that makes you such an effective analyst, but directed toward understanding Wendy's emotional landscape rather than predicting it."

Jon nodded slowly, the tension in his shoulders starting to ease. "I can do that."

"I know you can," Dr. Carson said with quiet certainty. "Your way of thinking isn't the problem, Jon. It's a strength, and it's one of many you possess. The challenge is learning when to rely on it and when to set it aside."

As the session concluded, Jon checked his watch. He'd need to hurry back to make his next meeting. But Jon was happy he'd kept the appointment. He'd learned things about himself he hadn't realized before. Even if everything was fine with Wendy, he had things he needed to work on.

"Same time next week?" Dr. Carson asked, standing to open the door.

Jon nodded, surprised to find he meant it. "I'll be here."

Outside, the rain had intensified, forcing Jon to jog to his car. He'd been so focused on the statistical probability of losing Wendy that he'd missed the emotional certainty of how to keep her. That would change, starting tonight.

Marcus's office felt glacial despite the mid-afternoon sun shining through the window. Wendy wrapped her arms around her body. She felt like she had been called into the principal's office and she was patiently waiting for her punishment. Beside her, Michael sat like this was just a casual conversation between friends. His knee gently touching hers as the chair threatened to give way under him. Her black dress had ridden up slightly, causing her knee to be exposed where he pressed against it. The physical contact was subtle, but it was enough to make Wendy's skin burn and her mind recall everything that happened last week.

Marcus sat across from them, his jaw tight as he read through the latest email from the Fireball team regarding the timeline. A gold watch hung loosely on his wrist, catching the light as he moved. Wendy could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall behind her, each second of silence feeling more and more like the end of her career was drawing closer.

"I just got off a call with Jack Peterson," Marcus's voice had an edge to it Wendy hadn't heard before. "Anyone want to tell me what the hell is going on?" His gold watch caught the light as he folded his hands on the desk, knuckles whitening slightly.

Wendy's pulse hammered against her throat. She could feel Michael's presence beside her, radiating a calm that seemed impossible given the circumstances. Her fingers found her wedding ring, spinning it once before she caught herself and placed both hands deliberately on the table.

"It was my responsibility," she began, trying to keep her emotions in check. "Michael emailed me last week, but they went to spam, and I didn't—"

"It was a communication oversight," Michael said with a smugness. He leaned forward running his palm against the back of his neck. "Though if we're being honest, that entire process could use some streamlining. I mean, here we are working on the largest account this company has ever seen and we are sending emails to talk to other critical members of the team."

Marcus's eyebrows shot up. Their eyes meeting across the desk, neither man wanting to blink. The muscles in his jaw clenching as Michael dismissed the criticality of the situation. "You seem to have a lot of those... communication oversights when it comes to projects like this. If you're having trouble leading then I'm sure we—"

The vein in Michael's neck pulsed with rage, the only sign that Marcus's comment affected him at all. He knew Marcus was talking about what happened with Lisa. "No trouble at all, actually. Just trying to think about the best way to allow Wendy here the comfort of working at her own desk while still staying up to speed with the Fireball project."

"Let me guess, you already have some suggestions?"

"In fact, I do." Michael sat back in his chair, the smile on his face never faltering despite the disdain that was evident in his eyes. He reached for a water bottle, opening it and setting it in front of Wendy before doing the same for himself. It was a subtle gesture of unity that completely caught Wendy off guard. "Wendy's been doing the best she can despite being buried in the bullpen. She needs proper authority. An office closer to the action, a title change."

The room began to spin. Was Michael defending her after publicly humiliating her just hours ago? Her confusion must have shown on her face because Marcus was studying her with increasing interest. She felt hot, her leg pressed further against Michael's. It wasn't deliberate, but his presence made her feel almost... safe?

"What I'm suggesting," Michael continued as if this was just another casual conversation between friends, "is a promotion. Account Manager, with a proper office. It would give her the authority to communicate directly with Fireball executives and the space to think strategically." He turned to Wendy, his expression radiating professional admiration that bore no resemblance to the man who'd berated her earlier. "The kind of vision she's demonstrated deserves proper recognition. I'm confident with the proper... encouragement Wendy will be fully committed to all of her..." He paused for a second, his hand coming to rest on his leg under the table, his fingers brushing against her exposed knee. "commitments. Isn't that right, Wendy?"

Wendy's focus fractured like cracked ice, splitting into jagged, chaotic pieces. This morning, he'd eviscerated her in front of the entire department. Now he was proposing she be promoted? Another part of her mind, screamed this was a trap. She saw how he was looking at her, understood the double meaning of his words, but she was struggling to process them. Instead, the part of her that couldn't let this project fail won out. She was so close to everything she'd worked for, she just needed to focus.

"Yeah... yes sir. Whatever we need to do. I want this project to succeed."

Marcus glanced past them to the clock on the wall, a move that wasn't missed by Michael, then quickly back to the timeline on his screen. "Talks of promotion seem premature. We need to get this project back on track first or we may be having an entirely different conversation."

Marcus was glaring at Michael as he said it, but Wendy couldn't help but feel like the statement was directed at her. Did he mean termination? Just last week Wendy felt like she was on cloud 9, now there was talk of her possibly being fired? She couldn't, she wouldn't, let that happen. She was determined to make this project a success whatever the cost.

"I actually already ran it by Brian," Michael countered smoothly noting the flicker of shock on Marcus's face.

"You went over my head? That's highly unpr—"

"It wasn't anything like that. You were just in another meeting and Brian asked how I thought we could get things back on track."

Wendy's cheeks burned, as she turned to look at the man beside her. His fingers were still touching her knee, it was possible he didn't even realize they were there. He had talked to Brian about her? About a promotion?

Marcus's glare turned from Michael back to the clock on the wall, ten til five. He hated that Michael had the upper hand, but he didn't have time to dwell on that. He needed to wrap things up.

"If Brian's already approved it then I suppose it's out of my hands," Marcus said finally. "We'll need to figure out office space though. Give me a few days to figure out arrangements and get the paperwork finalized before making any type of announcement. In the meantime, get me the revised strategy and distribution plan by Friday."

Michael nodded, satisfaction ghosting across his features so quickly Wendy almost missed it. "Fair enough. We'll get started first thing tomorrow and—"

"Tonight," Wendy heard herself say, surprising all three of them. "We can start right after this meeting. Work late." She met Michael's gaze directly, not really thinking about what she was saying before she said it. "If we're committed to saving this account, there's no reason to wait until morning."

Michael's lips curved into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Of course. I have nowhere to be."

Marcus nodded at them, already shutting down his computer. "I need to head out. Thanks for your attention on this." Another glance at his clock. "But I expect a detailed status report in my inbox by nine tomorrow."

As Marcus gathered his materials, Wendy felt the weight of her rash decision begin to hit her. She'd just volunteered for another late night alone with Michael. This was the exact situation she'd been avoiding since their near-miss in the conference room. But the alternative was watching the biggest opportunity of her career slip away because of missed emails and mixed signals.

Michael stood as Marcus headed for the door. "Meet me back in my office in five minutes. We can pick up where we left off."

Wendy opened her mouth to talk, but no words came out. She felt heat running up her spine at the implication. She needed a different approach with Michael. He was a man who appreciated directness. So she'd be direct, find a way to put an end to these double meanings and ensure he had nothing else to hold over her head.

Wendy rehearsed her speech in her head for over ten minutes before standing outside of Michael's office. She felt her pulse racing in her neck as she tried to find her confidence. She needed to reestablish boundaries and make sure Michael was on the same page as her without jeopardizing the account or her career. With a bout of confidence she pushed Michael's door open, rattling the blinds in the process. His desk was empty, catching Wendy slightly off-guard, until she saw him standing at the window watching the parking lot below.

"If this is going to work, we need to talk," she announced, kicking the door closed behind her with her foot.

Outside, Ava and Marcus were rushing to his car. The rain was starting to just pick back up again and Ava huddled close to Marcus to avoid getting wet. Michael's smile lifted his face. He couldn't believe his luck with the weather. He couldn't see Brian's office from where he was positioned, but he was confident Brian was watching as well and the thought of it brought a warm smile to his face.

"Did you hear me? I said we need to talk." Wendy was already losing momentum, as she wondered what could possibly be so important outside.

Michael didn't turn immediately, he wanted to keep her on edge. Keep her guessing. "I heard you," he replied before turning his full attention to the woman across from him. "But unless it's about shifting the Fireball rollout from tri-state to local, it needs to wait." His voice was sharp, serious. She'd expected more double meanings or inappropriate glances, but instead Michael was all business.

"What do you mean 'local'?" The winds of confrontation had completely left her sails, replaced by professional confusion.

"They want a more grassroots approach." He gestured to his computer. "Which you would know if you'd checked any of the emails I sent you last week." Wendy burned with embarrassment, wanting to shrink into the closest chair and just start working. "They're pivoting toward community-based events instead of the regional media blitz we'd planned. They want to start even smaller than we initially thought."

The righteous energy that carried her into the office had evaporated as her mind tried to process all that was happening. She slumped into the chair across from Michael's desk, her purse sliding off her shoulder. "Where do we start?"

The sun continued to set, casting them into near darkness as they revised and dissected their rollout strategy and campaign messaging. They did their best to adjust their approach while maintaining the core "Evolve Your Fire" concept. Like before, they were about to achieve results neither of them would have been able to achieve alone. As much as Wendy tried to fight it, she couldn't deny just how well they worked together.

By nine o'clock Chinese food takeout boxes littered the small table next to Michael's desk. Wendy had slipped off her cardigan as they worked, the warmth of the cramped office and heat from their food forcing her to expose more of her shoulder than she ever had before. By ten, they had a completely revamped strategy that addressed Fireball's new direction.

"And sent," Michael said with a satisfied smile as he emailed the revised plan to both Marcus and the Fireball team. "Barring any catastrophes, I'd say we just saved the account." He leaned back in his chair, suddenly looking more human than the intimidating figure who'd berated her that morning.

"So," Michael said, closing his laptop. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

The question caught her off-guard, despite the fact that she'd been anticipating it. She gathered empty takeout containers, buying time as she tried to recapture the determination that had brought her to his office hours ago.

"Right," she began, setting down the containers and taking a deep breath. "We need to establish some boundaries."

Michael's expression remained neutral, waiting.

"This IOU thing," Wendy continued, her eyes trying to focus on anything except for Michael. "It was a mistake. A mix-up. You need to just let it go and—"

"I don't think it was a mistake at all," Michael interrupted, rising from his chair. "In fact, I'm pretty excited to get to finally cash it in." He moved toward her with deliberate slowness. "'One night of making your wildest dreams come true,'" he recited from memory, his voice dropping to a lower register. "'A 24-hour pass to all of your deepest desires.'"

The heat of his presence made it hard to think clearly. Wendy took a small step backwards, finding herself against the door.

"I want you to give it to me," she demanded. "Or destroy it. But I can't have you continue to hold it over my head." The words were the same as what she'd practice, but her delivery was off. It had lost all its spunk.

"According to the IOU," Michael said, now close enough that she could smell the sweet and sour sauce on his breath, "It's valid until I use it."

Wendy rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to fuck you, Michael," she blurted out, very matter-of-factly. Michael stared at her, no doubt caught off guard by her bluntness and soon he was laughing. His laughter seemed almost infectious and without wanting to, Wendy had started to laugh too.

Once they got their laughter under control, Wendy tried to keep her serious demeanor. "I'm serious Michael. It's not happening."

"I won't force you to do anything you don't want." Michael kept his voice reasonable, reassuring even, but inside he was practically ecstatic. The fact that Wendy was the one to bring up sex meant that it was on her mind, even if she insisted it wasn't a possibility. The seed had already been planted. He leaned in closer to her so he could whisper in her ear. "Besides, there's lots of other things we can do that don't require me fucking you."

Chills ran down Wendy's spine when he said that. No one had ever talked to her like that before. His brashness, his cockiness, it should have caused Wendy to slap him and storm out. Instead, she felt butterflies in her stomach and a heat building between her legs she desperately wanted to ignore. Wendy felt trapped between her desire to escape and her need to resolve this situation once and for all. A wild idea formed in her exhausted mind.

"Jesus, you're like a dog with a bone," Wendy chastised, although she couldn't keep the smile off her face when she said it. "How about this offer? I give you one kiss. Right here, right now and then we call the entire thing even." The words escaped before she could fully consider them.

The smile that spread across Michael's face told her she'd made a critical error in judgment. She'd opened a door she'd been trying desperately to keep closed.

Michael seemed to consider the proposal, taking a step backward and looking Wendy over. "If I remember correctly," he said slowly, savoring each word, "the note promised a night of making my wildest dreams come true, not just a kiss." His gaze traveled deliberately over her face, down to her lips. "You're hot, Wendy, but that's a far cry from my wildest fantasy."

"I told you, I'm not going to have sex with you," she repeated, more firmly this time.

"Who said anything about sex?" His voice was maddeningly reasonable. "I'll tell you what. If you really want to get rid of it, we can make a little wager."

"Wh... what kind of wager?" She knew she shouldn't even be entertaining the idea, but if she could just get Michael to stop holding the IOU over her head everything would be so much easier.

"Give me sixty seconds..." his eyes wander over her body, his tongue darting from his mouth. "If I'm unable to make you cum in sixty seconds using just my fingers then we shred this thing into pieces right now." He reaches into the front pocket of his shirt and pulls out the IOU. Something about seeing it makes heat flood Wendy's core as she processes his words.

"You've got to be kidding," Wendy said, but her voice lacked conviction. Her mind was still processing. While she was sure it probably wasn't impossible to get someone off that quickly, she'd never personally experienced it and she imagined someone like Michael wouldn't be able to be the first. Perhaps he was overplaying his hand.

"It's not sex, Wendy." He wasn't able to hide the smile on his face. "And it gets you what you want. You can burn the thing if you want to."

"And what happens if you win?" Wendy arched her eyebrow, not wanting to get in any deeper.

"Then the paper goes back in my pocket and we continue as if nothing ever happened." This time he didn't even try to hide his smile. "That is until you want to try again."

Butterflies were tumbling in her stomach. This was stupid. Why was she even considering it? She thought back to Marcus's office earlier. His threat about a different conversation playing in her head. "Sixty seconds. You know that's next to impossible, right?" Wendy was spinning her wedding ring as she spoke.

"Sounds like you have nothing to worry about then, right?" Michael stepped closer, his gut pressed against her, pinning her to the door.

Warning lights flashed in her mind, like one of those obnoxiously large ones in the cartoons she would watch as a kid. But like the characters in those cartoons she was ignoring them, choosing the dangerous path.

Walk away. Right now. Just say no and leave.

The thought was so simple, so clear, she almost did it. She should have done it. She even felt her muscles tensing to push past Michael, to grab her purse and run. It would be awkward tomorrow, but she would have her dignity, her marriage, herself.

But alongside that voice came another; the one that remembered every dismissive glance, every patronizing explanation, every time she'd been passed over or reduced to "Jon's wife" or "the former model." The voice that had tasted power and recognition for the first time and couldn't bear to let it go. The voice that whispered: *You've made it further with Michael in a few weeks than you did the years without him. Without Michael, there's no promotion, no recognition. Just another marketing specialist. Forgotten. Invisible.*

Wendy took a shuddering breath. The clarity that had momentarily broken through was already receding, replaced by the familiar calculations and justifications. *It's just a bet. It won't go further. I'll win and destroy that stupid IOU once and for all. This is a strategic decision to protect my career.*

"I just... I have your word that you're not going to go back on your word?"

"Scouts honor," Michael said, with a grin. "How about a kiss to seal the deal and make it official?"

"That wasn't part of—"

Before she could finish, his lips found hers before she could react, one hand gently cupping her face while the other settled at her waist. The kiss was aggressive, passionate. His thick tongue filled her mouth pressing against her teeth. The top row of his teeth grazed her lip making her knees buckle. The worst part of all, was that her body responded. Heat bloomed in her core as his lips moved against hers, expert and confident in a way that made her mind go temporarily blank. He seemed to coax her tongue to participate and before she realized it, she was kissing him back. Her tongue wrestling with his as he worked to completely dominate her mouth. When he finally pulled back, her lips were parted slightly, short of breath and utterly confused by her own reaction.

Every cell in Wendy's body felt like it was buzzing with sexual energy. she blinked, several times in quick succession as if she was trying to come out of a dream.

Michael's smile was that of a man who already knew the outcome of a game his opponent didn't fully understand. "Watch the clock," he instructed, pointing to the wall behind him. "No cheating."

His hands were already on her legs, bunching her dress around her hips. His fingers slid across her bare thigh causing her to shudder. His touch felt like fire, she was suddenly very aware of the situation she had put herself in. Even if Michael lost she would still have to face him, still know what he'd done.

"Maybe we should... Ohhh fuck," Wendy lost her train of thought as Michael's meaty, sausage-like fingers pressed against the front of her panties and immediately parted her lips.

"Mmm already, so wet and eager," he teased, pressing the fabric into her core. "Start the timer."

The world shook around Wendy as she grabbed Michael's shoulders for support. She expected to be met with firm muscle mass, it was what she was used to with Jon. Instead, her fingers sunk into his fatty flesh causing her to fall forward slightly. Her eyes were wide in panic as she scanned the room finding the clock on the wall.

It took Michael less than two seconds to slide her panties aside and work his finger between her slick folds. "I love a woman who shaves bald," he whispered, close enough now to press his lips to her neck. "So juicy, so wet so... slutty." To punctuate his last word he pressed his fat finger between her lips, feeling her walls part like the sea.

"Fff fuck," Wendy cried, curling her fingers against his shoulders and sinking her nails into his arm.

Michael slid his digits back out of Wendy's core, having already soaked them in her juices. He rubbed the pads of his middle and pointer finger across and around her swollen clit with just the right amount of pressure.

Pleasure skittered around her body, her eyes fluttering shut. Her hips began to sway on their own desperate for more contact.

"Oh, you like that, don't you? Did I already find the sweet spot?" Michael chuckled in her ear and let his tongue run along the base of her neck. "Eyes open, princess. Gotta make sure you keep track of the time."

With a sigh, Wendy opened her eyes. Her mind was foggy, she couldn't remember if it'd been ten seconds or thirty. She was suddenly not so sure that she was going to win this bet. She wasn't sure if Michael was even more skilled than she realized or if her body had just been primed from all the sex with Jon over the course of the week, but she could already feel her orgasm start to build.

"You... fuck. You have fifty seconds."

Michael's tongue continued its assault on her neck, before he dipped his head further and pressed his teeth to her sensitive flesh. Goosebumps exploded over Wendy's skin as Michael worked his entire hand between her legs pulling her panties down to allow himself better access.

"You like this better though, right?" he asked sliding not one but two fingers inside of her. Wendy's walls stretched to accommodate their girth. Her legs opening wider to allow him better access.

"Ohhh... oh God," her mind was reeling, all thoughts of Jon and faithfulness gone. How was he so good with just his fingers? She wiggled her hips against the invasion. She wished she could convince herself that she was doing it to keep his fingers out of her, but the truth was she was trying to get him deeper.

"Not God, just Michael." Wendy wanted to roll her eyes at the lame humor, but he was already easing his fingers in and out of her. The wet sound of her arousal filling the air.

"Th... thirty seconds," she barely remembered to look at the clock. Her lip was between her teeth as she struggled to keep from screaming his name in pleasure.

"You're so fucking tight." He worked his fingers deeper, curling them slightly as he hit her G-Spot, causing Wendy to pant. "I can't wait to fuck you."

"Ohhh, don't... you can't." She was having trouble forming words, her entire body felt like it was on fire. She could feel herself on the verge of surrender, her orgasm so close.

He was working his fingers into a frenzy now and the sound of her pussy sucking his fingers grew louder. There was no doubt in his mind he was going to win. He was actually surprised she went along with the bet so easily. He expected to have to push her, but once he'd started she was like a powder keg ready to explode.

"Fif... uuugh, oh God. Fifteen."

His lips dusted over the shell of her ear. She was ready. She just needed one final push. "You hear that Wendy? Your cunt loves my fingers. Wait until she feels my cock." He drove his fingers deeper into her core, grinding the heel of his hand against her sensitive clit.

"Mmmm you can't... Fuck oooh God. Michael." Every nerve in her body seemed to turn on all at once, as an inferno washed over her. Her walls clamped down on Michael's fingers pulling them deeper inside her, her head falling onto his chest. "uggghhh Fuck, oh fuck, that feels so good."

Michael's fingers stopped their assault on her quivering pussy as it continued to spasm and suck on them like they were a cock. Her entire body was leaning on Michael for support, as she tried to recover from the intensity of it all.

After her orgasm finally subsided, Michael slipped his fingers from inside her. The sudden emptiness made Wendy whimper softly, but she barely had the energy, or the self-respect to lift her head from his chest. She stared at him, blinking and wanting to wipe the stupid smirk from his face. But she couldn't deny the intensity of what just happened. Even now, in the aftermath of her orgasm, her mind told her she should yell at him. Call him a cheater, something to regain her dignity. Meanwhile, her body was still humming, silently hoping he would take things further and... she was afraid to finish that thought.

Michael slowly lifted his fingers up to his face. The light reflecting on them and causing them to glisten from her desire. He held her gaze before slipping them into his mouth and sucking them clean while maintaining a level of eye contact that felt too intimate for the two of them.

"I can't wait to taste it straight from the source," he said with a wink before the ding of an incoming email breaks the spell they both seemed to be under.

"That... that will never happen." But there was no conviction in her voice. Michael had already picked back up the IOU and placed it back in his pocket. A silent reminder that he could, and certainly would, still hold it over her. The only thing she managed to do here today was get herself in even deeper.

Reality was already starting to crash over Wendy like ice water. Jon. Her husband's face materialized in her mind, his kind eyes behind those glasses, the way he'd kissed her goodbye this morning, completely unaware of what was happening with Michael. A hollow ache spread through her chest, replacing the dying embers of pleasure with something colder that made her feel sick.

What would Jon think if he could see her now? Dress bunched around her waist, underwear askew, leaning against her boss's bulk for support after his fingers had been inside her. After she'd invited his fingers inside her. She straightened, pulling away from Michael's body heat, desperate to reestablish some semblance of physical boundaries now that her mental ones had collapsed so completely.

She wanted to blame Michael, to cast him as the villain who'd manipulated her into this position. But the truth clawed at her conscience, she had suggested the kiss. She had agreed to the bet. She had spread her legs wider when his fingers entered her. She could still feel the pleasure he'd brought her just moments ago. The mere thought of it caused her core to ache in a way she hated to admit. She had convinced herself she wasn't really cheating, she was just doing what she needed in order to keep Michael from holding the IOU over her. Now she wasn't so sure.

Wendy spent the next several minutes gathering her things and straightening out her clothes before heading to the door. Right as she opened it, she heard Michael chuckle and it caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand.

"Check your email," he said with a little too much joy in his voice. "Fireball loved the presentation we sent them." A smile grew on Wendy's face, at least something good had come from tonight. "They liked it so much in fact that they want us to spend a couple days there starting tomorrow for some in person meetings to discuss."

And there it was, the other shoe had dropped. Wendy's knuckles were white, she was gripping the door so hard. There was no way she could go on a trip with Michael. Especially one that involved an overnight, not after what just happened between them. But then, she'd already risked so much for it. She had a new promotion on the table, the project was back on track despite her nearly being fired from it this morning. Could she really give all that up after all she's endured to get it?

"I'll... pack a bag," she said softly hanging her head low before leaving his office.

Wendy's mind raced as she sat in her driveway trying to get the nerve to walk inside. She couldn't even remember driving home, she was still trying to make sense of what had just happened and what it meant for her going forward. Would she walk inside and completely break down? Would he immediately see it on her? Smell it on her?

With a deep breath, Wendy killed the engine and went inside, half expecting to see Jon already packing a bag to leave her. Instead, he was sitting in his normal spot at the desk in the living room playing solitaire. The normalcy of it all sent a fresh wave of guilt and shame through her.

"Let me guess, Michael's back to testing your limits?" He said, glancing up with a smile.

Wendy dropped her purse with a gasp, before seeing Jon's face and realizing what he actually meant. She took a deep breath, trying to stop herself from feeling like she may puke. "Had to salvage the Fireball campaign." She couldn't meet his gaze as she slipped off her heels, flexing toes that still tingled from her encounter with Michael. "We got it done, though."

Jon set his laptop aside, giving her his full attention. Before today, he might have asked for specifics – statistics, metrics, engagement predictions. Instead, he simply asked, "How are you feeling about it?"

She paused in the entryway, she couldn't remember the last time Jon had asked how she was feeling. A smile formed on her lips, tears already threatening to appear. "Good, I think. Michael... We work well together." Professionally, she should have added, but didn't. Of course she meant professionally, there was certainly nothing else they did together she enjoyed.

She squirmed where she stood, flexing her thighs together determined to ignore the heat building there. She watched Jon's face for a flicker of jealousy at Michael's name, the tightening around the eyes she'd grown accustomed to. It didn't come. Instead, he patted the couch beside him.

"Come sit. You look exhausted."

She sank onto the cushion, keeping a careful few inches between them. Her body, still alive with the ghost of Michael's touch, felt like a betrayal in itself. Her hands went to her lap, spinning her wedding ring before Jon reached for her causing her head to fall onto his shoulder.

"I need to tell you something," she said, feeling the muscles in his shoulder as she rested her head.

"Fireball wants us to visit their headquarters... In New Orleans." Her throat was tight, as she waited for the follow up questions from Jon that would send her into a spiral of confessions. "Tomorrow. For a couple days."

"Us?" Jon asked.

"Me and Michael," she clarified, unwilling to look him in the eye.

Jon was quiet for a long moment, processing. When he finally spoke, his response knocked the air from her lungs.

"That's fantastic, Wendy. What an opportunity. Think of all the connections you can make while you're there."

She finally met his gaze, searching his face for sarcasm or hidden frustration. Her gut twisted with guilt when she saw there was none.

"You... think I should go?"

Jon nodded, running a hand through his hair. "Absolutely. I mean, I'll miss you, but you're so good with people. Getting face time with them will be sure to win them over. In fact, studies suggest there's..." he paused, something else was on his mind. Wendy studied him, was he finally putting the pieces together? Did he see through her lies? "You've worked hard for this opportunity. I'm glad you're finally getting the recognition you deserve."

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. He was trying so hard to be supportive, to trust her, while she sat beside him with another man's scent still clinging to her skin.

"I wasn't sure you'd want me to," she admitted.

Jon pressed his lips to her head, kissing her softly. "You were right before, about me not supporting you" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "I realized today I rely too much on the data at times and don't give you enough credit. You're amazing at your job, Wendy. I'm glad it's being recognized."

Each word was a knife twist. Wendy swallowed hard against the confession building in her throat. Jon reached out, gently brushing away a tear she hadn't realized had fallen.

"Hey, what's wrong? I thought you'd be excited."

"Just... overwhelmed," she managed. "It's been an intense day."

Jon pulled her into a hug, that she didn't realize she needed. She wanted to bury herself in his touch, his scent. She inhaled deeply, not wanting to let him go.

"I need to shower" she finally said. "Want to join me?"

Executive Privilege Ch. 05

Traffic was always lighter first thing in the morning. That's why Jon insisted they leave the house before six, something about a large percentage of people waking up already feeling anxious and rushed. Wendy barely heard him. She sat in silence behind her oversized sunglasses, the early sun hitting her face like an interrogation lamp. All she could do was replay the moment in Michael's office when his fingers had pushed inside her. The memory sent rivulets of shame coursing through her body, making her press her thighs together instinctively.

Jon seemed more upbeat than usual, more engaged. She'd worried that he was going to be upset that she was going on a two day trip with Michael, she certainly was. But instead, he was supportive, almost eager. Was he happy to see her go? She dismissed the thought immediately. That was just projection, as her therapist would say. She was the one who was guilty, not Jon. She twisted her wedding ring, one, two, three, four. How could she have been so stupid?

In the moment, the bet with Michael seemed so logical, a calculated risk that would allow her to focus on the Fireball project instead of Michael's stupid IOU. Yet somehow she'd ended up even deeper in his debt, with his smug smile burned into her memory and the ghost of his touch lingering on her skin.

"They were using outdated models that didn't account for migration patterns after COVID." Jon was going on about an article he read about marketing metrics. Outside the window, early morning fog clung to the tree line, obscuring her view ever so slightly. A flash of red caught her eye. A balloon had drifted between the branches, tugged one way then another as it tried to break free before popping to the pressure.

Her stomach clenched as she thought about the upcoming trip. Two days in New Orleans. Two days of avoiding Michael's lingering looks, of maintaining professional distance while presenting their work. Of pretending yesterday hadn't happened. The balloon vanished into the mist, leaving her with an uncomfortable sense of her own uncertainty - caught between the safety of what she had with Jon and the intoxicating pull of professional recognition.

"Can you imagine basing an entire campaign on data that's practically obsolete?" Jon's voice filtered through her thoughts.

"That's crazy," Wendy said with a chuckle, barely registering in time that he had stopped talking.

As they curved onto the on-ramp, a sudden burst of barking drew her eyes to a small fenced-in yard beside the road. A German Shepherd was pacing, muscles tense beneath its coat. The dog paused at each corner, testing its boundaries before resuming its endless circuit. Something about its restless energy resonated deep in her chest.

She used to feel that way, trapped behind invisible barriers. Before the Fireball campaign. Before Michael saw beyond her... physical attributes and recognized something in her that no one else at the company had bothered to see. The thought sent conflicting waves of pride and shame through her body. He had given her a chance, that much was undeniable. Under his mentorship, she'd done work she never thought possible, reached heights that had seemed forever out of reach.

But his recognition came with a price she hadn't meant to pay. Wendy pressed her thighs together, her body betraying her with unwanted heat as memories flooded back. The way he

would look at her during those late-night strategy sessions, the way his tongue invaded her mouth like he was claiming her. His fingers sinking into her core making her...

The dog's bark echoed across the parking lot as they passed, sharp and desperate. Wendy turned away from the window, but couldn't escape the gnawing certainty that she was still pacing her own invisible cage.

"You're going to blow them away." Jon put his hand on her knee in a way that made her flinch. Would he be able to sense Michael's hand had been there? "When you talked through the concept last night, even I was convinced, and I've seen all the numbers."

The pride in Jon's voice twisted like a knife in her gut. When had he gone from the jealous husband who called out her ideas during presentations to this loving and supportive version? And more importantly, why hadn't she realized it sooner?

"You're going to knock their socks off in New Orleans, Wendy."

Wendy turned toward him, momentarily distracted from her guilt. "Really?"

"Really. No one knows this data as well as you." He kissed her hand with a tenderness that made her sigh. "Not even Michael."

Michael. Hearing his name out loud made her stomach clench. She needed him to know this trip was all business nothing more. She had a momentary lapse in judgment yesterday. It wouldn't happen again and she wouldn't let him use this trip as an excuse to harass her.

"I know you usually get a little anxious before flights," Jon said, misreading her silence. "But, in forty-eight hours you'll be back home, with a successful campaign launch under your belt. You'll be the talk of the office."

The talk of the office, pride swelled in her chest as she imagined all the congratulatory looks and handshakes. This was her dream chance. She just had to get through two days without compromising herself further. It seemed both impossibly long and mercifully short.

"I'll text you from the hotel," she promised, unbuckling her seatbelt as they pulled up to the departures terminal.

Jon put the car in park and turned toward her. "Only if you have time," he said, surprising her. "I don't want to distract you when you're in the zone."

The response was so unlike his usual checking-in behavior that Wendy stared at him for a moment.

"What?" he asked with a self-conscious laugh. "I'm trying this new thing where I don't need to know your exact GPS coordinates at all times."

She leaned across the console and kissed him deeply, trying to pour every ounce of regret and love into the gesture. When they separated, Jon blinked behind his glasses, pleasantly surprised.

"What was that for?"

"For being you," she whispered, gathering her courage along with her carry-on. "I'm going to miss you."

With a final exhale of self-doubt, Wendy stepped out of the car into the crisp morning air. Movement in the manicured airport landscaping caught her eye. Two squirrels fighting in the underbrush. She watched as one mounted the other in a frenzied blur of motion. At first, she couldn't tell if they were fighting or fucking. The squirrel on the bottom thrashing and wrestling until eventually giving up and accepting its fate.

"Fuck," she whispered, the word barely a breath as she turned toward the terminal, her fingers reaching for her ring as Michael's bulk loomed like a shadow in her mind.

The moment Wendy turned the corner after security she saw Michael's imposing silhouette pressed against one of the windows. She hesitated, momentarily considering a detour to the restroom to delay the inevitable, but he'd already spotted her. He raised a hand in greeting, two coffee cups clutched in his meaty palm.

"The beauty queen has arrived," he called out, smirking as he watched her face contort like the words were a physical jab. Several other travelers looked up from their phones, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever famous person he was referring to.

"Not a pageant girl," she mumbled under her breath, unable to keep herself from turning red from the unwanted attention.

When she finally reached Michael he extended one of the cups toward her. "Black coffee. I wasn't sure how you liked it, so I figured you could add whatever you needed."

She accepted it cautiously, their fingers not quite touching during the handoff. The simple gesture felt loaded with subtext after yesterday. She wondered if the other passengers could sense the tension in the air between the two of them. Could they see her guilt? Her shame?

"Thank you." She kept her voice professional, cool.

The boarding process moved with surprising efficiency, and before long they were settling into the spacious first-class cabin. Wendy had flown business a few times for modeling gigs, but never first class. The seats were wider, the legroom generous. Yet somehow, as Michael lowered himself beside her, the space felt suffocatingly small.

"First time up front?" Michael asked, noting how she explored the seat features.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You've got that wide-eyed look." His smile seemed genuine, almost as if he was a friend.

"Reminds me of taking my nephews to Disney last year. They'd never flown before, let alone first class. You'd have thought they won the lottery the way their faces lit up after the flight attendant brought them pre-flight cokes." He chuckled, a noise that almost sounded foreign coming from him. "Tommy, the youngest, just turned eight. He kept asking if we were in a spaceship."

The image was disarmingly human. Wendy couldn't help but smile at that version of Michael. The doting uncle, who just wanted to have fun with his nephews. He seemed worlds away from the man she knew. The one that... she didn't want to finish the thought.

As the plane began its taxi, Michael settled deeper into his seat causing his thigh to press against Wendy. She shifted closer to the window rolling her eyes. Of course he would still find a way to touch her despite all the extra room they were afforded.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're cleared for takeoff," the captain's voice crackled over the intercom. As the plane accelerated down the runway, Wendy closed her eyes. She hated this part. The nose of the plane tipped into the air, causing her stomach to do somersaults as she balled her hands into a fist.

"I'm here if you need me," Michael whispered placing his hand on hers. Images of last night flashed through her head. Michael's touch, his knowing glare, the way her own body betrayed her.

"I'm fine," she said, a little colder than she meant, as she jerked her hand away.

Once the plane reached its cruising altitude, Wendy relaxed a bit, opening her eyes. "Sorry," she said, trying to keep the edge from her voice. "I just..."

"It's fine," Michael said, dismissively before flagging down a flight attendant. "Could we get a blanket?"

The attendant nodded, returning moments later with a neatly folded blanket that Michael spread across his lap. "Want to share?" he offered, extending the corner toward Wendy. "Planes always get cold."

Something in his tone, or maybe the look in his eyes, made the hairs on the back of her neck stick up. "Absolutely not," she said, a little too sharp and drawing stares from across the aisle. She lowered her voice. "Michael, yesterday was a mistake. A momentary lapse in judgment that will never happen again." She folded her arms tightly across her chest. "And certainly not on a plane full of people."

For a heartbeat, she could see his eyes go dark, but then he just shrugged, pulling the blanket back over his lap.

"I apologize if I made you uncomfortable," he said like he was the most carefree person in the world. "You looked cold, I was just trying to be considerate."

Heat flooded her cheeks. Had she misread him? Was she wrong about this entire situation? She ran her hands over the front of her jeans in four quick bursts to try to gather her thoughts. Was it possible he was being sincere and she was just acting like a bitch? She watched him through the reflection of the airplane window. His hands were folded in his lap, his eyes closed. She needed to get out of her head before she cost herself the biggest opportunity of her career.

Ava was already on her third cup of coffee as she strolled through the dimly lit Buckeye Building towards Marcus's office. It was weird being here so early before the hum of the work day. Outside, the sun was just starting to rise. The busy Columbus streets that were usually lined with traffic sat empty, making Ava feel even more alone in her crusade to save her friend.

When she reached his office, Marcus was already inside, the glow of the computer screen painting his dark skin in shades of blue and white. His brown eyes were narrowed in concentration, his brow furrowed like he was trying to solve a math equation.

"Tell me you've figured out a way to use Lisa's story against Michael." Ava walked into his office like she owned it, closing the door behind her to ensure no one else could hear their conversation. Marcus didn't even bother to look up from his screen, his eyes studying the contents of it like he didn't believe it was real.

"What's wrong?" she asked, walking to his side of the desk and sitting on the edge of it. Marcus looked like he hadn't slept all night. His dress shirt, usually crisp and freshly stretched, was wrinkled in a way that made him look more like Michael. When he finally looked up from the screen, his eyes were blood-shot and there were heavy bags under his eyes.

"We're... too late," he whispered so softly Ava barely heard him despite the eerie quiet in the building.

Her eyes went wide as she tried to piece together what he meant. "What do you mean, too late?"

Without looking at her, Marcus turned his monitor toward her. Ava quickly scanned the contents. Her hazel eyes darted left and right as she read the email from Brian, a soft gasp escaping her lips as her hands flew up to cover her mouth. "They went to New Orleans together? How? Why?"

Ava's hands shook slightly as she pulled out her cell phone and tried to call Wendy only for it to go straight to voicemail. She fired off a quick text asking her friend to call her when she got her message. "We've got to do something Marcus. You heard what Lisa said."

He hung his head, shaking it slightly. "There's nothing we can do."

"What do you mean? Lisa told us how Michael would manipulate her. How he would get her alone then push just the right buttons to get her to bend to his will. Don't you see? He's doing the same thing."

Sunlight began to pass through the slates of the window shade. The burst of light causing Marcus to tilt his screen. "When I was a child we had this uncle who used to come over all the time." Marcus sat back in his chair taking a deep breath like the memory was too hard to get out. "He would tell me and my brother these grand stories about all the places he'd been. Germany, Japan, Thailand. I used to think he was the coolest guy ever. I would tell my mom, when I grow up I want to be just like Uncle Tommy."

"I don't—"

Marcus held up his hand. "My momma would just laugh and shake her head. I didn't understand why she was being so dismissive." He licked his lips. "The next time we saw Uncle Tommy, he told us another story. This time he was in South Africa and he saw all this crazy wildlife. Lions and cheetahs, and such. I just listened to him, starry eyed like always. Then momma," he gave a soft chuckle, "she asked Uncle Tommy, surely you must have some pictures you can show the boys, right? You went to all these magical places, surely you have a photo or two." He turned to Ava, his eyes moist. "You know what happened after that?"

Ava shook her head.

"Uncle Tommy never told us another story again. In fact, he stopped coming around all together."

The implication hung in the air, neither Ava nor Marcus looking away. Finally, it was Ava that spoke first. "But Lisa gave us—"

"Nothing," Marcus said, defeated. "She gave us her story. A story that came with zero evidence, zero facts."

"Her story matches exactly what we've seen Michael doing with Wendy," she sounded more defensive than she realized and Marcus reached out putting his hand on her arm to try to calm her down. "Michael got her to start working late, he engineered situations to get her alone so he could take advantage of her. Promised her promotions in exchange for..."

Marcus sighed, running his hand over his smooth head. "What she gave us was her version of the truth, Ava. No recordings, no emails, no witnesses."

"You don't believe her?" Ava's eyebrows shot up.

"Of course I believe her, but that doesn't change the facts. It's her word against his." He moved his monitor back to its original position. "Besides, even if just her word was enough, Lisa explicitly said she doesn't want to get involved. She won't talk to anyone else for fear of retaliation. So where does that leave us?"

"But we've seen him doing the same with Wendy, and now..." Her voice cracked as she wiped away a tear. Marcus grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"What we've seen is a director working closely with a talented employee on a major campaign."

"We have to do something. If she's already in New Orleans with him. Christ Marcus, there's no one there to stop him."

"I know," Marcus nodded still holding her hand. "I'll talk to Jon. See if there's anything—"

His office door swung open without warning causing them both to jolt. Brian stood in the doorway, his eyes moved from Marcus to Ava, noting her position on the desk, the closed door, their hands touching.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," he said, his gaze shooting lasers at Marcus.

Ava looked to Marcus, waiting for him to explain, to make this look less... intimate. The silence stretched uncomfortably.

"I wanted to make sure you saw my email about Michael and Wendy." He looked at Ava, noticing the way she slinked off the desk, her eyes avoiding his. "In fact, can I have a word with you, alone?"

"I um... I was just leaving," Ava said, unable to get out of the office fast enough.

"You know," Brian said once Ava had left, closing the door behind her, "I've always respected how you develop talent, Marcus. But there are... boundaries that need to be maintained. Especially when the parties involved are married."

"It wasn't like..."

"Save it. I don't need details. Just... be mindful of appearances. The wrong kind of attention can derail promising careers." He paused before walking away. "For both parties."

Marcus sank into his chair after Brian left, staring at his computer screen without really seeing it. He needed to be more careful. He could already see how this conversation must have looked from Brian's perspective. He couldn't have another misstep.

Louis Armstrong Airport wasn't the biggest airport Wendy had ever been to, but it made Columbus feel tiny in comparison. Michael led them to the baggage claim area, like he'd been there a million times in the past, and they got there just as the groan of the carousel came alive and began to dump bags onto the carousel.

The plane ride had been smooth, and uneventful which surprised Wendy most of all. For the most part, Michael either slept or was on his laptop and barely paid any attention to her at all. Maybe he realized yesterday was crossing a line. Maybe he was actually going to back off.

She spotted her purple suitcase almost immediately, but before she could reach it, Michael shouldered his way through the crowd, nearly knocking a woman onto the carousel as he grabbed both their bags.

"You didn't need to do that," Wendy said when he was back at her side, both their bags by his side. "I was just waiting my turn."

"Have you never heard the expression nice guys finish last?" Michael pulled out his phone, ordering them an Uber as he pointed her toward the exit.

"You mean the excuse assholes use to justify being assholes?"

Michael's laugh echoed through the terminal, drawing glances from passing travelers.

"Is that what you do? Just go through life like a wrecking ball taking anything you want?" The disdain in Wendy's voice was practically dripping, but it just rolled off Michael like she was paying him a compliment.

"Seems to be working out for me just fine so far," he said, letting his eyes scan her body in a way that made her want to crawl away and die, even as he held the outside door open for her.

Despite it being January, the air in New Orleans still felt stickier than Ohio. There was still a chill in the air that made Wendy wish she'd packed warmer clothes, but it felt different, thicker. She was happy to see the Uber pull up to the curb just a few minutes after they got outside. Michael gestured toward the back seat, allowing Wendy to slide in first.

"Ever met Jack Peterson before?" Michael asked once they were underway, his leg brushing against Wendy's despite the added room in the SUV. She ignored it, choosing instead to focus on his question

Wendy shook her head. "Only the few calls we've had when I've been with you."

"Thirty-nine and already CEO. Youngest in the company's history," Michael gazed out at the passing scenery. "He's the type of guy who's used to getting what he wants. His father was the CEO before him, and if the rumors are true... Let's just say he wasn't the most qualified for the job. Turns out being the son of the man in charge has its perks."

"Great," Wendy said, shaking her head. "More assholes failing to the top."

"Hate to be the one to break it to you, sweetheart. But here in the real world if you want to make it to the top. If you truly want to be seen, you have to fight dirty and use every advantage you have to get there."

"Don't call me that."

Such a cynical outlook on life. There was no way that was true for everyone, was it? She didn't want to believe it. Just because Michael was cut throat it didn't mean she needed to be, and it definitely didn't mean Jack was either. "You seem to know a lot about him."

"Met him at a few industry events over the years. Friend of a friend situation. Smart guy, but gets bored faster than my nephews."

"So, how do we use that to our advantage during our meeting?"

Michael laughed, his belly bouncing on his legs as he kicked his head back. "Now you're getting it," he said wiping tears from his eyes. "You'll want to keep him engaged. The guy has the attention span of a goldfish." Michael stretched out his body a bit, hit arm falling behind Wendy's headrest. She rolled her eyes at the move, but didn't bother to say anything. This was the Michael she was drawn to. The business shark who would help her achieve her goals. "Mix up your delivery, make sure you ask him a lot of open-ended questions."

"So that means you're letting me lead the presentation?" She didn't mean to sound as shocked as she did. When Michael had told her about the trip last night she had just assumed they would have equal speaking parts.

A smile appeared on Michael's face as he turned to look at Wendy. "Of course. I told you already. I trust you. I know you've got the commitment needed to see this thing through."

A tingle of something that wasn't pride ran up Wendy's back. He'd been using that word a lot lately, commitment. Her fingers spun her ring, unsure of how to answer.

"Just remember, we need this to go well," Michael continued, his tone serious as he made note of Wendy's movements. "If we get his green light today, we can start the soft launch next week, then go straight to the community launch and then, hopefully, the regional blitz we've been discussing. But his team will try to push you on the numbers, so be ready." He leaned closer, his hand suddenly resting on her shoulder. "Remember, you know this data better than anyone. Even better than that husband of yours." He chuckled, locking eyes with her. "Just watch Jack for your cue. If he starts to zone out or check his phone, you're losing him. That's your sign to switch tactics."

By the time they pulled up to the hotel, Wendy felt confident, maybe even excited, for the meeting ahead.

The Hotel Monteleone sat in the heart of the French Quarter. As Wendy stepped out of the car, she couldn't help but admire the elegant architecture.

"They have a bar inside that's in the middle of an actual carousel. We should check it out later if we have time," Michael said, observing how she admired the building.

"Let's just focus on the meeting," she replied, determined to ensure Michael knew this was strictly business.

"Reservation for Reynolds," Michael said to the front desk attendant, a young woman whose professional smile brightened as she took in Michael's expensive suit.

"Of course, Mr. Reynolds." She tapped at her keyboard, her manicured nails clicking through the empty hall. "I see two reservations. One for you and one for Ms. Taylor as well?" The woman looked at Wendy as if to confirm.

"That's right," Wendy said, stepping forward.

The attendant printed out their registration cards. "You're both on the fifth floor. Elevator is down the hall and to your right."

The elevator ride was silent, tension building with each ascending floor. When they reached the fifth floor, Michael led the way down the corridor, stopping at room 512.

"This one's yours," he said, handing Wendy her suitcase. "I'm in 514."

Wendy slid her keycard into the lock, the green light blinking as she pushed open the door. The room was nice. Way nicer than anything she was used to. It had tall windows, plush bedding, classic New Orleans decor. But her eyes immediately locked on the interior door nestled in the wall to her right. A connecting door.

"Are you kidding me?" she muttered.

Michael appeared in her doorway, confusion crossing his features. "Something wrong?"

"Connecting rooms." She gestured toward the interior door. "You really think it's going to be that easy?" Anger bubbled in her chest. She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid. Of course Michael behaved himself on the plane. He knew he didn't have to rush, cause he'd have a door that led straight to her bed. The audacity of that man.

Michael's eyebrows rose. "Excuse me?"

"I already told you. Last night was a mistake and it's not going to happen again. Getting adjoining rooms sure as hell isn't going to make me any more likely to sleep with you." She realized her voice was getting louder, a few guests from down the hall stuck their heads out to see what the commotion was all about.

A look of confusion crossed his face before morphing into something like amusement. "Wendy, I booked the room at the last minute at the same time. The hotel probably just booked them together because that's standard practice." He shook his head. "You know, for someone who is constantly saying you don't want to sleep with me, it sure seems to be on your mind an awful lot."

Heat flooded her cheeks, embarrassment mixing with doubt. Was she overreacting? Projecting intentions that weren't there?

"We need to head to Fireball headquarters in a couple hours," he said while she was still wavering from her outburst. "I suggest you get settled and review your notes." He turned and took the few steps to his room before turning back to her. "Oh, and the door looks from both sides. So you hardly have to worry about me sneaking into your room."

"Michael, I didn't mean—"

His door clicked shut, leaving her alone in her room and feeling more stupid than ever.

Wendy fell back onto the king-sized bed, letting her body sink into the foam mattress. She released a frustrated sigh before digging her phone out of her purse. She had a missed call and a text from Ava. She wondered what could possibly be so important. She'd call her back later, first she wanted to check in with Jon. Knowing him he had calculated up to the minute the plane had landed and was wondering where she was. A smile formed on her lips, it was nice to be wanted.

Jon answered on the third ring, the familiarity of his voice making her feel homesick despite the fact that it'd only been a few hours.. "Hey, you made it! How was the flight?"

"Fine," she said, hearing the tension in her own voice. "Michael and I are at the hotel now."

A brief pause. "Everything okay? Is he behaving himself?"

Wendy glanced at the connecting door. Had she misinterpreted the situation? Was she the problem?

"Yeah, he's been... professional, actually." She replayed their hallway conversation in her head. Stupid. "We have a meeting at Fireball headquarters in a couple hours."

"That's great." He sounded more upbeat than usual. "After your meeting, you should explore the city a bit. I hear there's tons to do there."

Wendy frowned. This didn't sound like the Jon who tracked her movements and worried when she was five minutes late. Was he glad she was gone? "We'll see. Apparently there's a bar here that's inside a carousal or something. Michael was telling me about it, but he's the last guy I want to be in a bar with."

There was a pause and for a moment Wendy wondered if she lost connection. "Yeah Michael can be... You should go though. I mean, I don't love that it's Michael either, but you deserve to unwind a little. You deserve it."

"Okay, who is this and what have you done with my husband?" she asked, only half-joking.

Jon laughed. "You're the one always saying I work too hard. I don't want you to suffer the same fate. Besides, 38% of workplace stress has a direct impact on stress at home."

"And he's back," Wendy said with a giggle. "How's everything there? I miss you."

"I miss you too. Nothing new to report here. Marcus wants to have lunch with me tomorrow. Probably another project." She could hear papers shuffling in the background. "Oh, and I took a look at those demographic projections you're presenting. I found some interesting correlations you might want to—"

"Jon." She already knew where this was going. "I've got this. You don't need to check my work."

"I wasn't checking your work," he protested. "I just noticed that if you adjust for seasonal variance—"

"Stop." She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply counting to four. "I don't need you to fix my presentation. I don't need you to make it more... mathematical."

"That's not what I—" He exhaled heavily. "I'm sorry. You're right. You've got this."

Silence stretched between them, the loving moment from just a moment ago now long forgotten. "I should let you go. You probably need to prepare for your meeting."

"Yeah." Wendy said, flatly. "I'll talk to you later. I love you."

"Love you too," came his quick reply. Then the call ended.

Wendy tossed her phone to the side, Ava could wait, she didn't need any more drama right now. Why did Jon always think he needed to jump in and save her? Why couldn't he just let her prove herself for once.

She glanced across the room. The connecting door suddenly felt like it was pulsing with possibility. Michael was just on the other side, probably working on the presentation. Someone who actually trusted her instincts, who saw her potential without going behind her back and making adjustments without being asked. He actually trusted her, believed in her, even when all she did was throw insults and accusations at him. She sat up on the bed, running her fingers through her hair. She could do this. She didn't need Jon, or Michael. She had everything she needed to succeed on her own.

Wendy smiled at herself in the hotel room mirror. Her gray pantsuit was pressed and wrinkle free, the cream-colored blouse underneath buttoned to the top making her look as professional and powerful as she felt. She'd pulled her blonde hair into a low bun; she was ready to take over the world.

Two sharp knocks on her door announced Michael's arrival. When she opened it, his eyebrows shot up as he took in her appearance.

"That's what you're wearing?" His gaze swept over her suit with thinly veiled disappointment. "I've seen nuns show more skin than that."

She rolled her eyes, of course he expected her to dress more provocatively. "I'm wearing nearly the exact same thing as you. It's a presentation for a major client. They want to see professionalism."

"No, they want to see someone who resonates with their brand." He checked his watch, the single button on his jacket threatening to pop off and hit Wendy in the eye.

"I told you before, I want to be taken seriously. My ideas should speak for myself."

"Let's hope so," he said, gesturing toward the elevator. "It's too late to change now."

The ride to Fireball headquarters was quiet. Wendy looked out the window, mentally going over her notes. Her reflection stared back at her as the city slid by outside. She was bold, confident, everything Fireball represented. Michael was wrong, she was dressed exactly how she needed to be.

Once inside, Wendy felt like she'd stepped into another world entirely. A mural of the iconic red dragon covered the walls. Its body coiled along one side, its flames licking up around the windows like a border. The marble floors glistened underfoot, flecked with red gemstones that sparkled in the light.

"Subtle," Wendy muttered as they passed a twelve-foot dragon sculpture breathing neon-orange fire.

"Authenticity," Michael corrected. "They know exactly who they are. They understand that trying to hide it only diminishes their value."

A prickle of recognition ran up Wendy's spine at the comment, but she dismissed it as the elevator doors opened.

The executive team was already in the room when Wendy and Michael arrived. They sat around a circular oak table, most of them dressed in either red or orange dress shirts.

Jack Peterson sat at the center of the table and stood as they entered the room. In his late thirties, he looked every bit the part of someone born into privilege. His piercing blue eyes danced over Wendy, his smile faltered only for the briefest of moments as he took in her outfit. He wore a dark colored suit with a red tie and a bright orange pocket square. Everything about him screamed money.

"Michael Reynolds." Jack's handshake was relaxed, as he clapped Michael on the back, "Long time no see. Your golf game improve much over years?"

"Still working on my putting game, but always happy to get out there and teach you a thing or two." Michael's laugh was loud, artificial.

"And you must be Wendy. I've heard great things."

Wendy's cheeks reddened. "Thanks for the opportunity. I think what we have outlined for the campaign will get you just as excited as we are about moving forward."

"So professional, this one." He shot Michael a wink before turning toward the other executives. "This is Bruce Kellerman, our CFO. Tom Miller, head of creative. And Sarah Chen, head of distribution."

Once introductions were complete, Wendy moved to the presentation area, her heart pounding against her chest. She took a deep breath as she connected her laptop to the display system.

The Evolve Your Fire logo appeared on the screen. "Based on the feedback you've given us, you'd like to start the campaign small. A more grassroots approach." She went to the next slide. "We've developed a three-phase implementation that starts locally before scaling to regional and national markets."

For the first ten minutes, the presentation flowed smoothly. Wendy walked them through the revised rollout plan, showing how they would target key metropolitan areas first, Lexington, Nashville, New Orleans and Columbus.

"Phase one focuses on community engagement," Wendy explained, clicking to a map with highlighted zones. "Partnering with influential local cocktail bars, retailers, and cultural events in each city. This creates genuine brand evolution that feels organic rather than imposed."

She noticed Jack checking his phone. Following Michael's advice, she shifted tactics.

"Jack, I'm curious, which of these initial markets do you think will respond most strongly to the premium positioning?" she asked.

He glanced up, putting his phone down. "Nashville, probably. They've got a whiskey culture and large cocktail scene."

"We thought that as well," Wendy said, noticing Michael's approving nod from the corner of her eye. "In fact, we've front-loaded some of the Nashville activates for that very reason." She advanced to slides showing consumers in upscale Nashville environments enjoying Fireball cocktails. "Phase two would expand regionally outward from these initial success markets over a 12-week period."

But as she moved into the budget projections and implementation timeline, she noticed Jack's attention wandering again. He let out a soft yawn, his thumb swiping something on his screen.

Bruce, the CFO, interrupted. "These numbers assume a 27% conversion rate when scaling from local to regional markets. What evidence supports that assumption?"

Wendy was prepared for this. "Historical data from similar spirits category expansions shows—"

"I've seen those models," Bruce cut in. "They typically show 15-18% conversion at best."

"For brands that abandoned their core identity during expansion, yes," Wendy smiled. "Our approach maintains authenticity, and as a result we expect existing customer sales to increase by 5% instead of the typical decrease brands see when they make this switch." Bruce looked like he wanted to cut in again, but Wendy powered on. "Authenticity is key. We believe as long as you stay true to your core—"

Jack's phone buzzed loudly. He checked it, typed a quick response, then looked up at Wendy with a thin smile. "Continue."

But she'd lost him. His body language had shifted entirely, his chair angled slightly away from the presentation area. She looked around the table, Sarah gave her an apologetic look as Wendy felt her hands start to shake. All that she had worked so hard to accomplish suddenly felt like it was in jeopardy.

Michael stepped in. "What Wendy's brilliantly captured here is the opportunity to build authentic momentum. Rather than forcing a regional blitz that might feel corporate, we're suggesting an expansion pattern that mirrors how actual trends spread naturally from cultural centers outward."

Jack nodded absently, his eyes returning to his phone.

Michael tried a different angle. "Jack, random question." He looked up from his phone momentarily intrigued. "Any indoor golf facilities around here where I can practice my swing? We have this charity event coming up in a few weeks and I'm a bit rusty."

"There's actually one just a few blocks from here." Jack's smile grew, his phone disappearing into his front pocket. "If you want, we can head over now. Pick this back up tomorrow morning at nine?"

The air seemed to leave the room, and for a moment Wendy felt like her heart had stopped. She had a second chance now, but she wasn't sure how. She'd followed Michael's advice, her pitch was flawless. Jack just didn't seem to be interested in what she had to offer.

"That sounds great," Michael confirmed. "Let me just run back to my room and get out of this monkey suit and I'll meet you there in an hour."

As they gathered their materials, Sarah, the distribution head, paused beside Wendy. Standing now, Sarah's fitted red dress caught Wendy's attention, and of course, Michael's. His gaze lingered on her exposed legs where the hem stopped just short of her knees. "For what it's worth, I think the presentation was great," she said quietly. "But Jack needs to be... entertained. He has his father's attention span."

The ride back to the hotel was silent for the first several minutes. Wendy stared out the window, mentally replaying every moment of the presentation, searching for what she'd done wrong.

"Your presentation was great. The content wasn't the issue," Michael finally said, breaking the silence.

"Then what?" Wendy turned to him. "I followed your advice. I engaged him directly. I shifted tactics when he started looking bored."

"He didn't connect with you, Wendy. You were just another suit to him."

Wendy stared at him blankly, not understanding what that meant.

"Look, everyone has their thing, right?" He ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm, as you so eloquently put it, the asshole who takes what he wants. The receptionist, she's the care-free woman with fire hair. Hell, even the Sarah chick..."

"No one says chick anymore, Michael. It's degrading."

"See, too fucking corporate," he chuckled. "It's like she said, Jack wants to be entertained. You walked in buttoned up like a fucking Sunday school teacher and shook his hand like some corporate lawyer then dove into a power point presentation that put the room to sleep."

Tears stung the back of Wendy's eyes, but she pushed them back. "So, that's it then? you're saying I'm too boring for this job?"

"Jesus Christ." He drew a long breath trying to calm himself. "I'm saying THAT was boring. You're anything but, you just need to get out of your own head." He turned back to look at Wendy. He had that look in his eye that made her skin crawl while at the same time making her stomach clench. "Look, I have to go pretend to like golf for the next hour with Jack. Why don't you head down to the bar. Grab a drink. I'll meet you there when I get back. We'll figure it out."

Wendy looked out the window again with a nod, fighting back the urge to defend her presentation further. Something had gone wrong, something beyond the content or even her delivery. And she had a sinking feeling that Michael's solution would involve more than just tweaking slides.

The Carousel Bar was busier than Wendy expected as she stepped onto the slow rotating platform of the bar. She couldn't help but smile at the feeling of being a kid again, as she grabbed a golden pole and found an empty seat. The bartender, a middle aged man with a beard, chatted up a woman in a low-cut dress while Wendy waited to order.

The meeting with the Fireball executives had been a complete disaster, and all Wendy wanted was a drink to take the edge off while she figured out her next move. Maybe Michael would have a new strategy when he got back from playing golf. She threw up her arm to try to get the bartender's attention, but he had already moved on to some college girl whose chest was all but spilling onto the bar, completely over looking Wendy.

As the bar completed its first full rotation, Wendy found herself staring into a mirror on the other side of the liquor bottles, her mind replaying Michael's words from the car ride over. He wasn't wrong, she looked like she was a sixty old accountant. She reached behind her head and let her bun down, shaking her long blond hair out. Whether a coincidence or not, this seemed to get the bartender's attention.

"What will it be?" He had an accent, but she couldn't place where it was from.

"Can I get a Vieux Carre?" She asked, placing the menu to the side.

"Popular choice tonight," he said, already reaching for the Sazerac and Cognac.

Ice clattered into the cup, drowning out some of the conversation around her. She used this time to watch some of the other customers as the carousel made another round. A group of men at the far end of the bar was chatting up every girl in sight. Well, every girl except Wendy, that was. They wore expensive looking watches and designer suits. They carried themselves like Michael, smug, confident.

The burn of the Sazerac helped numb the humiliation she was feeling, at least a little bit. Why was it that when a man dressed in a suit with fancy jewelry he was taken seriously, yet when she did it she wasn't entertaining enough. What the hell did that mean, anyway? She wasn't there to entertain Jack. She was there to make him millions of dollars, so then why the fuck did he care how she dressed? One drink had turned into two, then three, time slipping away as she sat lost in thought. Her chest was beginning to feel warm, the soft motion of the carousel making her sway more than she intended.

Was this really what she'd worked so hard to become? She'd spent years fighting to be taken seriously, learning the lingo and hiding her figure in hopes to climb the corporate ladder. She'd abandoned modeling to escape being judged on her appearance, only to find herself being dismissed for entirely different reasons.

"Well, no one can call you a lightweight."

Wendy startled at Michael's voice. His large frame pressed against her as he maneuvered himself into the chair next to her. She chewed on the inside of her cheek as she watched him snap his fingers at the bartender only to have him rush over and get him a drink the second his butt touched the seat.

"How was golf?" she asked, noticing the way his chest hair stuck out of his unbuttoned polo.

"Awful. I'm terrible." Michael laughed, amused by his own incompetence. "But Jack had a great time showing off," he took a long drink of his whiskey. "And we got a redo tomorrow morning, which was the point."

"Great." Wendy's tone was flat. "I'll add some golf metaphors to the presentation. Maybe wear a caddy outfit."

"The caddy outfit isn't your worst idea."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh lighten-up, Wendy. You take yourself too serious."

Heat flared in Wendy's cheeks. "Maybe if men thought with something other than their dicks then I wouldn't have to try so hard."

"You trying so hard is the exact reason we are in the situation we're in." Michael's voice was low, calm. It made her hate him even more. Of course she was going to be the one that looked unreasonable in this situation.

"I want to be taken seriously. Why is that so bad? Why do I have to have my tits out in order for an executive to take me serious."

Michael shook his head, like it pained him to be having this conversation. His entire demeanor made her blood boil. Why couldn't he just say what he wanted to say. Why did he insist on being an arrogant prick about it?

"We don't need to choose between premium and playful, we can be both." Michael turned his body, facing her. "You're the one that said that, aren't you?"

"Oh, fuck you. That's different and you know it." Her fingers tightened around her glass. If it wasn't empty she would have considered throwing it in his face. "I was talking about brand identity not dressing like a whore."

"It's about authenticity." He finished the last of his bourbon and flagged down the bartender for another round. "Brands fail when they try to be something they're not. Well news flash, princess, so do people."

A tear rolled down her cheek, but Wendy ignored it. "So that's it then? I'm just reduced to being a set of tits?"

"You're not listening." He rubbed his temples like Wendy was the cause of all his problems. "You can be both. Who the fuck cares how you get their attention as long as you get it?" Michael's gaze seared into her like he was looking into her soul. "You've got an amazing mind, Wendy. But you have an even more amazing body." For once, his eyes didn't travel to her chest. "So if you have to use one in order for them to see the other then well... that's just using what you have to your advantage." He finished the rest of his whiskey in one drink. "Just like my terrible fucking golf game."

Michael pushed away from the bar and walked away, leaving her there alone with just her thoughts. The carousel continued its lazy rotation, while Wendy's mind raced. She'd spent so long fighting against being reduced to her appearance that she'd forgotten how to own it. But was embracing that power just another form of surrender, or was it just another form of leveling the playing field?

Back in her hotel room, Wendy sat on the corner of her bed swaying like she was navigating a small boat in the ocean. She'd only had a few drinks, she wasn't drunk, but she also didn't drink enough to handle so much in such quick succession. "Fucking Michael," she said under her breath as she pulled up her leg to slip off her heel.

The zipper of her pantsuit dangled just out of reach, leaving her thrashing on the bed trying to reach it. Her fingers felt clumsy, uncooperative. Eventually, after more time than she cared to admit, she was able to tug it down her body. "Why does he have to be such an asshole? For once, why can't he just help me without making it all sound so... sexual." The Fireball meeting played on endless loop in her mind: Jack's wandering attention, the way the CFO questioned the numbers then went right back to not focusing on her before she even finished her answer.

He needs to be entertained. He has his father's attention span.

Wendy sat at the desk in the corner of the room, determined to come up with something that would salvage the meeting tomorrow. Michael was right, throwing in some golf metaphors wasn't going to be enough, she needed something that would keep Jack engaged. She pulled up her slide deck, going over each slide trying to find something she could enhance. Maybe she

could run a quick interactive poll, show the executives exactly what customers thought. But there wasn't enough time to collect any meaningful data.

She paced the room, her buzz fading as her fingers drummed against her thigh to a four-count beat. She was right in the heart of bourbon street, maybe she could just get video testimony from bartenders about sales when brands try to evolve? But that too felt futile. Bars would be packed right now, and even if a bartender was slow enough to talk to her the audio would be trash with all the live music in the background.

After an hour of fruitless attempts, she slumped onto the bed. Nothing felt big enough to overcome Jack's wandering attention. She needed something bold, something that would force him to engage. But what?

With growing frustration, she threw open her suitcase, hoping inspiration might somehow hide between her carefully packed professional attire. Three pantsuits in varying shades of gray. Two button-up blouses, one cream and one pale blue. A modest navy dress for dinners. All professional, and boring. She sighed in frustration. What was she even doing? She wanted to be seen for her brain not her looks. Why was she pandering?

The adjoining door seemed to mock her indecision. Michael's words from the bar echoed in her head: *Who the fuck cares how you get their attention as long as you get it?* She'd spent so long trying to prove herself on merit alone, but where had that gotten her? Jack couldn't even stay off his phone long enough to hear her ideas. She glanced past the door, catching her reflection in the mirror. The black bra hugged her chest tight. Pushing her chest up in a way that was all but invisible under the clothes she was wearing. The lace outline along the cups were just the right amount of playful she enjoyed, allowing the pink of her areola to peak through from the right angle.

She walked toward the mirror with a grin on her face. Her belly was smooth, flat. Her hip bones just visible as her stomach dipped into a V where her matching panties began. They were a little more provocative than her bra. Slightly more sheer in a way that always made Jon's mouth hang open. She ran her fingers through the back of her hair, fanning it out the way she used to do in her modeling days. She could already feel the heat begin to build in her core, she looked hot. The kind of hot she'd locked away all those years ago. "I bet this would get their attention," she mused to herself. "Do I have your attention now, Jack? Want to hear all about my... proposal again?" She leaned forward, letting her chest nearly spill out as she kept her eyes trained on her reflection. "See something you like, Jack?" She stood up straight making her chest bounce. "If you give me your undivided attention, you may get something you'll like even better."

"How's that for evolving my fire?" she scoffed, turning on her heel and walking toward the bed. The buzz between her legs had started to grow, her little roleplay having more of an effect on her than she realized. She fell back on the bed, grabbing her phone to call Jon. Perhaps they could play a little before bed, help take the edge off. Another message from Ava greeted her as she unlocked her phone.

Ava: I haven't heard from you. Call me back, please.

She stared at the message. Why was Ava so determined to talk to her today? She'd call her back, but first she needed Jon.

Unfortunately, after the third ring it went to voicemail. "Hey, it's me," she said after the beep, her voice wavering slightly. "The meeting didn't go great. I just... I missed you and hoped to hear your voice. Call me when you can."

She tossed the phone onto the bed and resumed her fruitless search. Nothing in her suitcase remotely suggested "playful." Nothing would capture Jack's attention tomorrow.

She grabbed the navy dress and pulled it over her head. It was loose-fitting, and while the neckline was just low enough to show a hint of cleavage, it wasn't exactly going to set the world on fire. She needed a new plan.

"Damnit," she complained under her breath, glancing again at the door that separated her room with Michael's as she grabbed her phone.

Wendy knocked on the door, a little more forcefully than she'd meant to. She heard movement inside then the soft click of the lock, just like he'd mentioned earlier. When the door opened, his polo was gone, replaced by a white T-shirt with what looked like an old coffee stain on the front. His slacks had been traded for a pair of worn gym shorts that had clearly seen better days.

"Wendy," his gaze scanned her body, taking in her new outfit. "What a surprise."

She almost lashed out at his feigned shock. Instead, she gestured helplessly at her outfit. "This is the best I have. I didn't exactly pack for..." The words trailed off as she realized she wasn't sure how to finish that sentence.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside.

She bit her lip, warning bells sounding in her head as she contemplated going to his room. Her fingers curled pulling her dress before she took a step forward on shaky legs. With each step she convinced herself they were just going to talk strategy about tomorrow, to come up with a plan to get Jack excited about their vision. But the voice in the back of her head told her she knew better. Every time they were alone Michael tried something, she couldn't trust him.

Michael's hotel room was almost identical to hers, except he'd already made himself at home. His laptop sat open on the desk, his bed unmade with the blankets thrown about, along with an open bottle of whiskey on the desk.

"I figured you might stop by," he said, moving to clear some clothes from the desk chair. "After our conversation at the bar."

Wendy remained near the door, just in case she needed to make a quick escape. "I'm not here to rehash that. I just thought we should figure out a solution for tomorrow."

"And you expect me to bail you out?" Fire flashed in Wendy's eyes, her anger quickly replaced by self-doubt. He wasn't wrong, was he? Every time she found herself in hot water Michael was the only one who was able to get her out. If it wasn't for Michael she wouldn't even be on this project, so why was she acting so hostile toward him?

"I just...", she gestured at her navy dress. "This isn't going to work. You were right. We need to catch Jack's eye."

Michael studied her for a moment, licking his lips. There was something in the way he was looking at her. Something that told her she was in over her head. "You know, When I went to play golf with Jack earlier I passed this small little boutique." He made his way to the closet.

"What's your point?" She asked, even as the hair on her arms stood up.

"My point is that Jack responds to certain... visual cues." He pulled a bag from the closet. "I might have done a little shopping while you were at the bar."

Wendy didn't have to be a genius to know what was in the bag, she didn't even need to be sober, although she was beginning to sober up very quickly. She held her breath as Michael pulled out a gold dress that shimmered in the light. The neckline was accented by red gem stones that hung way too low for Wendy's liking. To make matters worse, there was a slit down the side that she was pretty sure would come all the way up to her hip.

"Fireball gold," Michael said, holding it up. "On brand, don't you think?"

"No." The word came out instantly. "Absolutely not."

"You haven't even tried it on."

"I don't need to. Christ my entire body would be on display." Heat flared in her cheeks.

Michael draped the gold dress over the back of a chair. "What exactly are you against, Wendy? Being noticed? Making an impression?"

"Being reduced to my appearance." Her voice rose slightly. "You think I don't know what happens when I dress like that? How men stop listening to what I'm saying because they're too busy staring at my chest?"

"They're not listening to you now," Michael countered, his voice maddeningly calm. "At least this way you get his attention long enough to make your point." He chuckled to himself. "Then, when you catch them looking you call them on it. They will be so embarrassed they'll have to give you their undivided attention."

She hated how right he was. Hated even more that she had just played out that exact fantasy in the mirror before coming here.

"I can't," she said quietly. "Not that one."

Michael rolled his eyes and reached back into the bag, pulling out a second dress. "I had a feeling you'd say that. You're too afraid to take any real chances."

The dig stung, especially after the rejection from earlier today. Her insecurities intensified and she worried that perhaps she wasn't cut out for this after all. Maybe she should just go back to Columbus, turn down the promotion, the Fireball project, and just go back to writing twitter campaigns and website tag lines.

The dress he pulled out next was black with gold flecks woven through the fabric. It was significantly less flashy than the first, but still more form-fitting than anything in her suitcase. The neckline was modest by comparison, hanging slightly lower than the dress she was currently wearing.

"This one is probably more your speed," even that felt like a dig. Was she just being sensitive? "Personally, I don't think Jack will notice it, but good to have options I suppose."

"It's not a bad compromise." She ran her hand over the dress trying to convince herself that it just may work.

"That's the problem. You're compromising. Jack doesn't respect compromise he wants someone with commitment." Michael gestured toward the gold dress. "This is what will get his attention."

Wendy took a step back, frustration building. The way he was looking at her, the way he said commitment. "You just want to see my chest. Jesus, why are all men such pigs."

"What can I say, we appreciate a good rack," he said with a laugh.

She fought the urge to slap him, to run back through the door and leave. Then a thought popped in her head.

"Fine, you want me to wear that one?" She took a step toward him, her confidence growing slightly. "You want to see me walk around their conference room with my tits out?" She smirked as Michael's eyes went wide at her sudden change in tone, her words laced with a seductive edge.

"You tear up the stupid IOU. Stop badgering me about commitment, and I'll wear your dress. I'll prance around Fireball headquarters showing so much skin Jack won't dare look away." She stopped just a couple of steps in front of him. She could feel the adrenaline rushing through her veins. The surprised look on Michael's face made her burst with pride. She was tired of his smugness.

But then, something changed. Just as quickly as she'd turned the tables on him, Michael seemed to find his bearing. He cocked his eyebrow, closing the small gap between them. He was close enough now, she could smell the whiskey on his breath.

"Allow me to give you a lesson in leverage, Wendy." His voice dropped lower. "I hold all the cards here, not you. If tomorrow fails, my reputation takes a hit, but I survive. You don't. You need this more than I do." That cocky smirk was back, and Wendy felt herself go ghost white. "Why would I give up something so valuable when I'm getting nothing in return?"

Panic rose in Wendy's chest. He was right, of course. If Fireball pulled the plug on this then Michael would be fine. Sure, his bonus check might take a hit, but the world would continue to spin. For Wendy, this presentation was everything. If she failed no one would take her seriously.

"What if...," she chewed on the inside of her cheek. "What if I sweeten the deal for you?" Her stomach did a summersault. This was a bad idea.

"I'm listening."

The room felt suffocatingly small as Wendy tossed her phone onto the bed. She could do this. She could leave here with Fireball excited about the go-forward strategy, without reducing herself to a pair of tits for Jack. She knew if Michael really wanted to, he could keep Jack's attention. He just needed the right... motivation. With a deep breath and a fake smile, she sunk onto her knees.

Michael's expression shifted instantly. His eyes went wide in shock, his mouth hanging open, for once in his life at a loss for words. She'd managed to catch him off guard, and the momentary flicker of surprise in his eyes gave her a small surge of power.

"Two minutes or less, those were our terms last time, right?" She let her fingernails scrap over his stained t-shirt, dragging toward his shorts. She fought back the burning in her chest, the tears stinging her eyes. She knew she was crossing a line, but Michael had been right. She had

advantages of her own she could play, and didn't it make more sense for her to use them on Michael instead of a room full of people she didn't know?

"It..." he cleared his throat realizing his voice was an octave too high. "It was one minute."

Her fingers sank into his flesh. "Oh, you're one of those guys?" Wendy saw his nostrils flair, but a laugh still crept from his lips.

"Two minutes is fine. What exactly are you suggesting?"

"If I win, I wear the black dress," her fingers teased the band of his shorts. "And you do everything in your power to convince Jack that despite my lack of... commitment he still agrees to our strategy."

She looked up at Michael. He had at least three different chins from this position, his beady eyes filled with lust. She had him on the hook, she just need to keep him there. "And you tear up that stupid IOU."

"And when you lose?"

"If... I lose," she let her nails rake over his thighs. His gut pressed against her forehead, his breathing intensifying. She tried not to think too much about what she was about to do.

"Then I wear the gold dress tomorrow." She nodded toward the more revealing option. "Your choice, no complaints."

A slow smile spread across Michael's face as he considered the offer. "What's in it for me? I already have the IOU. I still have all leverage."

No, Michael. This time I have it." Heat throbbed between her legs, even as bile clawed at the back of her throat. She tugged the sleeves of her dress down her arms before she could stop herself, dragging the neckline with them until her bra was fully exposed. The black lace snapped into view. She heard his sharp gasp, wondering if he could see the pink of her nipple from that angle.

"But if you're not interested, then I guess I will go back to my room and try on the black one." She began to stand, only to feel his hands on her shoulders.

"No, I'll accept your terms," he said quicker than he intended. He'd expected Wendy to eventually relent and accept that the gold dress was the right option. But this... this was better than his wildest dreams.

"So, should we start the clock?" Her tone was mocking as she felt a slight shake in his hand. she'd never seen Michael nervous before. Her body pulsed with energy as she realized the power she held over him.

"You sound awful confident." His fingers slid across the exposed skin of her arms. "It didn't go too well for you last time."

Goosebumps littered her arm as she tried to focus on the task at hand and not the throbbing between her thighs. "Last time caught me off guard. This time, I know what I'm dealing with."

"Ok, time starts now," Michael said with a snicker. "But, I don't think you have any clue what you're dealing with."

Wendy rolled her eyes. If she had a dollar for every guy she met who thought he was packing she wouldn't need this job. With the clock officially started, she brought her hands back to the band of his shorts, pulling them down with ease.

"Don't flatt—" Her words caught in her throat as his cock popped into view, thick and heavy-looking despite its semi-hard state. It was easily thicker than Jon's, nearly as wide as her forearm. It looked to already be longer as well. Her body tingled at the wonder of what it would look like fully erect. What it would feel like. A thought she quickly dismissed. The skin was smooth, with a slight curve that made her pulse stutter, a large vein traced along the underside leading to his two heavy, and wildly hairy, sacs. The head was wide, flushed a deep pink, and just beginning to swell. Her breath hitched before she could stop it, a quiet, involuntary sound betraying her surprise.

Michael's laughter rang in her ears, fanning the heat now spreading between her legs.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? Jon not as... impressive?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She was truly speechless, caught somewhere between shock and wonder. Her hand raised on its own, her manicured nails disappearing in the unkempt bush of hair as she cupped the weight of him in her palm.

"Time's ticking," Michael murmured, closing his hand around hers, forcing her fingers to curl around his girth. The heat of his flesh seemed to intensify as she struggled to wrap her hand fully around him.

Her fingers didn't quite meet around his shaft, not without Michael's help guiding them there. The weight of him, the heat, the way his cock throbbed gently against her palm, it was all more than she expected. She was still reeling, still stunned. She felt his cock start to rise, blood filling it as she stroked him slowly.

"At this rate, you're not even going to get me hard in two minutes," he taunted, releasing his grip on Wendy's fingers, pleased that she continued to stroke him without his guidance. "Maybe you should use your mouth. A little spit goes a long way."

"I... I don't do that." Michael was right, she needed to focus otherwise there was no way she was going to win. She had given him back control. She needed to snap out of it. To find what drove him crazy and use it against him. Just like he'd done when he... she didn't finish the thought.

"But you're not wrong." Her grip tightened slightly causing Michael to gasp. "This is the biggest I've ever seen. I'd love to see what it looks like when you get fully hard." She looked up at him, biting her lip as she met his gaze. "Can you do that for me? Can you show me how hard you can get?"

Michael's grin widened at her praise, cocky and expectant, like he'd already won.

"All you had to do was ask," he said, rolling his hips just enough to make her hand shift on his length. "I knew it wouldn't be long before I had you on your knees."

Wendy let out a soft breath, her grip adjusting, smoothing her thumb over the ridge of his head. She felt the twitch in response, his length continuing to respond.

So, he liked the talking. Of course he did. She shouldn't have been surprised. But if that's what got him off then that's what she'd do. She'd crank it up to ten if it meant winning and ridding herself of all this.

"Had I known you had all this between your legs maybe I would have asked sooner." Another pulse from his cock, as the space between her fingers grew. *Gotcha* "You feel so hard already. So excited." She felt the first drops of precum slide across her fingers.

"Are you excited, Michael? Excited to finally feel my hand around your cock." She emphasized the word cock, drawing a grunt from him. Excited to cum all over my chest? That's what you want isn't it? To cum on my chest?"

Reluctantly, Michael closed his eyes. He didn't think holding out for two minutes was going to be a problem. Wendy was hot, but he had already factored that into his plan. He'd controlled his breathing, thought about all he was going to get after he held out. But, he didn't account for this. He had no idea this innocent little wife could have such a dirty mouth. That along with the sight of her tits on display was more than he'd bargained for.

"Mmmm, there is it is," Wendy continued, the excitement of now being in control causing her to rub her thighs together, feeling the full weight of his impressive hardness in her hand. "Open your eyes, big boy. Don't you want to see how good your dick looks in my hand?"

Each stroke felt like a new wave of power pumping into Wendy's blood. She knew she should feel repulsed, regret, and she would later. But right now, she was drunk on power. She was going to win, she was finally going to get the best of the man who had been tormenting her since Christmas.

With gritted teeth, Michael opened his eyes, his hips working in time with Wendy's hand as he raced closer to his climax. "Sixty... fuck, sixty seconds," he called out, glancing at the clock on the night stand.

"Mmmm I can feel it coming. Give it to me, Michael. Give me your cum." Wendy's voice was dripping with seduction as wet sloshing noises filled the room, Michael's pre-cum acting as its own form of lubricant.

Wendy leaned in, brushing her chest just slightly against his hip as she dragged her hand upward.

"You've thought about this before, haven't you?" she whispered. "Me... stroking your cock. You've looked at me. I've seen the way your eyes always drop to my chest when you think I'm not watching."

He chuckled, but it lacked the bite from earlier. He was trying to control his breathing. Wendy's phone buzzed from the bed, breaking her concentration for a moment, but she recovered quickly.

"Maybe I should give you a real treat," she purred, curling her fingers with more confidence, letting her other hand come up to cup his balls, her nails grazing his skin. "You want to see them don't you? You want me to take off my bra so you can see if they look as good as you imagined?"

She heard the shift in his breathing, felt the way his body responded.

"I bet you'd give anything to fuck my tits right now," she added, casually, like she was talking about the weather. "You've stared at them enough. Mmm I've never had anything as impressive as this between them before. Do you want to see it as bad as I do?"

Michael's hips flexed, just slightly. She had him. His breathing had turned into a series of grunts. In just a few short seconds this was all going to be over.

"for... forty five seconds left." He tried to focus on the clock, on anything other than her words. She seemed to be enjoying this even more than he anticipated and the thought of that made his balls ache for release.

Wendy took her time now, deliberately reaching behind her back, her strokes never stopping. Her fingers worked at the clasp, slow and intentional. "Are you ready for the big reveal?" She dragged the straps down from her shoulders. "Are you going to last long enough to see them? To feel them wrap around your hard dick?"

"Oh fuck." He couldn't even pretend like that didn't have an effect on him. This was it, she was going to win. He felt his balls tighten, on the verge of exploding. All he could hope for now was that he had corrupted her enough that they didn't have to hide behind the IOU anymore.

Another round of vibrations on the bed caught his attention. Jon's face lighting up on Wendy's phone screen. At the same time, the cups of her bra dropped free, and her breasts bounced slightly as they were released. Michael looked at the clock, thirty seconds.

"Jon's calling," he said, noticing how Wendy's body went rigid even as she continued to stroke him. "that's the second time he's called. He's probably worried what his wife is doing." Her strokes slowed, but didn't stop. He chewed on his bottom lip, doing everything in his power to slow his release.

Wendy's hand hesitated just slightly, a small tremor betraying her internal war. Jon. Michael was right. Jon was analytical, if she didn't answer his mind would go to the darkest places just like it'd done in his last relationship.

"What's that say about you Wendy? That you'd rather be on your knees, my dick in your hand, than answer your husband's call?" He saw her shake her head, her grip loosening just enough to give him some relief.

"I actually admire the commitment." The taunt in his voice was back. "In fact, I'll go ahead and answer for you. That way you don't have to stop what you're doing."

"No!" Her eyes went wide in fear. She could be quick. Just let him know she was about to get in the shower and she'd call him right back. Jon wouldn't suspect anything if she kept her voice light. It would buy her a little peace of mind. Just one second. Just one sentence.

Her hand left Michael's cock as she grabbed the phone, her exposed chest bouncing with the sudden movement. She answered, brought it to her ear, heart pounding.

This was all the distraction Michael needed. He smiled, noticing how flush her body was, her hard her nipples were. Wendy wasn't just flustered about Jon, she was turned on. Fortune seemed to be smiling down at him in more ways than one.

"Hey babe, I was actually just about to get in the shower. Can I call you back?" Her voice was sweet, but her breathing was ragged, her tone high pitched.

"Sure, sorry I missed your call early. I was just—"

"Okay, love you," she said, ending the call and tossing the phone aside like it was burning her. She turned her attention back to Michael, sliding off the bed and back onto her knees.

"Twenty seconds. There's no way you're... oh fuck."

Wendy pressed her chest together, her nails scrapping across her nipples as she lowered them around Michael's cock.

"Are they as soft as you imagined?" She pressed her breasts harder trying not to stare too hard at the impressive rod of steel sliding effortlessly between them. Her nails lightly teased her nipples causing her to squirm while rocking her body.

"Fifteen seconds..."

"Cum for me big boy." Her voice was trembling now, realizing she was on the verge of losing. "I bet these things produce so much cum." She reached down tugging and caressing his large sac. "I know you've always dreamed of this. Of covering my tits in your hot cum."

Michael's hips started to buck. He was still close. Maybe she could still win this. She just had to try a little harder.

Wendy leaned in, giving him everything. The weight of her breasts around his cock, her fingers squeezing from underneath to hold them just right.

"Five..."

"Cum for me, Michael," she whispered, desperate now, her voice a plea and a command all at once. "Do it. Cum all over me."

"Three..."

"Think about how good it will feel when it's in my mouth..."

"Two..."

"Oh fuck. Or in my pussy. You want that don't you? To cum in my pussy? Imagine how good that will feel."

"Uggghh, fuck. Time," he barely got the word out.

Michael grabbed her shoulders, holding her in place. He slid his cock deep into the tight press of her breasts, his head grazing her cheek.

Wendy gasped, trying to pull back, but he held her firm, her body frozen as she felt his pulse.

"Oh fuck, yes. Take it. Fuck, take it all."

Rope after rope of hot cum splattered her chest, neck and face. Her breath caught, not just from the shock of it all, but at the realization of just how wet she was at that moment.

The filthy words she'd whispered to get him off, *cum for me, Michael... in my mouth... in my pussy* they hadn't just worked on him. They'd worked on her. She could still hear them echoing in her mind, but now it was like someone else had said them. She felt her juices slide down her leg, her body aching, desperate for attention.

Then, the moment passed.

Humiliation crashing through her as she felt the sticky evidence of what she had just done. She clenched her jaw, trying not to look down, but she couldn't help it.

She'd never seen someone cum so much and with such force. It was like he'd been holding back for months not minutes. When it was done, Michael let out a shaky laugh, taking a step back to admire his handiwork.

Wendy's chest was drenched in his white glaze, globs of it dripping down onto her dress, ruining it completely. She blinked, stunned, frozen in place. Her breath hitched as she looked down, her breasts glistening, the fabric soaked and clinging. Strands of hair clung to her face, caught in the beads of sweat and semen dotting her flushed skin.

For a moment, she didn't move, her head still spinning from what just happened. She felt... warm. The aftershock of arousal still pulsed low in her gut, but it was fading fast, replaced by fear, anger... repulsion, at both Michael and herself.

He should've stopped.

Time was up. He said it was over. He should have stopped instead of... she reached up to wipe her neck, but the mess only smeared. Her lip curled in disgust as the sticky wetness coated her fingers, the harsh smell of it assaulting her nose.

"Fuck," she muttered under her breath. That flicker of power she had felt was long gone. Replaced by a cold wave of shame, and worse, the heavy realization that she'd not only let this happen again, she instigated it.

"I'm not going to lie, I thought you had me." Michael was still trying to catch his breath, his gaze on Wendy's chest.

Wendy's eyes snapped up to meet his. Her face twisted into something ugly. Rage. Embarrassment. Confusion.

"If Jon hadn't called..." He paused, stepping toward her as he pulled his shorts back up. "I really should take him to lunch. Maybe send a thank you card. If it wasn't for him, you would've won."

Wendy stared at him, she didn't know what to say. She wanted to lash out at him, to be angry, but something was holding her back.

Michael's grin deepened, his eyes trailing down her cum-streaked skin with smug satisfaction. "It's almost like..." he leaned in just slightly, "he wanted it to happen."

That did it.

"Fuck you!" Wendy screamed, getting to her feet. She grabbed her phone from the bed and stormed back to her room. She needed a shower, to burn away every trace of Michael from her body and her mind.

"Soon," he whispered as she slammed the adjoining door to her room. He licked his lips falling back onto the bed. "Very soon indeed."

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Wendy slammed the adjoining door behind her, clutching the gold dress to her body as she struggled for air. Michael's mocking words echoed in her mind though she tried to block them out. *This is not Jon's fault.* The reality burned through her brain even as doubt tugged at the edges of her certainty. If only she hadn't been so prideful. If only she'd devised some other strategy. If only Jon hadn't called at that particular moment. No matter how many times she said it wasn't his fault, the thought would bubble back up. She scoffed at herself, throwing her body across her bed.

"What the hell am I doing?" she whispered, letting the dress drop to her side in a shimmering puddle. Her phone buzzed, still clutched in her hand from when Michael had threatened to answer it. Another text from Ava, she'd meant to call her back already, but she'd been preoccupied with... The image of Michael's manhood invaded her mind. She bit the inside of her cheek, commanding her eyes to read the message in front of her.

Ava: Please call me back. I haven't heard from you. I'm starting to worry.

Anger burned through Wendy's chest like wildfire, the guilt she was experiencing acting as fuel for the blaze. Why did everybody insist on protecting her like she was some weak child? Jon with his obsessive need to verify her numbers, numbers she knew better than he ever would. Now Ava blowing up her phone with message after message like she was some kind of victim who needed to be saved. She silenced her phone and tossed it onto the bed beside her. She was the one executives were flying to New Orleans. She was the one who had the new promotion. She was the one Michael trusted when everyone else saw just another pretty face. Why couldn't anyone trust her to run her own life? She snatched her phone again, a sudden impulse seizing her. Fine. If Ava had been so desperate to talk, they would talk.

"Oh thank God," Ava said immediately. "I've been calling you all day. Are you okay? Is Michael—"

"I'm fine," Wendy cut in, irritation evident in her tone. "I've been in meetings. You know, working?"

There was a pause. "I'm sorry. I just... Marcus and I, we talked to Lisa."

The whispered cautionary tale in the office. The woman whose sudden departure had spurred gossip that Ava had discussed when Wendy had first started working for Michael. Now, after what had just happened in his hotel room, the name made her blood run cold. Her hand went to her wedding ring, twisting it once before she could prevent herself.

"Lisa told us about Michael," Ava continued, her voice low and persistent. "About how he isolated her, made her so desperate that—"

"Stop." Wendy's voice hardened. She did not want to hear Lisa's story. She was not a victim and she would be damned if she let anyone make her feel like one. "Michael has done nothing but advance my career while everyone else got in my way."

"But that's the point," Ava went on. "Lisa said that's how it started. He made her feel special, valued—"

"Enough!" Wendy's voice cracked. "Unlike you, Michael actually sees my potential instead of attempting to turn me into some damsel in distress." The words spilled out, acrid and satisfying. "He's giving me opportunities I've worked years for."

"This isn't about—"

"Maybe if you focused more on your own career and less on obsessing about mine, you'd have been promoted by now too." The moment the words slipped out of her mouth, Wendy knew she'd crossed the line. She could hear Ava's sharp gasp and the hurt even through the phone.

"Do you even hear yourself right now?" Ava whispered clearly struggling not to cry.

Wendy hung up, she didn't want to hear her cry. Maybe Ava was the one who needed looking after. Wendy looked at the phone, a conflicted mix of guilt and righteousness churning in her stomach. Her gaze drifted across to the gold dress laid out on the bed, its metallic threads shining in the hotel lights like liquid fire. Michael was right. She'd be deadly in that dress, commanding attention, demanding respect. No one would be able to take their eyes off her.

Wendy woke up in the morning feeling like she hadn't slept a wink. Every time she closed her eyes all she saw was herself kneeling on the floor, Michael's manhood dripping against her palm. The inside of her thighs felt sticky, yearning for something she didn't want to admit. She sat up in bed, the gold dress immediately coming into view on the back of the desk chair. The ridiculously revealing dress that Michael was convinced would help them get this trip back on track.

She approached it hesitantly, her modeling mantra rising unbidden from memory: "It's just a costume, not who you are." How many times had she whispered that before walking onto sets wearing next to nothing? The phrase had been her shield, her way of separating Wendy-the-person from Wendy-the-image.

"Just another role," she murmured, fingers trailing over the sequins. "One more performance."

The zipper rattled in her ears like the click of a lock. Each inch it rose up her spine felt like a closing door, a choice she couldn't undo. By the time it reached the top, she was locked in, the costume secured.

Golden sequins cascaded down her frame, catching light with every shallow breath. The neckline plunged to the middle of her chest. On someone with a less flattering figure, the dress would have looked professional, sleek. On her, it made it look like she was being dropped into an old 80s adult film. She tried on every bra she'd packed, hopeful that she could get one that fit and that wouldn't be visible beneath the thin material. In the end, she decided against a bra entirely. She would just have to make it work.

The matter of underwear presented a similar problem. For one dizzy, reckless moment, the thought of forgoing underwear entirely flashed through her mind. It would be the ultimate power move, and leave guys like Michael putty in her hands. The unexpected thrill of doing something so daring caused her freshly shaved sex to leak in approval. Eventually, practicality won out and she found a pair of black high-waisted panties buried in her suitcase. As she slipped them into place, she could still feel the lingering warmth of her split second of fantasy.

She tugged at the fabric doing her best to cover as much of her chest as possible, but it was a lost cause. If that wasn't bad enough, there was a slit climbing her thigh revealing more skin than she'd shown publicly since her final catalog shoot years ago. Red stripes accented the edges and mid-section of the dress, giving it the perfect fireball feel.

"Embrace your fire," she whispered, turning to examine the dress from all angles and ensure she wouldn't have a wardrobe malfunction.

Her phone vibrated against the nightstand, and for a moment she'd hoped it was Ava. She needed to apologize with how things had ended last night. Instead, it was Jon's face illuminating the screen. Her stomach twisted as she answered, suddenly feeling like she was living two separate lives.

"Morning, beautiful." Jon's voice carried warmth across the miles between them. "Are you ready to show those Fireball execs what they're missing out on?"

"I... think they'll be impressed," she said, cheeks burning with embarrassment as she turned away from the mirror, unable to look at herself while speaking to him.

"I've been thinking about your presentation strategy," Jon continued, oblivious to her silent struggle. "And you'll be happy to know I'm not going to throw any stats at you. You were right last night. You know what you're doing."

Wendy's palm glided over the sequins at her hip, smoothing non-existent wrinkles while at the same time exposing her entire thigh. "Thanks, babe," she barely heard him. "I think Jack is going to love the new direction." She held the phone with her shoulder, using her hands to bring her breasts closer together. She let out a soft gasp as her fingers brushed over her nipples, watching them harden instantly.

"Is everything ok?"

"Yeah sorry," she said releasing her chest. "Just burned myself with the curling iron." She dug through her makeup bag looking for the perfect shade of red lipstick to match the dress.

"Well I can let you get back to it. Let me know how it goes." Jon's excitement was infectious and for a brief second Wendy looked at the woman in the mirror with disgust.

"I love that you believe in me, it really means a lot," she told him, and that, at least, wasn't a lie.

"Go show them what you're really capable of. I love you."

"Love you too," she whispered, ending the call before emotion could crack her voice.

The phone slipped from her fingers. For a heartbeat, she considered changing, digging out her navy dress, telling Michael it was all a mistake, but as the woman in the mirror stared back at her she felt her resolve harden. She'd been through worse for less.

"They want entertainment?" she murmured to her reflection, setting down her mascara wand. "They'll get a performance they'll never forget."

Michael thought he'd broken her. That she was just going to be his dress-up doll and bend to his will. She let out a long breath to calm her shaking hand as she felt the anger start to swell. He may have gotten the upper hand a few times, caught her off guard, unprepared. The mascara slid over his her with a delicate stroke.

But he'd miscalculated. If there was one thing modeling had taught her, it was how to wear a mask convincingly while keeping her true self hidden underneath. That's all she had to do, convince him he was the one calling the shots until she came up with a plan.

Wendy leaned toward the mirror, examining her creation with the detailed eye of a model. She wasn't Michael's puppet, and she sure as hell wasn't a victim. She stood up, taking in her entire body from head to toe. Gone was the timid market specialist who didn't want to be seen for just her looks. In her place, was a Goddess who wore her sexuality with pride and confidence.

"Is this evolved enough for you, Michael?" she whispered, her reflection's eyes glinting with newfound clarity.

Michael's stiff knock echoed through the room telling her it was time to go. She scooped up her presentation materials and gave herself one last look in the mirror.

"It's showtime."

Michael knocked impatiently a second time before Wendy could get to the door to answer. She took a final breath and walked toward the door, grabbing her keycard and dropping it into her clutch. When she opened the door, Michael's jaw hit the floor.

"Holy shit," he breathed, eyes traveling from her gold stilettos up the length of her exposed leg to where the slit ended high on her thigh. He licked his lips, smiling to himself as she squirmed at his examination, before continuing upward to linger on her plunging neckline. "I knew it would look good, but this is..." His gaze locked onto her chest, he could just make out a hard nub of her nipple, she wasn't wearing a bra.

"Obscene?" Wendy finished his sentence, stepping into the hallway as her door clicked shut behind her sealing her fate. "Let's get this over with." She pushed past him, swaying her hips as she walked, even though she knew he was staring at her ass.

Michael scrambled to catch up, although he always stayed a step or two behind. "Jack is going to eat you up," he reached for her elbow, his breath labored as he matched her pace. "Fuck knows I want to."

The familiar tingle of excitement pulsed between her legs at Michael's words. She avoided his grasps with a playful giggle. "Sorry, sweetheart," she tried to say it in the same tone as him. "But this little performance is a one time deal and is strictly a look but don't touch situation."

His eyebrow cocked, a low chuckle coming from his mouth as he processed her newfound confidence. "You're full of surprises. I'll give you that." He checked his phone, they were behind schedule.

"Let's put a little pep in our step," he barked, squeezing past Wendy in the small hallway and rounding the corner. "As good as you look, it will all be for nothing if we show up late."

A loud crash from around the corner made Wendy jump. "Watch where the hell you're going," Michael's voice boomed as Wendy made the turn.

In front of her was an elderly housekeeper, her arm shaking as she held onto her cart in an attempt to kneel and pick up the fallen linen all over the floor. As Wendy processed what happened, a soft ding indicator the elevator had arrived. "Let's go," Michael yelled, his large bear paw of a hand holding the doors open.

Wendy paused, looking from Michael to the woman slowly bending over on bad knees.

"Wendy!" Michael's voice sharpened. "What the hell are you doing? We're going to be late."

She ignored him, shaking her head and kneeling beside the housekeeper. The gold dress caught the morning light as she gathered fallen towels, the sequins creating a disco ball effect on the hallway walls.

"You don't need to do that, miss," the woman protested softly, her accent thick with the musical lilt of New Orleans.

"It's no trouble," Wendy replied, stacking the towels even as Michael's face grew red with anger. "My mother cleaned hotels for fifteen years. Worked two jobs as a single mom with me and my younger sister at home. I know what it's like when your cart gets knocked over. The effect it can have on your day."

The woman's weathered face softened with surprise and gratitude. "Gracias, chérie. You're too kind."

Wendy rose gracefully, helping the woman secure the last towel on the cart. "Have a good day," she said, squeezing the housekeeper's hand briefly before turning back toward the elevator.

Michael's face darkened as he jammed his finger repeatedly on the elevator button. "Great, you're going to cost the company millions all so you can play maid. Jesus, Wendy. Do you even understand what's at stake here?"

As the doors slid closed, Wendy caught one last glimpse of the housekeeper watching her, a wide smile on her face. "I know exactly what's at stake," she replied, standing a little taller as the elevator began its descent.

The conference room seemed smaller than Wendy remembered as she made her journey through the Fireball headquarters. The red dragon mural on the wall seemed to come to life with each step Wendy took toward the doors. She could see Jack Peterson through the window, his back to the door as he putted a ball several feet into a small cup. He was already checked out, but Wendy was determined to change that.

"Nice form," Michael shouted as they entered.

Jack turned, a soft chuckle escaping his lips as he saw Michael. "There he is! Listen, I've got a tee time at noon that I'd really like to make, so let's try to keep this—"

His words died as Wendy stepped into view. Wendy was never really a runway model when she was in the business, but she met enough of them along the way to understand how to make an entrance. Her heels clicked in perfect timing as she made her way into the large room, each step accentuated by the sway of her hips and the swing of her dress that showed off her thigh. Jack's putter clattered against the conference table, his thought all but forgotten.

Wendy chewed on the inside of her cheek, willing her hands not to shake, not to tug at her ring as she entered the room. The nerves were still there. The same rush she'd get before a photoshoot. She could still feel the dread she'd get right before, knowing people would be ogling her, minimizing her to just a set of legs and tits. But this time, along with that, came a sense of power, an anger. She may just be eye candy now, but in just a minute she was about to blow their mind.

Just a performance, she reminded herself. Just a role.

"Good morning, everyone," she said, her red lips curling into a smile. Bruce and Tom, already seated, straightened in their chairs, their eyes never leaving her. Sarah, the only other female, nodded with a disapproving scowl on her face.

"Wendy, it's lovely to see you again," Jack took her hand squeezing it gently, before taking his seat. "It's nice to see you've... embraced the Fireball spirit." His gaze dipped below her neckline before quickly returning back to her face.

Butterflies erupted in Wendy's stomach as she fought the desire to race out of there. Jack was professional enough to imply he was referring to Wendy's color scheme, however his gaze told her exactly what he was referring to.

"Just showing my team spirit," she laughed, before taking her place at the head of the table. "I hope you don't mind if we dive right in." She connected her laptop to the overhead monitor without waiting for a response.

"Yesterday, we talked about evolution," Wendy began, clicking to her first slide without preamble. "Today, we're talking about ignition."

For the next twenty minutes, she held the room's attention as she talked through slides, and walked around the room knowing all eyes were on her. The Nashville strategy unfolded on screen just as planned. There would be signature cocktails at premier venues, influencer partnerships with country music stars, billboard placements for summer festival season. The campaign blueprint was meticulous, innovative, and most importantly, actionable.

"We've already secured preliminary agreements with three major Nashville venues," she continued, "pending your approval, of course."

Similar to yesterday, Bruce, the CFO, reached for his phone as Wendy brought the projected revenue from the event onto the screen. Her fire red lips puckered as she paused mid-sentence. She gripped the edge of the table and leaned forward, feeling her dress give way to gravity. Even as her face turned the same color as her lips, her voice remained calm.

"Bruce," she waited for him to look up from his phone. "I'd love your thoughts on the revenue projections."

His eyes automatically stopped at her exposed cleavage before darting guiltily to her face. His cheeks flushed red as he fumbled to put his phone away.

"They seem... um, aggressive but attainable," he stammered.

"I noticed your wedding ring," Wendy said conversationally, straightening up. "Is your wife a whiskey drinker?"

The question was innocent, but the message landed precisely as intended. Bruce straightened in his chair, his expression shifting from embarrassment to professional engagement.

"She prefers wine," he answered, suddenly finding his notes fascinating.

Wendy nodded, cutting her eyes to Michael who wore the look of a proud father. As much as she hated to admit it, once again his tactics worked perfectly. The rest of the presentation was

smooth sailing. With each slide Wendy's confidence grew, her vision for the campaign coming across with crystal clarity.

Michael watched from the background, amazed at Wendy's transformation. When the day had started he'd considered dropping a pen on the floor and asking Wendy to pick it up. Now, seeing her embracing her sexuality without his prodding he stuffed the pen back in his pocket. Whether she realized it or not, she was embracing this side of herself even faster than he expected. The thought of what that meant made his pants tight. He looked at his watch, ready to wrap up the meeting. He'd accomplished everything he'd needed.

As Wendy reached her conclusion, laying out the three-phase rollout timeline, she stepped back to let her words settle over the room.

"That's our proposal," she finished. "Evolution without abandonment. Premium without pretension. The fire you love, refined for a new chapter."

The silence that followed made her skin prickle. This was it, the moment of truth. Jack tapped his putter absently against his palm, his gaze still on Wendy.

Then, just as Wendy was sure she couldn't take another second of strained silence, Michael stepped forward. He placed his hand on the small of her back, and pulled her close. On the outside, they looked like the perfect team, but beneath the surface, Wendy's conflicting emotions made her want to both pull away and lean into his now familiar touch. She smiled through the tension coiling in her stomach, acutely aware of how easily she'd slipped into this performance of partnership, and more disturbingly, how much she enjoyed it.

"What Wendy has outlined is revolutionary," Michael said, seeing his opportunity to seal the deal and addressed Jack directly.

Revolutionary, the word made Wendy squeeze her legs together, her smile widening even as she felt Michael's fingers dance along her back.

"Think of it like golf. Most brands try to play it safe, aiming straight down the fairway." He pantomimed a cautious swing. "But sometimes, the smarter play is to take a calculated risk. Aim for that corner, cut the dogleg." His free hand traced an ambitious trajectory through the air.

"High risk, high reward," Jack said with a smile and a nod.

"Exactly. And we've run the numbers. This approach gives us the highest probability of not just retaining your core consumers but expanding your premium market share by 23% in the first quarter alone." He extended his hand. "All you need to do is say yes and we will have the wheels in motion."

The team exchanged impressed glances. Jack tapped his golf club thoughtfully against the floor.

"I like it," he declared, reaching for Michael's out-stretched hand. "Bold but strategic. Let's move forward. I expect to see our branding everywhere I go when I'm in Nashville next month."

"Impressive work," he said, turning his attention back to Wendy. "You've got the Fireball spirit."

As the Fireball team shook hands and filed out of the room, Wendy gave Michael an excited look, her elation barely contained.

"You were brilliant!" he exclaimed, sweeping her into an exuberant hug that she returned without a second thought. "Absolutely brilliant!"

The praise was like a drug, and she longed for more. This was what she'd always wanted, the recognition for her strategic thinking. Maybe Michael was right. Why did it matter what she'd worn to get here?

As they gathered their materials, Sarah lingered by the doorway. The distribution head who'd been friendly yesterday now regarded Wendy with unmistakable disappointment.

"You know, yesterday I thought you were different. An ally who understood the fight women have in the corporate world." She let her words sink in, watching the look of horror on Wendy's face. "But I see exactly what kind of person you are." Her gaze drifted to Wendy's dress, before she rolled her eyes and left the room.

"Fuck her," Michael said, appearing at her side. "She's no better than you."

"I don't understand what happened. She was nice to me yesterday," Wendy countered, doubt creeping back into her voice.

Michael scoffed. "Please. She's a classic case. I mean, look at her Wendy. She's an Asian woman who contributed nothing to conversation the last two days."

"What does that have to do—"

"It has DEI hire written all over it. She used being a woman and Asian to get where she is, and now she has the nerve to judge you for playing the same game?" He shook his head. "Pure hypocrisy."

Wendy wanted to defend Sarah, but uncertainty clouded her judgment. Had she noticed Sarah speaking yesterday? Had Jack dismissed her input just as he'd initially dismissed Wendy's?

"She's just threatened because you succeeded where she failed," Michael continued, ushering Wendy toward the elevator. "Some women tear others down instead of celebrating their success."

The way he was able to rationalize it so easily gave Wendy the out she needed. Her discomfort subsided as she mulled it over. Wendy was using what she was blessed with to her advantage, how was that any different than Sarah, or anyone else for that matter? Her fingers patted her leg in her familiar four-beat count.

"Maybe..." she murmured, allowing herself to believe it just enough to preserve the exhilaration of their victory. There would be time to second-guess herself later, right now she needed to just accept the win. She was meeting with some of the biggest executives in the world, and she was winning them over.

Electricity continued to course through Wendy's veins as she arrived at the airport gate. Her dress, or as she liked to refer to it, her costume, was packed away in her luggage. A white blouse and a pair of loose-fitting black shorts were what she wore for the journey home. She had to admit, the authority she had felt in the meeting had been a rush, but now she was flying back home, it was time to turn back into 'normal' Wendy. She reached into her pocket, dialing Jon, her hands still shaking as she typed in his number.

"They loved it," she squealed the moment he answered, not able to contain the enthusiasm inside. "I had them eating out of the palm of my hand." She laughed, then cringed at herself, hearing how she was coming across. "Michael says they've already sent over the paperwork. It never happens that fast."

"Wendy, that's great! I knew you had it in you. I bet as soon as they saw the numbers they knew they were making the right choice."

The warmth spreading from Wendy's chest stopped. "The numbers? Jon, my pitch was perfect. They couldn't take their eyes off me... the presentation."

"Oh, I didn't mean... I'm sure you were great." Jon fumbled, unsure of what he said to make her so defensive. "So what's next? The Nashville demo is largely younger adults. Have you considered—"

"Jon!" She didn't mean to yell at him. "I just... I was hoping we could celebrate when I get back. This is a big deal for me."

The line was silent for a moment, as if Jon was processing what she was saying. "Of course," he finally said. "Maybe we can head down to the sportsbook. People watch like you used to."

"I... I'd like that." Wendy glanced across the terminal where Michael was standing at the bar, a bottle of champagne and two glasses in his hand as he handed the bartender his card. He'd spent the entire car ride from the hotel praising Wendy's presentation, calling her a natural, and saying how impressive she was at commanding a room. Now it seemed, he was buying her champagne. A perfect way to celebrate their victory together.

"The flight's about to board. I can't wait to get back to see you," she said already walking toward Michael. "I'll call you when I land."

She hung up just before she reached the bar, a smile already painted on her face. "What's all this?"

"This my dear," he gestured to the seat next to him. "Is how we celebrate the marketing marvel who just convinced Fireball to send us millions of dollars." He handed her a flute, already filled with bubbles floating near the top.

"You're going to make me blush," she laughed accepting the drink, surprised at how much she enjoyed Michael's company.

"Good, you look hot as hell when you blush."

Wendy rolled her eyes, Michael was always so crude. Still, she felt warmth creep up her neck, his constant praise having an effect on her. She wished Jon would be more like that. To think more about her feelings instead of... she shook her head, she shouldn't be comparing them. Jon had plenty of strengths, and she knew his weaknesses before she married him. But it wouldn't hurt if he told her how beautiful she was on occasion.

"To hard work, determination and... embracing your fire," Michael said, clicking his glass to hers. Now she was blushing.

The bubbles of the champagne tickled her throat as she swallowed it in one drink. The warmth she'd felt earlier was back, and magnified. Michael refilled her glass, insisting they finish the bottle before boarding the flight.

When they finally did board, Wendy was all smiles. She took her seat in first class next to the window as Michael pressed in beside her. "Plane is practically empty," Michael observed. "Looks like we have all of first to ourselves."

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain," the speaker crackled to life as the sound of flight attendants slamming overheads shut behind them. "There's a weather system coming in from the west. We expect to see some moderate turbulence along the way. We ask that you keep your seatbelts buckled as we get you safely to Columbus, Ohio."

Wendy's stomach flipped, she hated traveling, turbulence was only going to make it worse. She gripped the arm rest as the plane began its acceleration down the runway, closing her eyes as she felt her stomach drop and the plane begin its ascent.

It took her a second to realize Michael put his hand on top of hers. His thumb caressed her knuckles. "I remember you saying you hated this part." His voice was comforting, in a way that didn't make Wendy want to rip her hand away from him. "Just focus on your breathing. These things practically fly themselves. You'll be back on the ground in no time."

The plane started to level off, and Wendy let out a sigh of relief. Her eyes remained closed, even as the seatbelt sign turned off. Michael squeezed her hand and she was once again back in his hotel room. The room looked different than she remembered, darker, smaller. A strange numbness washed over Wendy as she watched herself on her knees in front of Michael. Only, there was another difference. The person in front of Michael wasn't Wendy, at least not the one from last night. It was the Wendy in the gold dress, the one who knew how to take what she wanted. The one who wasn't afraid to use her sex appeal to close a deal.

The bet was the same, but this time she seemed... excited about the terms. "Sixty seconds", she told him, already reaching for his waist band. His cock sprung free, and Wendy felt the same heat rush through her. She rubbed her thighs together, and her nipples hardened, even though this version of herself didn't seem surprised at all by his size. She just got right to work, wrapping her manicured hand around his shaft with the excitement of a kid at Christmas.

A jolt of turbulence shook the plane, and Wendy's eyes fluttered open for just a moment. The hotel room wavered, dissolving briefly into the reality of first class. She turned her head to Michael, his focus was on his phone, his hand still resting on Wendy's calming her. She squirmed in her chair, her body still hot from what she saw when she closed her eyes. Or maybe it wasn't from that at all. Maybe it was still buzzing from the successful presentation, or all the praise Michael had showered her with on the way to the airport.

The plane steadied and she bit her lip, closing her eyes once again. The hotel room returned, gold-dress Wendy had pulled her chest out, licking her lips, her tongue dangerously close to his enormous mushroom-head shaped tip as he worked it between her breasts. "I bet you want to cum for me. Don't you Michael? You want to cover me with your delicious cum?" He reached down to touch her, but this version of Wendy simply slapped his hand away. "I make the rules here, sweetheart. You're just my sex toy." She pressed her breasts harder into his thick cock. "You don't mind being my little plaything, do you?"

Another bout of turbulence brought Wendy back to the present. The throbbing between her legs was becoming unbearable. What the hell was wrong with her? She should sit up, should watch a movie or start looking at the Nashville numbers. But a voice in the back of her head gave her pause. A voice that sounded exactly like the Wendy in a gold dress telling her she deserved this

moment. Everyone else had their fun in New Orleans, gotten what they wanted. Didn't she deserve some relief as well? Wendy Taylor, the married woman hellbent on proving everyone wrong could return when they got back to Columbus. Right now the Wendy from the presentation was still in charge.

Before she could second-guess herself, she pulled Michael's hand into her lap. Gold dress was calling the shots now, just until they got back to Columbus. Michael's hand stiffened in shock before relaxing, his fingertips warm against the bare skin of knee. The plane's vibrations traveled through her body, doing little to quell the inferno that had been building between her thighs since their victory at Fireball.

Michael turned his head, his gaze meeting Wendy's. His fingers flexed, moving a fraction of an inch under the loose cut of her slacks. His smirk grew wider with each second. Wendy's grip on his wrist tightened, stopping him.

"My rules," she whispered firmly. "You do as I say or I turn away and go to sleep." Her eyes blazed with conviction as her grip loosened slightly. Michael gave an approving nod not wanting to mess up a good thing.

Wendy closed her eyes again, but the scene from last night was gone. She gave a frustrated sigh, the throbbing between her legs growing with each passing second. She slid her hand so it was directly on top of Michaels, moving them both slowly up her leg. Her legs parted on instinct alone, their shared touch resting on the inside of her thigh already feeling the blaze from her sex.

The moment she pressed his fingers to the front of her panties they both let out an audible gasp. She couldn't believe how turned on she was, the front of her underwear felt like mesh as Michael's fat digit applied pressure to it.

"Slow," she whispered as her body slumped further into the seat. She may have been guiding his touch, but Michael had enough wherewithal to know exactly how much pressure to apply.

The plane hit another pocket of turbulence, jostling them in their seats. The motion pressed his fingers more firmly against her, drawing a shuddering breath from deep in her chest. Her eyes were half-lidded as she scanned the cabin. The business travelers in the row behind them were oblivious to what was going on, absorbed in their laptops. A flight attendant had disappeared into the galley. They were effectively alone.

Michael leaned closer, his touch growing bolder. "I knew you'd come around eventually."

"Shut up," she hissed, rocking subtly against his hand. "This isn't about you."

His laugh was low, infuriating. "It never is."

She grabbed his fingers, peeling them from the slick material of her panties. "I can finish myself off on my own. I don't need your help."

With his free hand Michael threw up his arm in surrender. Whatever had gotten into Wendy, he knew his best course of action was to let her have her way... for now.

When she was convinced he was going to follow instructions, she released his fingers, allowing them to press into her folds again. She left her hand on top of his, guiding his touch the way she needed. Circles, not the back-and-forth he kept attempting. Her breath caught as he finally complied, finding the rhythm she needed. The fabric between them created a maddening

barrier, she needed to move it, even though it allowed it her keep the smallest sense of who she was.

"How does it feel to be the one being used?" Wendy's attempted taunt was met with laughter as she adjusted her hips to increase the friction between them.

"Feels pretty damn good to me. Don't you think?" He curled his fingers, making them sweep over her stiff clit.

"Ahhh," Wendy cried out, immediately slapping her right hand over her mouth. The electricity going through her body amplified. Her fingernails dug into the back of Michael's hand trying to regain control.

"You and Jon ever do anything like this? Ever join the mile-high club?"

Hearing Jon's name gave her a moment of clarity. She sat back up in her chair, pushing Michael's hand away.

"I warned you," she huffed her hand staying between her legs. "I can do this myself."

Michael cursed himself under his breath, his gaze never leaving Wendy's hand as her hips started to rock. She was like a lock he couldn't figure out. Every time he thought he had her figured out, she gained her footing and pushed back.

"I'm sorry," he said, nearly choking on the word. It wasn't one he used a lot. "I'll behave. I promise." He placed his hand back on top of hers, timidly like you would a rabid dog.

Wendy held his gaze, but didn't speak. Instead, she bunched her damp panties in her hand, allowing their fingers to slip past the final boundary between them. Their shared gasp was barely audible over the sound of the engines.

The wet heat of her core shocked them both. His digits slid effortlessly through her slickness, his second knuckle disappearing inside her. She bit her lip to stifle a moan, her free hand gripping the armrest thrusting her hips forward.

"Christ," he muttered, his cocky demeanor momentarily replaced by awe. "Your body is amazing. You feel so fucking good."

The praise only added fuel to her fire, intensifying the sensation running through her body. Her hips rolled, gripping his digit and pulling it deeper inside her. The small circles of her lower body going unnoticed to anyone else on the plane.

A soft bell chimed as the seatbelt sign illuminated again. The plane shuddered, hitting another patch of turbulence. Her muscles clenched around him again, her body aching for more than just his fingers.

The pad of his hand pressed against her clit. The callused bumps proving a rough texture for her to grind her swollen nub against.

"Arrrgh fuck," she panted, her nails returning to the back of his hand driving him forward.

"You love this don't you? The forbidden nature of it all. Actually letting go and not worrying about what people think."

Wendy opened her mouth to speak just as Michael curled his fingers hitting her G-spot. "Ahhh, God." She caught her tongue between her teeth, drawing Michael's fingers out slightly. "Sex toys aren't supposed to talk," she said, trying to catch her breath.

"We both know you don't really want that. You may want to be in control, but I think the back and forth is really what gets you going." He pushed his fingers deep inside her again, drawing another grunt from the once innocent wife.

This time, she didn't try to stop him, she welcomed the fullness his touch brought, absentmindedly picturing the cock she held in her hand last night. The size of it, the weight, what would it feel like inside her? Her breath came in short, shallow gasps now, her control slipping with each passing second. Gold dress Wendy was taking over completely, and she didn't even care. She wanted this, needed the release.

"Your body is tired of pretending, Wendy." He felt her body respond to his words, perhaps he'd figured out the lock after all. "Tired of pretending you don't want everyone watching." Her hips ground against his palm. "Tired of acting like you don't know what you want." Her walls continued to pulse around his invading digits. Wet sucking noises were just barely audible over the hum of the engine. "That you didn't absolutely love the performance you put on for Jack. You know exactly what you want, don't you? What you are."

"Mmm fuck. Ugggh God, yessss," she hissed, her heels dug into the floor of the plane, she wished she could take him deeper, harder.

"You're a bad girl, Wendy. A bad girl who knows this is only the beginning. Embrace it Wendy. Let it take control and you'll be the baddest bitch this world has ever seen."

"Ohhh fuck," she was getting louder, she was going to cause a scene, but she didn't care. Michael was right, wasn't he? At least right now, this was exactly what she wanted, what she needed, and it felt mind-numbingly good.

Michael pulled his fingers from her dripping cunt, leaving her writhing in need. "Open." He barely waited for her to comply before he jabbed two fat fingers into her mouth.

Panic raced through Wendy for a second. She wasn't that girl. She rarely took Jon in her mouth, hating the taste of it, and she never tasted herself. Still, whether it was her heightened state of arousal or her newly created alter-ego taking control, she found herself sucking his fingers like her life depended on it. Her tongue bathing each one like it was her favorite flavor of candy.

When he finally withdrew his fingers, she felt dizzy, disoriented, and so turned on. She knew that later, after it was all over, she would hate herself. But right now she didn't care. That was an issue for Columbus Wendy. Right now, Gold dress Wendy needed to cum.

She grabbed his hand, pushing it back between her legs. She kicked her feet wider, anticipating his touch, the way he would stretch her. Her body arched into him the second he made contact. Her petals blooming, welcoming him.

"Yessss. Oh Fuck." Wendy could feel her orgasm approaching, the release she needed. Once she got it, she knew things would go back to normal.

"Your pussy is on fire for me, Wendy. It can't get enough." His digits pressed against her G-spot, his thumb strumming her clit like a guitar.

"Give me your hand, feel how hard you make me."

She knew it was a bad idea. This was about her getting off, not him. He got his last night. Still, the idea of having that power over him drove her arm to his lap. The idea that she could make something so large so excited was almost as erotic as what he was doing to her.

"Do you feel that, Wendy?" he whispered. "Can you feel how hard I am for you?"

Wendy nodded her head, unable to form words as she felt the heat of it against her palm. In this moment it felt even bigger than she remembered, thicker.

"Tell me," he whispered. "How does it feel?"

"Good," she murmured absentmindedly. "Hard.... so fucking hard."

"You did that, you know. You're the one that made it so hard." He started to fuck her with his fingers drawing short, sharp gasps from her. "I can't wait until the first time I get to slide my cock into you." Her walls clamped around him as he spoke. Each word seemingly driving her closer to her release.

"I'm... oh fuck." Wendy's tongue slid over her top lip. "You can't... ugh... fuck me." Wendy was starting to see white flashes at the edge of her vision. The jumping and falling of the airplane as it battled the storm outside was long forgotten as she neared her climax.

She was squeezing Michael's cock through his pants, her other arm outstretched and holding onto her armrest, nearly suspending her body in midair. She pushed her hips down, thrusting back against the onslaught of Michael's hand as if she were riding him. This allowed her to control the tempo, to be the one in control.

"Don't tell me you haven't thought about it. About how good it would feel inside you."

Her grip on his meat tightened, she was imagining it right now, and it felt so fucking good. His fat fingers drove into her again and again. As he slid them deftly over the ridges of her G-spot, she clenched down on them hard, her eyes closing as she focused on the feeling inside her.

So close... so close.

"Don't stop," she whispered through gritted teeth. "Don't stop, I'm so close..."

Michael smiled, his arm staying in place even as the cabin rolled left and right. "Do it," he growled. "Cum for me. Say my name as you cum on my fingers."

"Ohhh fuck, Michael..."

"Again," he growled, lifting his hips to simulate Wendy stroking him.

"Uggh Michael... fuck, don't stop."

She released the arm rest and clutched his arm as she felt the dam release. Her nails dug into the back of his forearm.

"Fuck, Michael. Oh God."

Michael bit into his lower lip to keep from crying out. Wendy's nails continued to dig into his arm, probably breaking the skin, but he didn't care. He had her. His dick pulsed as she said his name, the moment forever etched in his brain. He brought his thumb down on her clit applying hard pressure.

"Fuck Michael. FUCK.... OH GOD!" Wendy was pretty sure people all the way in coach heard her orgasm. Her body jerked violently, as the warmth of her release spread through her entire body. Her pussy tightened around his fingers, holding them in place as if trying to keep them in there forever.

Before her orgasm could subside she felt Michael's weight shift. Her hips were still rocking against his hand when she felt him invade her space. Before she could protest, his lips were on hers, her mouth opening in another moan allowing his tongue to snake into it. Her body responded before her mind could, the thick aggressive nature of his tongue, slightly more familiar than the first time this had happened.

She melted into the kiss, her body arching toward him instinctively. Her hand released his forearm and slid up to his neck, fingers threading through the short hairs at his nape. The kiss deepened, her tongue meeting his with equal hunger. This wasn't the same hesitant conflicted woman from their first kiss, this was gold dress Wendy claiming him with the same hunger he had for her.

Just as she lost herself completely in the sensation, Michael pulled back. His breathing was ragged, pupils dilated with desire. "My turn," he laughed, struggling to get her hand under his waistband.

Wendy blinked, her hand giving his cock a gentle squeeze. "Sorry sweetheart," she grinned, finding her resolve at the last second and pulling away. "You got yours last night. This was all about me."

Michael watched her for a moment, the arousal on his face turning to anger and then humor. "Fine," he whispered, putting his hand on her knee. "At least let me show you how great round two can be."

Wendy rolled her eyes, pushing his hand away. "I'm afraid I'm a one and done kind of girl." She watched some of the cockiness in Michael's face disappear, his shoulders slumped. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to use the ladies room before we land."

In the lavatory, Wendy splashed cold water on her face as she stared at the person in the mirror. Her body hummed, not just from the orgasm she had just experienced, but from how powerful she felt. A smile formed on her lips as Michael's words replayed in her head... *the baddest bitch this world has ever seen*

"Attention passengers. We've begun our initial descent into Columbus. We ask that you return to your seat and remain in your seatbelts until we land."

Wendy lingered a moment longer before the mirror. It was time to return to herself. To being Jon's wife, to the woman determined to be recognized for her mind alone. As the thought formed, she noticed her smile had vanished, replaced by a look of longing.

Executive Privilege Ch. 07

"So, Jon, the last time you were here you talked about Wendy going on an unexpected trip to New Orleans and how that could have brought up some troubling memories from your past." Dr. Carson adjusted his glasses, his brown eyes studied Jon. His weathered hands were folded neatly on his notebook. "How do you think that trip went?"

The burgundy armchair Jon sat in was stiff, and made him reposition himself several times before answering. He knew Dr. Carson would take it as a sign that he was uneasy, but the truth was, he wasn't. Jon and Wendy talked multiple times during the trip, he even tried to get her to go out and enjoy the city, but Wendy was just too focused on work to care about that.

"Honestly," he started, trying to focus his attention on the facts instead of the nervous twitch of his leg. "I think it was great. Wendy said the presentation was a huge success. She even got special recognition by our CEO during our company all hands."

The scribble of Dr. Carson's pencil was all that could be heard as he nodded softly, taking detailed notes. "That's great, Jon. But," he sat his pencil down and turned his attention back to his patient. "I mean on a personal level. How do you think it went for the two of you?"

Jon managed a laugh, more nervous energy. "Oh, it was fine. I mean, she stayed pretty busy and when we talked it was mostly around work." He shifted in the chair again. "I did tell her she should get out and see the city a bit, but she's just so focused on her work."

"I see. When you two spoke, how was the conversation? Was there any tension? Did you argue at all?"

"Not really. I mean," he paused, and turned his attention to the window watching a plane fly by in the distance.

Dr. Carson watched him, making a note of the stall tactic but allowing Jon to take the time he needed in order to process the thought.

"There was one small argument," he finally admitted. "But it was nothing really. Just a miscommunication."

"What kind of miscommunication?"

"After she told me about the meeting and how successful it was I got excited for her. I told her she should start thinking about the analytics of the market and how the demographic is different."

Dr. Carson cocked his eyebrow, he could already tell where this was going. Emotional maturity seemed to be Jon's Achilles Heel as of late. It was something he was determined to work through with Jon.

"She sort of snapped on me and said she just wanted to celebrate."

"That's a perfectly reasonable request, don't you think? How did you respond?"

"Yeah, I guess it is." Jon ran his fingers over his face letting out a long breath. "I told her I thought we should go out and celebrate when she got back."

"That's great, Jon." Dr. Carson smiled, he was making progress. "And did you?"

There was a pregnant pause, and the moment of pride seemed to leave the doctor's face.

"No," Jon finally admitted. "I mean, I meant to, but then everything got so crazy at work."

Dr. Carson set down his pencil entirely. "What happened?"

"After Wendy's promotion, Marcus put her in my office. There wasn't any empty space available, and he said since we had the same title now it would make sense." Jon's fingers found the arm of the chair, drumming a nervous rhythm. "But for that first week she was back, Wendy was in high demand."

"How so?"

"Everyone seemed to be stopping by, running ideas past her. People who'd never given her the time of day before were suddenly asking for her input on their campaigns." Jon's voice carried a note of pride mixed with frustration. "It was incredible to watch, honestly. She'd light up every time someone asked her opinion."

"But?"

"But it was distracting. I fell behind on my own work, had to stay late most nights just to catch up." Jon hung his head, realizing how selfish it sounded. "By the time I got home, we were both exhausted. The celebration dinner kept getting pushed back."

Dr. Carson leaned forward slightly. "And how did Wendy respond to that?"

"She said she understood. That work had to come first." Jon's voice grew quieter. "But I could tell she was disappointed. I could see it in her face."

The facial expression of Dr. Carson never changed, but Jon could tell he was deep in thought. After nearly a whole minute of awkward silence the doctor casually removed his glasses. "I'm proud of you, Jon. You were able to tell she was disappointed, and that's a good first step."

Jon continued to run his fingers over the coarse fabric of the chair, he already knew what the doctor was going to say next.

"Let's change gears," Dr. Carson said, surprising Jon. "We've talked a lot about you since Wendy came back from the New Orleans trip. What about her? How's she been acting?"

This was a test, Jon could see it from a mile away. Dr. Carson had harped on Jon's ability to read the room and understand emotions, he was checking to see if he'd been doing that.

"She's actually been a lot more confident at work, assertive even." Jon couldn't help but smile, There was no way Dr. Carson would be able to tell him he wasn't making that emotional connection. "But then there's little things."

"Such as?"

"Like... it's probably nothing, but Wendy has always been real particular about how she dresses." He ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth as he watched Dr. Carson's expression. "I mean, she has made it a point to try to dress down so she doesn't draw attention. She doesn't want to be known for how she looks." Jon squirmed in his seat. "But since she's been back I've noticed she leaves the top button of her blouse undone. It's dumb I know, but... it's different."

"Do you think maybe she's just more confident now that she's found success?"

"Yeah, I mean maybe."

"And how does that make you feel? Knowing that she has that confidence?" He couldn't help but smile at himself for the old cliché.

"Proud. Impressed, even." Jon straightened up in the chair, puffing his chest out. "She's always been brilliant, but now she's not hiding it anymore."

"So, why are you here?"

The question seemed to take the wind out of Jon's sails.

"Wha... what do you mean?"

"Well," he sat down his notebook and grabbed a glass of water that sat on the table beside him. "You seem to be able to tell when you've done something to upset Wendy and you say you're proud of her. So then why make the appointment?"

"It's just..." Jon sank down in the chair a little more, his hands suddenly clammy. "It's... well I told you about Michael." Dr. Carson nodded. "She went on the trip with him, which is fine. I mean I trust her."

"But?" There was always a but in situations like this.

"But since she's been back, on top of dressing different, she's been defending him." Jon shook his head. "I know how that sounds, I do. But you should have seen her before, she hated the guy. She called him arrogant, inappropriate, said he made her skin crawl." Jon's fingers curled into a fist on his knee. "Yesterday, I mentioned that he'd been particularly demanding lately, working people too hard. She got defensive immediately. Said he was just passionate about excellence, that not everyone understands his management style."

"So, you're jealous. You think she's cheating?" Dr. Carson's tone was calm. They'd talked about this in their first meeting and Jon completely dismissed it. Now, it seemed to be a common theme.

"No. God, no." Jon's response came quick and emphatic. "Actually, according to research from the Journal of Marriage and Family, sixty-three percent of people who engage in extramarital affairs show decreased sexual interest in their primary relationship." He leaned forward slightly. "Wendy's been the complete opposite. She's more... eager. More adventurous. Sometimes she initiates twice in one evening."

Dr. Carson's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly. "And that concerns you?"

"It doesn't concern me, exactly. It's just unexpected." Jon's cheeks flushed slightly. "She's always had a healthy appetite, but this feels different. More... intense."

Dr. Carson made another note in his notebook, but Jon couldn't figure out what it said. "Ok, so if you don't think she's cheating why does it bother you?"

"Because it's such a complete reversal. Six weeks ago, she was ready to file a complaint about him over a holiday party mishap. Now she's defending his character."

Dr. Carson set down his pen, leaning back in his chair. "Jon, isn't it possible that working closely with someone on a successful project might change your perspective on them? Perhaps Wendy saw a different side of Michael during their collaboration."

"I suppose." Jon didn't sound convinced.

"What I'm hearing is a man whose wife has experienced significant professional growth, increased confidence, and renewed passion for their relationship. These are positive changes, yet you're seeing them as a negative." Dr. Carson's voice carried gentle challenge. "Do you remember the cognitive reframing exercises we discussed in your last visit?"

"Yes, and I've been doing them, but-"

"I want you to keep working on them, Jon" Dr. Carson looked at his watch. "You seem to still be looking for problems that aren't really there. Why do you think that is?"

Jon chewed on his lip. This was different, he knew it was, but then hadn't he thought that last time as well? "Because I'm terrified of being blindsided again. With Olivia, I missed all the signs until it was too late."

"But you didn't miss signs with Olivia. That's the problem, Jon. You created them, much like you seem to be doing now. You analyzed her behavior until you convinced yourself of a narrative that wasn't real." Dr. Carson leaned forward. "Are you going to make the same mistake with Wendy?"

"No. I won't." Jon's voice carried conviction, but Dr. Carson could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

"Here's what I want you to do." Dr. Carson picked up his pen, scribbling on a prescription pad. "Stop analyzing. Start trusting. Take Wendy out this weekend, it's not too late for that celebration. Ask her how she's enjoying her new position. Listen to her, connect with her."

He tore off the paper and handed it across the desk. In his scribbled handwriting, it read: *Trust her. Trust yourself. Connect.*

He stood up and extended his hand to Jon, marking the end of their session. "And Jon, stop looking for problems in your marriage. Sometimes the best thing you can do for love is simply let it flourish."

Three weeks had passed since New Orleans, and the intoxicating rush of people coming into the office with congratulatory smiles, meetings with executives, and champagne toasts had slowed to a halt. For three weeks, Wendy was the talk of the office, the rising star with a bright future, then in the blink of an eye, she was just another face.

She knew she should be content. Her promotion was official, she was now an Account Manager with a nice raise. She even got to share an office with Jon, a perk Michael was none too thrilled about when they got back from their trip. She'd overheard him and Marcus arguing about it one night after hours. Michael had insisted the best place for Wendy was in Michael's office where he could properly mentor her. It was a thought that made the hair on her arms stand up. In the end however, Marcus pulled rank, saying Jon was one of the best account managers on the team and Wendy could learn plenty from him. Plus, sharing an office with the director could not only be looked at as favoritism, but would also distract Michael from his duties as a leader.

Those first weeks back from New Orleans had been an adjustment. Michael had tried his usual tactics, putting his hand around her waist when they worked together, late night office visits reviewing documents, comments about her appearance. But she'd maintained her boundaries, kept things professional, just like she said she would.

Since becoming account manager, Wendy was now in charge of four different accounts. Everything from the creative strategy, to the budget and projected revenue. She should have been happy. This was exactly what she wanted. Still, she couldn't help but feel a sense of disappointment as Jon strolled into their shared office with a cup of coffee and a smile.

"How's the Wellness campaign?" He asked, as he set the coffee down on her desk.

"Just putting the finishing touches on the budget," she replied, faking a smile. In truth, she missed the rush of the Fireball account. This account, a regional dog food chain, had a budget of 250 thousand dollars. It wasn't anything to turn her nose up at, but it was peanuts compared to Fireball.

She closed her eyes, a smile forming on her lips as she recalled the way Jack had looked at her when she entered the office that second day in New Orleans. She shifted in her chair, absentmindedly rubbing her thighs together, remembering the way she caught the CFO staring at her before she casually mentioned his wife. That was true power, it was exhilarating. This was...

"Everything okay?" Jon asked, as he opened the blinds in the office to let the morning sun shine through like a spotlight on her most inner thoughts.

"Yeah, fine," Wendy said, sliding her hand over her neck and unbuttoning the top button of her red blouse. "Just... hot."

"Oh, did you um..." Jon lost his train of thought for a second as he watched Wendy pop the button open on her blouse, her silk, black bra beneath coming into view. He swallowed the lump in his throat, remembering Dr. Carson's words and fighting the urge to ask her why she was suddenly more secure about her appearance. "Did you want me to crack a window?"

Before Wendy had a chance to reply, Jon continued. "The pollen index is unusually high for this time of year, and the humidity is 82%, well above normal."

"No, it's fine." She stood up from her desk, her chair pushing against the wall. "I'm going to go refill my water."

Before she could take a step, Michael's laugh boomed down the hall making her pulse spike before she could stop it. "You keep up that sort of initiative, Jenny, and I'm sure I can find a spot for you on the Fireball team." Her fingers balled into a fist, sliding across the heel of her palm *one-two-three-four. One-two-three-four. One...*

The office door burst open without so much as a tap, Michael's presence immediately shifting the energy of the room as his gaze fell on Wendy, or more specifically, the open button of her blouse. His eyes lingered for a moment on the silk beneath.

"Just the couple I was hoping to see," he said with a laugh, before shifting his focus to Jon. "I have a Fireball update."

Wendy's face lit up, and she stood a little straighter, not bothering to fix the button of her blouse. Finally, a chance to return to the big leagues and to show just how much more she had to offer.

"Just got off a call with Jack Peterson." Michael's focus stayed on Jon. "All three Nashville venues have confirmed for the launch in two weeks. All that's left is to run the numbers and confirm our projections match the projections of the venue managers."

Wendy dropped back down into her chair, her fingers clicking away on her keyboard. "No problem, I can—"

"Actually," Michael interrupted, "I was talking to Jon." Wendy felt the air leave her lungs. "Now that the initial hype of the project has died down, we need to shift into more of a team mindset."

The dismissive nature of his comment made Wendy want to scream. After all they'd been through, after proving how capable she was, after New Orleans...

"I can have the preliminary numbers for you by the end of the day," Jon said, oblivious to the storm of emotions going on in Wendy's chest. "Venue managers tend to lowball their numbers, usually by as much as seven percent. I'll make some phone calls."

Wendy watched the exchange with growing frustration, waiting for Michael to outline her role in the process. When the silence stretched too long, she cleared her throat.

"What do you need me to do?"

Michael's attention shifted to her with what looked like mild disinterest. "The creative is locked, Wendy. Jack loved what we developed. Now it's just execution."

"But I can—"

"Listen," Michael's tone grew more authoritative, "now that the preliminary development is finished, Fireball's going to be more of a team effort. Jon can handle the analytical side, you focus on what you do best, the creative elements." His smile seemed perfunctory. "In fact, Jenny, the new hire, has some really great ideas. Maybe you should—"

"I can handle the creative," Wendy said, more defensive than she'd have liked. Heat flooded her cheeks, equal parts embarrassment and anger.

Michael threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Fine fine. I'll let you figure it out." He took a step closer to Wendy, his gut pushing over a jar of pens on her desk, his gaze clearly fixed on her chest. "Unless you just miss spending so much time with me. In which case, I'm sure I can think of something that requires more... hands-on collaboration."

Heat crawled up Wendy's neck, she looked over her shoulder at Jon, she couldn't believe how blatant Michael was being. Fortunately, Jon was already hard at work doing what Michael had asked.

"I'm... I'm fine," Wendy said, her fingers already spinning her wedding ring without realizing it. The ding of an incoming email grabbed her attention. The dog food chain had approved her budget. They were ready to move forward with the campaign.

When Wendy looked back up from her screen, Michael was already gone, disappointment filled her face.

"The team approach makes the most sense," Jon said, sensing her frustration. "The division of labor will mean no one gets burnt out and Fireball will see they have the full force of the company."

Wendy nodded in agreement, but her facial expression went unchanged. Three weeks ago she was the queen of the castle. Jack Peterson was hanging on every word she said, Brian was

talking about her taking his job one day, Michael couldn't get enough of her... she chewed on her lip dismissing that last thought.

She wasn't naive, she knew this was the normal progression for large clients. Jon was right, this made the most sense both for the company and for Fireball, but Wendy couldn't help but feel like she was being sidelined. For a brief second she allowed herself to wonder what Gold Dress Wendy would do in this situation. The thought of it made her nipples harden slightly, poking against the fabric of her bra.

"Plus it means no more late nights at the office. Maybe we can finally have that celebration dinner."

"Yeah," she whispered. "That sounds nice." She stood back up from her desk, a determined look on her face. "I'm going to go refill my water now. I'll be back."

Wendy made her way down the hallway toward the break room, the chatter of the other people in the office drowning out the click of her heels against the tile. As Wendy filled her water bottle she replayed the way Michael had looked at her, had dismissed her. She knew he was challenging her, seeing how far he could push before he broke her. She wouldn't let him win, not now that she'd seen what success looked like. The cold liquid of the water splashed against her skin, snapping her from her thoughts before she overfilled the water bottle completely.

Three weeks ago, executives hung on her every word. Now Jenny, whoever the hell that is, gets to share ideas with Michael about HER campaign. She'd barely been at the company a month, and now she's stealing Michael's attention. There was only one reason why that would happen and Wendy was sure it wasn't because of her creative skills.

"You look... different."

Wendy turned to find Ava leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed and her lips curved into a half smile. The playful banter was no longer there, replaced by something that was still friendly but distant.

"Hey." Wendy straightened, suddenly conscious of her unbuttoned blouse. "How are you?"

"Fine. Busy." Ava's gaze lingered on Wendy's neckline, then traveled back to her face. "What happened to not wanting to be the girl who uses her looks to get ahead?"

Heat colored Wendy's face, but she swallowed the anger down. Ava had a right to be upset with her. "Just trying something new," she said looking toward the floor. "Look, Ava, about what I said."

"No, you were right," she said, flatly. "I should focus on my own career. You clearly know what's best for yours."

"I didn't mean—"

"It's fine, Wendy really." She turned to leave then paused. "But seriously, when you're ready to talk about what's really going on. I'm here... and so is Marcus."

Tears stung the back of Wendy's eyes as she watched her friend disappear down the hallway, leaving her alone with the steady hum of the water cooler and a growing sense of isolation. Part

of her wanted to call out, to confess everything about New Orleans, but she didn't. Besides, what would she say, that Michael had convinced her to dress more appealing for her audience and as a result she landed the deal? Or that she, not Michael, was so wound up by all the success that she let him bring her to orgasm on the plane? No, this was Wendy's cross to bear. She was just playing the same game everyone else had been playing for years as they passed her by. She was using everything at her disposal to her advantage, Ava was just too short-sighted to see it.

She made her way back toward her office, her mind churning with fragments of frustration and wounded pride. As she passed Michael's office, the sound of laughter made her pause. Through the open door she could see Michael sitting behind the desk, his hands behind his head like he was the most important man on earth. In front of him was a smaller frame with shoulder-length brown hair. The woman looked young, maybe early-twenties, with a youthful excitement in her voice when she spoke.

Jenny.

Wendy's stomach dropped as she watched the interaction. Jenny was pointing at something on Michael's screen, her giggle like nails on a chalkboard. As Wendy watched the interaction, she couldn't help but notice that Michael was looking at Jenny's body more than the screen.

While Jenny was certainly younger, she didn't have Wendy's natural beauty. She was more of the traditional girl next-door. Her dark hair and eyes, coupled with her conservative clothing didn't make Wendy understand what Michael had seen in her. Then she saw when Jenny laughed, she reached out and touched Michael's chest, her head thrown back in joy. She watched Michael's smile grow, clearly enjoying the attention of the younger woman.

Before she could second-guess herself, Wendy knocked on the door frame and stepped into the office.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, putting on her best smile as both heads turned toward her. "But I was thinking more about what you said in the office."

Jenny straightened, her expression shifting from enthusiasm to polite confusion. Michael's eyes swept over Wendy, a look of satisfaction on his face.

"What about it?"

Wendy swallowed, her hands shaking slightly as she leaned forward on his desk, allowing her shirt to open a little more than usual. She saw Michael's gaze fix on her chest, and she felt the same rush of power spill over her she'd felt in New Orleans.

"I was hoping to go over a few new strategies for the rollout with you. We've always seemed to... click when running ideas past one another."

"I'm sure we could schedule something," Michael replied, a look of satisfaction growing on his face as he forgot all about Jenny.

"This afternoon, maybe?" She fidgeted slightly. She knew what it sounded like she was suggesting. She just needed to figure out a way to keep him interested while not crossing any more boundaries.

"Unfortunately, my afternoon is packed solid." Michael looked back over at Jenny with a hungry gaze before focusing back on Wendy. "But if it's that important to you, perhaps we could meet tomorrow evening... After hours, when we won't be interrupted."

"That um... that would be perfect," Wendy said, shifting her feet. The sense of uneasiness being replaced by the satisfaction of winning his attention.

Jenny shifted uncomfortably, clearly recognizing her dismissal. "I should probably get back to my desk anyway. Thanks for your time, Michael."

"Of course, Jenny. I'll circle back with you soon."

As Jenny gathered her materials, Wendy couldn't resist letting her hips sway slightly as she moved toward the door. The younger woman shot her a look that was equal parts confusion and irritation, but Wendy just smiled serenely.

"Six o'clock tomorrow then?" Michael called after her. "And Wendy?" He paused meaningfully. "It'd be nice to see the girl I saw in New Orleans. She had... fire."

Wendy nodded, almost on instinct alone. A warmth spread from her core as she replayed the events of New Orleans. She knew she couldn't let that version of herself loose here, but maybe, just maybe, there was a happy medium she could try to find.

As she walked back to her office, Wendy felt a renewed energy. She had a chance to get back into the action for the Fireball campaign. Not only did she successfully remind Michael what she brought to the table, she asserted her dominance over Jenny. She may have been younger, but no one could replace Wendy Taylor when she decided she wanted something.

She knew what Michael thought she was agreeing to, but it wasn't about that at all, she told herself as she sat back down at her desk. This was about strategic positioning, about not letting her star power fade. In New Orleans, she'd gotten results. She got out of her own head and it was an overwhelming success. There was no reason she couldn't channel that confidence again.

"How'd the water run go?" Jon asked, glancing up from his screen.

"Fine. Just ran into a few people." Wendy opened her laptop, already planning what she'd wear tomorrow. Something to push Michael's buttons, but conservative enough that she didn't feel dirty doing it.

Jon's phone buzzed, and his face lit up as he checked the message. "Great news. I managed to get us a reservation at Marcello's for tomorrow night at seven. Figured it was finally time for that celebration dinner we kept postponing."

Wendy's stomach dropped, the celebration. She'd completely forgotten about it. "That's so sweet of you, but..." She turned in her chair, and reached out to touch his arm. "Michael needs me to stay late tomorrow night. Something urgent with the Fireball account."

"Can't it wait until Friday?"

"You know how he is when he wants something." The words carried more weight than she intended, and she quickly looked away. "But maybe we could do something special tonight instead? Head to the casino to people watch and eat burgers?"

Jon's face brightened at the suggestion. "That sounds even better, actually. I wish I'd thought of it."

"Perfect." Wendy leaned over and kissed his cheek, letting her hand linger on his shoulder. "I'll make it worth the wait for that fancy dinner."

As Jon turned back to his computer screen, Wendy felt the warm glow of satisfaction. Tonight she'd be the perfect wife. Tomorrow, she'd remind Michael exactly why she was irreplaceable. Gold dress Wendy would be proud.

Wendy smiled as she slid into the burgundy colored booth at Lucky's Diner, a burger joint in the middle of the casino overlooking the casino floor. The ding of slot machines and muffled conversations filled the space with background noise as Jon slipped into the worn booth across from her. When they were dating they'd spent countless hours here together, people watching and enjoying each other's company as they laughed about statistics and human nature. A warmth washed over Wendy, having not realized how much she'd missed this.

"Remember our third date?" Jon asked, as the waitress dropped off their beer order. "You corrected my probability calculations on that basketball game."

Wendy laughed, shaking her head. "You mean your March Madness bracket where you had Duke winning it all based on their free throw percentages?"

"Hey now, statistical analysis suggested they had the highest probability of winning based on clutch performance metrics." Jon's mock defensiveness made her nearly shoot beer from her nose. "Then you pointed out that half their starting lineup was nursing injuries and their best shooter had a girlfriend who'd just dumped him."

She gave a playful shrug. "Human psychology trumps spreadsheets every time." She needed this more than she realized. All of the politicking at the office was taking a toll on her. It was nice to just be Wendy for a minute. "You looked so shocked when I was right."

"Not shocked. Impressed." His gaze from across the table caused her to bite her lip. "I'd never met anyone like you before." He stood up and slid into the booth next to her, putting his hand in hers. "I still haven't."

Wendy chewed on the inside of her cheek, guilt creeping into her conscious thought for the first time. She hated that she was going behind Jon's back with Michael. It was never her intention, not initially anyway. If it hadn't been for that stupid IOU...

Movement in the crowd caught her eye. A woman in a sequined top that hung way too low was feeding bills into a slot machine.

"Recently promoted middle manager," Jon said with a laugh, falling into their old routine. "Probably celebrating a bonus from work."

"Recently divorced," Wendy countered, relief flooding her system as the sense of guilt washed away. "You can see the tan line where her ring used to be. Probably just finalized and is looking to blow off some steam."

Jon studied the woman more carefully, then nodded. "You're right. She keeps looking around, hoping someone notices her."

"Everyone's hoping someone notices them." Wendy placed her hand under the table, finding Jon's knee. "The question is whether they're brave enough to do what it takes once somebody does."

Their food arrived, a couple of burgers with cheese, lettuce and tomato, no pickles. Jon hated pickles. Just the smell of them made him want to vomit. As they bit into their overly greasy food, Wendy sank deeper into the booth.

"God, why is this so good," she laughed, closing her eyes and savoring the taste.

"Guilty pleasures," Jon said, taking a bite for himself. "Our brains are hardwired to enjoy things we shouldn't. It's the thrill of doing something forbidden that gives you a fresh shot of dopamine."

The words hit closer to home than Wendy realized. That rush he described so matter-of-factly, was the exact feeling she had when she stepped into the conference room in New Orleans. When she made Jack listen to her, when she called out the CFO, on the plane when she used Michael to... Her pulse quickened at the thought of it.

She took another bite, the greasy indulgence suddenly feeling like a pale substitute for the real forbidden pleasures that had been occupying her thoughts.

"I've missed this," she said, stealing one of his fries. "Just us, no late nights or presentations or—"

"Work drama," Jon finished. "I know I've been distracted lately. Between the new projects and everything with your promotion..." He squeezed her hand that was still resting on his thigh. "I'm proud of you, you know. Watching you come into your own like this has been incredible."

"Thanks for this. I know it hasn't been easy on you. The promotion, me going out of town. Now I'm stealing your office."

Jon brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Sharing an office together just means we get to spend more time with each other."

As they watched the casino floor, Wendy felt emboldened by the intimacy of the moment and the beer warming her blood. Her hand slipped beneath the table, fingers trailing along Jon's thigh, higher than before.

"Do you think," she whispered, leaning closer, "anyone's watching us the way we watch them?"

Jon's breath caught as her hand moved higher. "Wendy..." He looked around the crowded restaurant. It didn't seem like anyone was paying them any attention at all, but then he could never be too sure.

"What if they are?" Her fingers traced the outline of his shaft, feeling him respond despite his obvious discomfort. "What if someone's creating a story about us right now? What do you think people would say about us? About me?"

"Seriously," Jon said putting his hand on hers. "People might see."

"It's too dark here for them to see." She kissed his neck. "And even if they did, who cares." Her polished nails pressed against his sac. "Maybe they will think we are newlyweds who can't keep our hands off each other." Her nails traveled up his slacks, feeling the wet spot at his tip.

Jon grabbed her wrist, pulling it away, closing his eyes as his shaft swelled. "Later, when we get home."

But Wendy didn't pull away. The rejection stung more than it should have, awakening something restless and hungry inside her. She was tired of getting rejected, of getting put on the backburner. In New Orleans, she'd felt powerful precisely because men couldn't help but look, couldn't control their reactions to her presence. Here, Jon was asking her to dim that light, to contain what she was beginning to recognize as her most potent asset.

"All this time people watching," she slid her hand back between his legs. "I didn't know you'd be so shy about being watched yourself."

"Well I am." He pulled her hand away again. His thumb stroked her wrist apologetically. "Let me get the check. We can go."

Wendy forced a smile and withdrew her hand, but frustration simmered beneath her composed exterior. She understood his reasoning intellectually, but emotionally, it felt like another request to shrink herself, to be smaller and more manageable.

They returned to people-watching, but the nostalgia from earlier was gone. The sequined woman had moved to a different table, and their game of creating backstories felt hollow. Wendy found herself watching Jon instead, noting how his gaze stayed respectfully away from the cocktail waitresses, how he sat with perfect posture even in a casino booth. How... bored she suddenly felt.

"That guy," Jon said, pointing to a younger-looking kid in sunglasses. But Wendy didn't bother looking. She was still feeling the sting from earlier.

Jon grimaced. Noticing the shift in her demeanor, he retreated into the comfort of his burger. Silence settled between them as they finished their meal, and while Jon signaled for the check, Wendy's thoughts had already escaped the restaurant. Unlike Jon, Michael showed no interest in protecting her from herself. His gaze carried uncomplicated hunger when it fell on her, never asking her to be smaller, to contain herself.

Jon left a generous tip and helped her with her coat, every gesture considerate and caring. Walking to the car, his hand warm at the small of her back, Wendy felt the familiar comfort of being cherished.

But as they drove home through the Columbus night, she couldn't shake the growing realization that being cherished wasn't always what a woman needed. She crossed and uncrossed her legs as she considered her meeting tomorrow with Michael.

The sun was barely up when Wendy stepped from the shower and moved to her closet. Her night with Jon ended pleasantly enough. As promised, when they got back to the house they made love and fell asleep in each other's arms. However, something felt off since the casino. The way Jon had resisted her advances, the way he shied away from the public display of affection bothered her more than it should have.

Her mind was already on today's events and the meeting with Michael later. She wanted something that would be bold, maybe not the gold dress, but something that would grab Michael's attention. Her fingers slid across the cool feeling of the hangers. Her navy dress was

too corporate, the cream-colored blouse too conservative. Her hand paused on a red blouse she'd worn years ago when she and Jon were dating. It was a little darker than "Fireball-red", but the neckline hung a little lower than her usual tops and it gave her the same dangerous feeling as New Orleans. That paired with a black pencil skirt would look perfect.

Walking over to her dresser she remembered the disappointed look on Michael's face as he tried to glance down her shirt. A vicious smile formed on her lips as she opened her dresser drawer where she kept her bras then closed it just as fast. If he wanted a taste of New Orleans Wendy, then that's what she would give him.

"Coffee's rea..." Jon stepped into the bedroom and upon seeing his wife, nearly dropped the two cups onto the floor. "You look... I mean... wow."

The compliment sent an adrenaline rush straight to Wendy's core. That was exactly the type of response she was hoping to elicit. She walked toward Jon, her gaze glued on his as she watched the way her chest moved in the form fitting top, the three buttons still undone. She threw her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek. "You like?" She said with a grin, not waiting for a response as she grabbed her coffee from his hand.

"I um... I mean... yeah. Who wouldn't?" Jon was more than a little uncomfortable with Wendy's dress choice, but his time in therapy had taught him it was best to leave that unsaid. It was like Dr. Carson said, Wendy's getting more comfortable with her body, Jon should be supportive of that.

"I had a great time last night," Jon said, moving the conversation to the kitchen where he grabbed his wallet and keys off the table. "It felt like old times."

"Yeah, it was nice," Wendy replied already feeling the tension from last night returning. How was it possible he didn't see how his repeated rejections last night affected her?

Jon seemed more than happy with her response and headed toward the door, turning off the kitchen light behind him.

They drove separately to the office due to Wendy's late meeting. She used this time to try to clear her head and put together a plan of attack. She knew Michael loved her chest, he'd made it more than obvious every time they were together. That was ultimately why she decided to go braless. She could use a similar tactic that she used in New Orleans. Tease Michael a bit by letting him get a peek, after all it wasn't anything he hadn't seen before, and then get him to agree that they don't need Jenny or anyone else. Wendy was more than capable of handling things on her own.

She also considered the fact that Michael may try to take things further, after all it wouldn't be the first time. She was determined however to set boundaries, she'd already crossed so many before it was time to rein them in. He could look, maybe even a casual touch here and there, but absolutely nothing like New Orleans. This wasn't about using her body to get ahead, she had the brains for success. This was just... strategic presentation. Like wearing the right outfit for a client meeting.

The Buckeye Building was already alive with the hum of every day work as Wendy stepped off the elevator. Her hand went to the one undone button of her blouse, nervously tugging at it as doubt started to creep into her head. Maybe she should button it back, she already felt so exposed without a bra. The heel of her shoes felt too tall, like she might topple over at any

minute. She took a deep breath, gathering her nerves and trying to summon some of the courage of New Orleans to make it through the rest of the day.

"Wendy."

Michael's voice cut through her thoughts like a blade. He stood at the elevator door, coffee mug in hand, taking in her appearance with an appreciation that both made her skin crawl and her blood turn to liquid fire.

"Perfect choice," he said with an approving nod. "And just in time too. I have a status meeting with Brian this morning. Walk with me."

Heat crept up her neck as her legs seemed to move on their own. She'd dressed for exactly this reaction, yet receiving it felt both validating and deeply unsettling. "Brian? I didn't..."

"You wanted to be more involved right?" They stopped just outside Brian's closed office door. "I'm just holding up my end of the bargain."

"Yeah, but my outfit. I mean..."

"About that." Michael stepped closer, invading her personal space like he'd done dozens of times now. "There's just one small adjustment."

Before she could respond, his thick fingers were at her blouse, working the second button free. The silk parted further, revealing the curve of her chest. Cool air rushed into the open space, making Wendy suck in air as her nipples responded shamelessly.

"There," he said, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "Much better. Now let's show Brian what he's been missing."

Wendy stood frozen, caught between mortification and a dark thrill. Last night, Jon had shut her down because people might see, his careful consideration feeling like rejection. Now Michael was boldly undressing her in a public hallway, claiming her body as his to adjust, and the contrast sent conflicting waves of shame and arousal through her system.

Brian was sitting behind his desk looking out his floor-to-ceiling window when Michael and Wendy walked in. He swiveled in his chair as he heard the creak of the door, his smile wide. "Michael, thanks for meeting with me. Marcus had something he had to take care of this morning. I was just hoping to," his gaze landed on Wendy, taking in her new look for the first time. She immediately felt the weight of Brian's stare, her fingers curling into the palms of her hand as she reminded herself to breathe.

"No trouble at all," Michael said, striding into the office like he owned it and taking a seat on the sofa near the window. "I actually just got off the phone with Jack this morning. He's excited about the Nashville launch."

Brian nodded absently, his focus still fractured between Michael's words and the woman standing uncertainly near the door.

"He's heading out there personally next week to observe some of the fanfare," Michael continued smiling as Brian struggled to focus. "I hope you don't mind, I brought Wendy along this morning. She's better with the numbers than I am."

The sound of her name seemed to snap Wendy out of whatever daze she was in and she smiled warmly at Brian, who jumped slightly like a kid getting caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

"The only real hiccup, it's minor really, is the venue projections. They came in a bit underwhelming. They've estimating twenty-five percent below our initial forecasts."

The effect was immediate. Brian's scattered attention snapping to Michael. "Twenty-five percent?" His voice boomed across the office making Wendy take a step backward. "That's not variance, Michael. That's borderline incompetence."

Wendy's fingers ran over the heel of her hand in four quick circles. Did Michael bring her here to make her the fall person?

"If Jack Peterson discovers we've fundamentally miscalculated market penetration—" Brian's words came faster now, his anger building momentum.

"Wendy, please, sit," Michael interjected smoothly, gesturing to the cushion beside him.

Wendy was like a deer in headlights as both men looked at her. Her legs felt like they may give out as she made her way to the sofa, bending down to take a seat next to her boss.

The simple request fractured Brian's building tirade. As Wendy moved across the room, her movement causing the silk to shift and reveal even more of her cleavage. Brian's train of thought derailed completely. His mouth remained open mid-sentence, his previous tirade completely forgotten as he struggled to tear his eyes away from the parting fabric that was now in his direct eyeline.

"Fortunately," Michael continued as if nothing had happened, "our team anticipated venue conservatism. Wendy's been developing alternative projections with Jon."

Still visibly struggling to regain his mental footing, Brian looked to Wendy expectantly, though his gaze kept drifting downward despite his obvious efforts to maintain professional eye contact.

"Venue operators consistently underestimate traffic patterns for experiential events," Wendy began, her confidence returning as she realized the power she had over the CEO. "Jon's demographic modeling shows they're applying pre-pandemic metrics to post-pandemic consumer behavior."

Brian nodded his eyes still unable to meet hers. "Right... behavioral shifts."

"Exactly. That, mixed with everyone still using pre-pandemic numbers, more than accounts for the delta between our projections. Our analysis of comparable launches this year indicates venues typically underproject by fifteen to twenty percent when introducing premium experience elements." She leaned forward slightly resting her hands on her knees, and Brian's eyes flickered downward before he forced them back up. "The twenty-five percent shortfall they're projecting actually translates to realistic performance within seven to ten percent of our original estimates."

"Seven to ten percent," Brian repeated, though his tone suggested he was processing more than just numbers. The mathematical explanation seemed to wash over him while his brain handled the competing demands of business analysis and biological response.

"Well within industry standards for launch variance," Michael interjected, as Wendy settled back in her chair smiling.

Michael wasn't setting her up for the fall at all. He was giving her back the power she thought she'd lost. Her skin tingled with excitement as she watched the CEO go from fury to agreement with just a few simple movements and facts from Wendy.

"Yes," Brian said after a moment. "That's... comprehensive analysis. Strategic thinking."

Michael's satisfaction was evident as he watched the tension drain from the room. "Wendy's market intuition combined with Jon's analytical framework has been invaluable."

"Keep me informed about final confirmations," Brian concluded, his earlier fury completely dissipated. "Excellent work, both of you. You two are becoming quite the dream team."

"I couldn't have done it without Wendy," Michael said reaching over and grabbing her hand. The touch felt natural, earned, and Wendy squeezed his hand in response, oblivious to the pooling fire between her thighs.

Walking back toward their offices, Wendy felt the intoxicating rush of wielding influence through multiple channels simultaneously. She'd neutralized a potential crisis using her intellect while her presence had created the emotional conditions for acceptance. The combination felt more powerful than either element alone, a realization that thrilled her even more than she realized.

The afternoon stretched endlessly as Wendy tried to concentrate on campaign revisions. But work felt mundane after the electric rush of her meeting with Brian. Every routine task paled in comparison to that moment when she'd watched a CEO's composure crumble with a simple lean forward. The ordinary interactions with colleagues felt colorless now, lacking the intoxicating charge of wielding influence through presence alone. She found herself craving that feeling again, watching the clock with a growing sense of anxiety.

At five-thirty, Marcus appeared in their doorway, his jacket slung over his arm. His warm smile encompassed both of them, but his attention lingered on Wendy.

"Heading out early," he said. "Promised the wife I'd actually make it home for dinner tonight."

"Give Sandra my best," Jon said, not looking up from his screen.

Marcus's gaze found Wendy's, and for a moment neither of them said a word. Finally, Marcus broke the silence. "Brian told me about your meeting this morning. Nice job with the numbers."

Wendy sat up a little straighter, validation washing over her even as Marcus's face remained somber. "But Wendy," he continues. "My door's always open if you ever need... to talk. About anything. Work, projects, whatever's on your mind."

Wendy forced a smile, the sense of celebration was gone, replaced with a guilt she didn't want to admit. She wondered if Marcus could see it written all over her face. How was he able to see parts of her that even she didn't seem to see?

"I appreciate that. Really."

He lingered another moment, as if weighing whether to say more, then nodded and disappeared down the hallway. The brief interaction left Wendy feeling exposed, and she glanced at Jon, thankful that he was powering down his computer, oblivious to the whole interaction.

"I'm going to head out too," he said, sliding over to give Wendy a kiss on the cheek. "Good luck in your meeting tonight. I hope it goes well."

"Thanks, I'll get home as soon as I can," she said, accepting his kiss while the guilt she felt from her conversation with Marcus grew.

At five fifty-five, she gathered her presentation materials and made her way down the hallway toward Michael's office. Each step amplified the competing voices in her head: the intoxicating memory of Brian's fractured composure, Marcus's knowing concern, Jon's trusting kiss still warm on her cheek. The rational part of her mind told her this was a mistake, that she should turn around and go home. But another part, a darker part, insisted this was just business. She was simply playing by the same unspoken rules that everyone else had played for decades. She was being strategic, she told herself, using every available asset to secure her professional future.

Michael was standing by his desk when Wendy arrived. Unlike their previous late night meetings, he had all the lights in the office on, the soft hum of the fluorescent light drowning out the outside noise of people leaving for the day. Wendy had done a lap around the floor before arriving, just to see who else was in the building. Like always, it was a ghost town.

"I was starting to think you got cold feet," Michael said, closing the door behind her as she entered. "You were quite the asset earlier. I think that meeting with Brian would have gone completely different if you weren't there."

Wendy couldn't help but smile. Michael needed her, and he was finally starting to see it. "The numbers needed to be explained. So I explained them."

"Oh, I think it was a bit more than that." Michael pushed past her, his fingers dancing across her arm as he fell into the chair beside her. "Don't sell yourself short, Wendy. You had him eating out of the palm of your hand and you know it."

"So, I'm back on Fireball full-time? No more of this team bullshit?" She shocked herself with her words. She was rarely ever that unprofessional, even with someone like Michael.

Michael let loose a boisterous laugh that seemed to rattle the windows. "I put the team together because ever since we got back from New Orleans you seemed content with mediocrity, I was just preparing to pick up your slack."

Wendy opened her mouth to protest, but Michael pressed on.

"But today, you surprised me." His fingers went to the neckline of her blouse. His sausage-like digits tracing her neckline and causing her heart to skip several beats.

The touch sent electricity through her nervous system. She should pull away, establish boundaries, but the combination of his praise and proximity left her paralyzed. His fingers continued its path along her collar, dipping slightly beneath the fabric.

"I've been waiting to see the girl from New Orleans. I'm glad Brian got to see her today too. That's the version of yourself that's going to get noticed. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if you had my job soon."

The world felt like it was spinning. She knew Michael would try something when she came in. She thought she was ready for it. But now... could she really be a director? She knew Michael was just feeding her a line, after all she only just got promoted, but as Michael's meaty fingers

traced lower to the curve of her chest, she felt her body respond. Heat pooled in her core as her nipple harden against the soft fabric.

"That's... I mean... I can be this person." The words left her mouth before she could process what she was saying. She wasn't even sure what she was agreeing to. All she knew for sure, what that today was the best day she'd had in the office in weeks.

"I know you can. You just have to get out of your own way. That's what I'm here for."

Wendy held her breath. Michael's fingers stopped their descent just inches from her aching nipple. His fingers pushed into the soft flesh causing her lips to part in a silent moan that seemed to go unnoticed. Then without warning, he pulled his hand away completely as if nothing had happened.

"Now, for our call with Jack tomorrow." He stood from the chair, making his way back to the other side of the desk, leaving Wendy feeling disoriented. "You need to impress upon him the covid theory. That was smart."

She watched as he clicked through some files. She almost felt disappointed that he'd moved away from her so abruptly, but she dismissed the idea. It was the validation, the understanding that she didn't need a team behind her, that was making her feel this way.

"Come over here, take a look at this," he said, barely turning the screen toward her." Once she was leaning next to him he continued. "These are the projections Brian was talking about. You can see here Nissan Stadium specifically is projecting a decline of over twenty percent. Jack won't be happy about that."

"I talked to Jon about that already this morning. He's pulling data from Bank of America Stadium to show comps. We..." She froze mid-sentence as she felt Michael's hand on her bare leg. His thumb rolled over her calf, causing her eyes to flutter shut for a second before she regained her composure.

"We um, we think that number is actually closer to seven percent and even then when you take into account that Fireball Whiskey is just superior to other brands it will likely be closer to break even."

Michael's paw continued up her leg, and Wendy gripped the side of the desk to keep from falling. She rationalized with herself that Michael was just testing her, just seeing how she would react before committing to giving her more responsibility. Her legs parted on their own as he made his way up the back of her knee.

"And the bars on Broadway? Those are the real money makers." Michael clicked to another slide that showed sales declining at about 12 percent.

"We thought of... um... that as well." Wendy squirmed, her knuckles turning white as she bore down on the desk. Michael's thumb had just slid across the top of her thigh and pressed ever so gently into the wet fabric of her panties.

"Bars have notoriously been under-selling projects but as much as... fuck." His fingers brushed across the fabric again making her knees buckle.

"As much as what?" Michael asked with a laugh before he withdrew his hand completely.

The rational part of her mind told her this was only the beginning. He was going to keep pushing and keep tormenting her until he got what he wanted. But as the contact of his skin left hers she couldn't help but feel a wave of disappointment as the throb between her legs began to grow.

"As much as um... fifteen percent."

"Fifteen percent would be enough to get us from a decent campaign to an overwhelming success."

Wendy watched the wheels turning behind Michael's gaze. He was calculating something more than just market trends and profit margins. She couldn't help but be impressed with his business acumen. As much as he could be a creep, he was even better at his job. She wished she could see what he was thinking now, to understand his next move.

"Alright, you keep this level of... commitment and I'll hold off the team formation as long as I can."

Pride and accomplishment bubbled up in Wendy's chest. She'd done it. She had come into the meeting today with a plan, and she was accomplishing it. Just like she knew she would.

"What about Jenny?" She asked, unable to hide the jealousy in her voice.

"What about her?" His smile was equal parts amusement and satisfaction. Jenny had played her role perfectly and was completely oblivious to it. "I think it's safe to say she's nowhere near your league." His hand found the small of her back, causing Wendy to turn to face him. "That is, assuming you can handle this level of exposure."

Fire shot through her body, not just from his hand but his words. The double meaning wasn't lost on her, yet instead of feeling disgusted by it she felt a sense of pride from all that she'd been able to accomplish.

"Good because this campaign can be awful demanding." The pressure he was applying to the small of her back was gentle but insistent and she found herself leaning forward slightly.

"I'm more than capable of meeting the demands of this campaign, Michael." Her voice was strong, matter-of-fact, as she bent to being eye level with him. "I'm confident I can give Jack what he needs."

She didn't mean for her words to sound as sexual as they did, but the moment they left her mouth she heard it. She bit her lip, unable, or perhaps unwilling, to break eye contact with Michael.

"You do have a way of giving people exactly what they need. It's one of the things I love about you, Wendy. Speaking of which..."

More pressure was added to her back causing Wendy to fall to her knees in front of Michael. Her heart was pounding in her chest as her hands came to rest on his thighs. The sound of Michael's belt buckle being undone echoed in the quiet office like a gunshot.

"And let me guess, you want something like this?" It felt like an out-of-body experience for Wendy as her fingers slid up his legs to the front of his pants. A dark thrill washed over her as she watched Michael's eyes flutter shut a satisfied smile forming on his lips.

"Going forward, I'm part of every phone call with Jack." Her hand wrapped around his boxer-covered length. She still couldn't believe how thick his shaft was. Her face grew a shade redder as Michael's hips lifted just enough to slide his pants down his tree trunk legs.

"Copied on every email. No more talk of team delegation," Wendy continued, her hand pumping his shaft faster.

"Of course," Michael agreed, reaching out to touch her face, but Wendy pulled away.

"I get to make the rules, Michael. Remember?"

Michael let out a dissatisfied grunt. Wendy still thought she was the one pulling the strings. Somehow in her twisted mind, she thought she was in control. A gasp left his lips, as Wendy's grip tightened around his cock, coaxing a bead of pre-cum from the tip.

"Whatever you say, but I think you know I need a deeper level of commitment than this." He leaned back in his chair slightly, allowing Wendy better access to his growing erection.

Gold dress Wendy was taking over, all rational thought escaping her as she made her demands. With her free hand, she undid the remaining buttons on her blouse, then, releasing his manhood, pulled her top completely over her head, bringing her naked chest into view.

"Is this better?" She asked, her hand returning to his cock and bringing it between her breasts.

She'd done this before, she rationalized, it wasn't like she was crossing any new lines. But, as the warmth of his manhood pressed against her smooth skin, she couldn't help but feel her own arousal start to grow.

Michael's breathing grew heavier, his head tilting back slightly. "You're really fucking good at that."

Pride swelled in her chest despite the circumstances.

"But here's the thing," Michael continued, he reached back out brushing his hairy knuckles against her hard nipple. A shudder tore through Wendy as she struggled to back away in time. "Markets change, attitudes shift." He pinched her nipple, smiling as goosebumps formed on her chest. "What was acceptable in the past, doesn't always work in the future."

She bit her lip, her chest pausing at the base of his cock. "What do you mean?"

"I mean repetition gets boring. Pitching the same ideas to clients cause them to second guess you. It displays weakness." His hand left her nipple causing her to sigh. His thumb traced her full lips, pulling the bottom one down slightly. "That's where Jenny came in. She was so eager to please. Showed lots of promise."

The comparison to someone like Jenny made her stomach clench. Michael had already said she wasn't in Wendy's league why would he bring her up now? There was something she was missing, some connection she wasn't able to form because of the onslaught of attention from Michael.

"I've already told you. We don't need Jenny. I'm more than capable..."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," Michael said with a shit-eating grin as his hand tightened in her hair.

"Ahh," Wendy cried out at the sudden aggression, her eyes closing momentarily. Michael used this to his advantage, thrusting his hips forward. Before she could process what was happening the crown of Michael's cock pushed into her mouth.

The invasion only lasted a second before Wendy pulled her head back, but it was enough for her to taste Michael's desire. It wasn't as tangy as she remembered as she subconsciously swallowed the small amount that bathed her tongue. But her eyes blazed with fury from the utter disrespect he had shown.

"What the fuck, Michael?" She wiped her mouth with shaking fingers. "I told you, I don't do that. Not even with Jon."

Michael rolled his eyes, his palm still tangled in Wendy's hair. "Relax, you're acting like I just asked you to commit murder." He massaged her scalp gently and on reflex she nestled into his hand. "I told you, repetition kills deals. You've got to move forward." As he spoke he gently pulled her head back toward his waiting cock.

She placed her hand around his shaft, more as a defensive mechanism than anything else. "I can still get you off. Just... not like that."

"Look, it already happened now. You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube." With his free hand he reached down and mauled her exposed chest. Pinching her nipple in a way he knew she'd grown to like. "You need to start acting like the badass I saw in New Orleans. The one that gets shit done."

He pulled her nipple from her body, causing her to yelp and at the same time press her chest into his hand. "You're not some sheltered little housewife. You're the woman who makes powerful men forget they have power."

Wendy tried to think rationally about this. She told herself before she came to the office today that she wasn't leaving without guarantees. She had that now, but for long? She'd already crossed so many lines, what was one more? The arithmetic of sunk cost ran through her head. She'd already sacrificed so much, she couldn't afford to turn back now.

"I... I want something in writing. Proof that I have final say over who we bring onto this project." Her hand stroked him a little faster. She watched through her peripheral vision as Michael pulled up a new document on screen. His fat fingers hitting the keys on the keyboard with too much force.

She was doing this to secure her future, nothing more. It was a sacrifice she was making to ensure everything she did in the past wasn't done in vain. She was making boss moves. Yet, even as she told herself that she couldn't shake the feeling of sadness. Not because she was doing this behind Jon's back, but because Michael's hands were no longer on her.

"Done," he said with a grin, and bringing his hands back to her hair. A warmth spread through Wendy's body as she leaned forward whispering a silent "I'm sorry" into the air before she extended her tongue and licked the underside of his cock.

Wendy's tongue worked up the length of his shaft with a tentative pace. She could see Michael squirming, growing impatient as she worked up the large member. When she finally reached the head, she swirled her tongue around it like a lolly-pop.

"You're supposed to suck it, not just lick it," Michael said impatiently, fisting her hair and forcing her to take it into her mouth.

Wendy gagged for a moment, her jaw stretching to accommodate him, while her hand held his base.

"Mmmm much better. I knew your lips would feel good wrapped around my dick."

She wanted to be angry at the vulgar language he was using, at the way he was man-handling her, but the truth was it just seemed to turn her on even more. She worked up hand toward her mouth, twisting it the way she'd done to Jon hundreds of times, while she took another inch of him into her mouth.

"Fuck that feels good. You sure you don't normally do this?"

His cock slipped from her mouth with a 'pop' as she looked up at the ogre of a man through her lashes. Her tongue extended again teasing his head. "Just cause I don't normally do it doesn't mean I'm not good at it."

A low chuckle left his mouth as he applied pressure to her head. "Balls".

Wendy wanted to protest, but she was already sinking lower. Her tongue traced circles around the orbs, while the vast amount of hair tickled her throat. Michael couldn't believe what he was witnessing. He expected more of a struggle. After Lisa he wasn't sure he was ever going to have this opportunity again. Now, it seemed like he had struck gold.

He pressed her head forward even more. Wendy got the hint and opened her mouth taking one of his nuts into her mouth and sucking gently. Her hand continued to pump his shaft enthusiastically as she switched to the other testicle.

Her free hand found the inside of her thigh. Despite the degrading manner she found herself in, her pussy was on fire and she found herself wishing Michael would touch her.

She rose back up on her knees, her hand making contact with her soaked panties. "Mmmm fuck," she moaned happily taking his cock back into her mouth.

"You look so good like that. So fucking powerful." As he spoke, Wendy took more of his cock into her throat. Her index finger was lightly rubbing her clit, making the fire in her core grow to an untamable blaze.

Something about Michael's words rang true. She did feel powerful. Not only was she getting exactly what she wanted from a business perspective, but something about the way she was able to handle a cock of this size made her feel more alive. She wanted to see how much of it she could take... if she could make him cum.

"It's so fucking big. So... hard." Spit ran down her chin as she fought to catch her breath. She remembered how much he liked dirty talk from New Orleans. She pumped him faster, her grip getting tighter. "I can see why you're so confident. Guess what they say about big dick energy is true."

Wendy dipped back down, smiling as more than half his cock disappeared into her throat. She took his balls into her hand, massaging them with the same force she was applying to her clit.

"You're doing a good job. I know you're not used to handling something so large."

The dig was supposed to hurt Wendy, but she was beyond caring. Her fingers worked inside her panties, stuffing two of them deep inside her core while she concentrated on not choking. Even with so much of his shaft in her mouth there was still enough room for her to pump his base with her hand.

"Mmmm fuck. Just like that, Wendy. I'm going to cum soon."

"Oh fuck," she gasped, pulling her mouth off. "Not in my mouth. You have to pull out."

"Sure, sure," he laughed, guiding her head back into his lap. "You love that don't you. You love sucking my big dick, while you play with yourself."

Wendy didn't respond, she couldn't. Her eyes were closed, her orgasm starting to build. She ran her tongue along the shaft in her mouth, opening and closing her mouth around it like she was making out with it.

"That's it baby. Cum for me. Cum for Michael while you suck that cock." He thrust his hips forward, causing Wendy to panic slightly as her breathing was cut off. He only held her there a second, before relaxing his hips and moaning in delight as Wendy's lips worked his shaft.

Glug Glug Glug, the sounds of her nearly choking filled the room, accompanied by the wet squishy sounds of her fingers in her pussy. The orchestra of sex filled the room just as she felt Michael's cock start to swell.

Feeling his impending release brought Wendy over the edge. She pulled her mouth from his manhood right at the last second, the first jet of cum plastering her face. At the same time, her thighs clamped around her hand, her head falling limply on his lap.

"Fuck, oh God. Yessss," she hissed, as she watched the second rocket shoot from the tip of his cock into the air and land on her cheek. She knew she should move, but her body was still convulsing. Her sex twitched around her fingers as she laid in his lap another glob landing on her chin.

"Arrgh, Fuck!" He roared, replacing her mouth with his hand as he worked rope after rope onto the beautiful woman's face.

The shock of the entire situation seemed to string her orgasm out as her knees buckled and she continued to grind into her hand. She struggled to catch her breath as she watched the once impossibly hard cock start to deflate before coming to a rest on his thigh, inches from her mouth.

She fought the urge to lick her lips, her orgasm finally subsided, as a glob of white goo dripped past the corner of her mouth.

The satisfaction of her climax began to fade, reality seeping back in like cold water. Wendy blinked, Michael's cum cooling on her skin as awareness returned. What had she just done? Her fingers trembled as she pushed herself up from his lap, the movement suddenly awkward and ungraceful.

"Jesus," she whispered, the weight of her actions crashing down. Her hand flew to her face, feeling the sticky evidence of her compromise. She looked around frantically for tissues, for anything to clean herself with.

Michael leaned back in his chair, tucking himself away. "That document's already in your inbox," he said, his fingers finding her bare skin under her dress. "As promised."

Wendy pushed his hand away. "No more," she said, but it sounded more like a request than a statement.

"Very well. I just thought you may—"

"Wendy?"

Ava's voice from the doorway caused them both to freeze. How long had she been there? What all did she see?

Wendy's heart stopped as she met her friend's wide-eyed stare. Her fingers spun her wedding ring frantically, the four-count pattern accelerating with her panic. One-two-three-four-one-two-three-four.

The expression on Ava's face told her everything she needed to know.

Executive Privilege Ch. 8

"Wendy?"

Ava's voice from the doorway caused them both to freeze. How long had she been there? What all did she see?

Wendy's heart stopped as she met her friend's wide-eyed stare. Her fingers shot to her wedding ring in a panic, feeling the sticky substance on her fingers slide over the ring. She pulled her hand away like it had burned her, rubbing the front of her dress in four quick counts instead.

The expression on Ava's face told her everything she needed to know. Everything she'd worked for was about to go up in flames. Her career, her friendship, her marriage. Oh God, Jon. How could she do this to him?

Michael leaned back in his chair, the creak echoing through the room like a sonic boom. He tucked himself back into his pants with zero shame. Even with everything that was happening Wendy couldn't help but wonder how he got it all to fit. His lips curved into that satisfied smirk as he zipped up his pants. The casual arrogance of it made Wendy's stomach twist. How was he not freaking out? His career was about to go up in flames as well.

"Fuck," she breathed, scrambling to her feet. She searched frantically for her red blouse, covering her chest with her arms. She reached down, finding the fabric sticking out just under Michael's desk. She clutched the fabric closed across her chest, but there was no hiding what Ava had walked in on. Not with Michael's evidence still cooling on her skin.

"I um..." Ava's voice cracked. "Don't stop on my account. I was just leaving." Her tone turned cold as she spun around and pushed out the door.

Wendy gave a panicked look to Michael. His expression remained unchanged, his arms behind his head, pushing it forward in a way that made it look like he had six chins. "Ugh," Wendy grunted in disgust, both at herself and Michael's lack of concern, before pushing past his desk. "Ava, wait—"

Ava was already out the door, before Wendy could catch her. She slipped out behind her, attempting to button her blouse with one hand, catching her friend in the hallway.

"Don't." Ava held up a hand without turning around. "I just... I can't."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly." Ava spun to face her. Tears welled in her eyes, and her nostrils flared. Wendy had never seen her friend look so angry. So... disgusted. "I told you. I fucking told you what he was," spit flew from Ava's mouth, unable to contain her emotions. "and you still... Jesus Christ, Wendy."

Each word was like venom in Wendy's veins. Ava was saying the same thing she had said to herself, deep down, she knew her friend was right. But Ava didn't understand the pressure she was under. The weight of the New Orleans trip, this project as a whole. They'd almost lost the Fireball account. Her first big project and she nearly blew it. Her fingers found the last button, her hands shaking so badly she could barely work it through the hole. "It's not what it looked like."

"Oh good, because it looked like you had Michael's dick in your mouth."

Heat flooded Wendy's face. She stared at her feet, unable to look her friend in the eye.

"In fact, you still have a little there on your cheek. You may want to clean that off before you go home. You know... to your husband."

Wendy's breath caught, her hand instinctively moved to her cheek. Her stomach tightened, bile filling her throat as she ran her fingers across the white sticky evidence of her betrayal and what she'd become. Her legs gave out and she fell onto the cool tile floor, arms resting on her knees as she buried her head in them.

"Oh God," she sobbed, no longer able to stifle the cries from echoing down the empty hallway. "I'm so... Jon's going to... Oh God, how do I explain this to Jon?" She barely got the words out. Each one rolling into the next as she tried and failed to control her breathing.

The fury in Ava melted away slowly as she watched her friend crumble onto the floor. This must have been what it was like for Lisa. That moment of cold, hard reality before it all came crashing down. She knelt beside her friend, gripping her shoulder in a show of solidarity.

"I know this wasn't completely your fault," she whispered. "But, let me help you. You've got to tell Marcus what's going on. We can still make this right."

"It was all because of that stupid Christmas party," Wendy choked out, her voice thick with tears. "That stupid IOU that you..." she stopped herself. "When the gifts got mixed up Michael used it to tease me and then..."

"Wendy, how long has this been going on?"

"New Orleans." She had to open her eyes, afraid of how her body would react if she relived those thoughts. "But it's been building for awhile." Wendy wiped her eyes. "I just got so caught up in the moment, the power."

Ava nodded, unsure of how to respond. It made sense. There was no way someone like Michael could land a girl like Wendy, or even Lisa for that matter. He must have used his position for leverage, promised them the world. Suddenly Wendy's promotion made more sense.

"That's the look I was trying to avoid," Wendy said quietly.

"What look?"

"The one that says I didn't earn my promotion. That I'm only here because... fuck" She pressed her fingers into the palm of her hand until it hurt. "You should have seen it, Ava. When I walked into that conference room in New Orleans no one could take their eyes off me. I had them eating out of the palm of my hand." She paused, looking up at Ava through glassy eyes. "I know what you're thinking. That Michael had me dress like some whore. Some bimbo to parade around so he could make a sale."

"Well, didn't he?"

Wendy licked her lips, the tingle of something other than anger and embarrassment building inside her. "No," she said flatly. "I held all the cards. I made the pitch. For twenty minutes, I wasn't just some marketing specialist they were humoring. I was the one calling the shots."

"He lied to you, Wendy." Ava rubbed her arm, trying to offer comfort. "Michael was always the one calling the shots. He just made you think you had power."

She didn't understand. She couldn't. Ava had never had that type of responsibility. "You don't get it," she insisted. "Jack loved my presentation. He was engaged, he asked questions. He saw me as an equal."

Ava's expression tightened. "So that's it then? All of this, debasing yourself, that's all in the name of feeling important?"

Wendy shook her head. She still didn't see it. She was never given the chance to lead anything more than a social media campaign. "You know what Jon said to me when I told him I nailed the Fireball presentation?"

Ava raised an eyebrow.

"He wanted to help me with the statistical analysis. He couldn't even be bothered to tell me good job."

"Jon's just—"

"I know what Jon is," Wendy snapped before taking a break to calm herself. "He's loving, and smart, and supportive. But he also treats me like I'm some fragile doll that will break." There was a pause in the conversation, a silence that seemed to widen the gap between them. "Michael doesn't do that. He may be crude and harsh but he also hands me million-dollar campaigns with the expectation to deliver."

"Because he's using you." Ava's voice cracked with frustration.

"Maybe he is," she finally admitted, pressing her palms into her hands. "Or maybe I'm using him. Maybe I'm taking exactly what I want and finally playing the same game as everyone else."

"You can't be serious." Ava's voice rose, and she got to her feet. "You sound just like him you know."

Wendy didn't answer, but a strange sense of pride shot through her body.

"So what happens when Jon finds out? When all of this comes out and you lose whatever false sense of importance you think you have?"

"I... I honestly hadn't considered that," Wendy answered honestly. "I'd rather that not happen, but I guess that isn't an option anymore, is it?"

"You have until tomorrow morning." Ava's voice was final. "If you don't tell him, I will."

"Ava please." Panic started to creep back into Wendy's voice. "I thought we were friends."

"We are. That's why I'm doing this." Ava turned and walked down the hallway.

Wendy watched her friend disappear around the corner, leaving her alone in the hallway with the weight of tomorrow's deadline pressing down on her chest. Why couldn't she just trust Wendy to do what she knew was best? Why was she so concerned with Wendy's professional success all of the sudden?

The car ride home was torture for Wendy. Every stoplight gave her time to reflect on her decisions. How they not only affected her, but Jon. The tears had stopped flowing by the time she made it into her neighborhood, replaced by anger, first targeted at Michael, then Ava, and

finally, herself. She was finally getting recognition, making a name for herself at the company, only to have it all come crashing down before she really had a chance to prove just how far she could go.

She pulled into the driveway, her headlights shining into the kitchen window where Jon busied himself with what she assumed was dinner. She took a breath, this wasn't about her, or even her career. This was about Jon and finding a way to break the news to him that wouldn't completely crush him. She didn't mean for him to get caught up in this. This wasn't supposed to happen. She thought she could keep her two lives separate. Gold dress Wendy was the one calling the shots in the office. She was the master manipulator, the one using her sexuality to advance her career. All she wanted to do was come home and hide that persona away in the deepest, darkest, corner of her soul. To be the loving wife Jon deserved.

Dread stirred in her stomach, her fingers twirling her wedding ring unconsciously. The anger was back, pressing on her shoulders as she got out of the car. Why should she have to choose between the version of herself that felt powerful and the man she loved?

"You're home early," Jon called from the kitchen, a dish towel slung over his shoulder. "Dinner still has another ten minutes or so. How was the meeting?"

"It was um... productive," her hand twitched with anxious energy. "I got him to agree to keep me on point for the Fireball stuff. No more of this team stuff."

Jon's shoulders sagged. It was only then she realized even that would have an effect on him. How could she be so selfish? "I mean... I'll still use you for the numbers and stuff, babe. I just... this project is important to me you know? It's my baby."

She walked into the kitchen wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head on his muscular back. She wished she could lock in this instant forever, before she blew it all up. "What's all this about, anyway?"

"I just want to show you how proud of you I am." The comment took the breath from Wendy, guilt starting to strangle her. "I know we just went out to Lucky's, but I thought I'd make the porkchops you like."

Wendy chewed on her bottom lip, taking a step back. "Listen, about my meeting with Michael. There's something—"

"Actually," he interrupted, flipping the meat, the sound of grease sizzling filled the air. "before we get into anything heavy, can we just... eat first? I feel like we haven't had a normal evening together in weeks."

The request was reasonable, even sweet. But it also meant delaying the inevitable conversation that would end everything. She made her way to the fridge, pulling out the wine. She took a large sip, allowing the alcohol burn away some of her guilt.

"Of course."

Dinner was delicious, and it helped calm Wendy's nerves. She took another drink of wine, placing her hand on Jon's. "I love you. You know that, right?"

Jon looked at her, his mind working overtime to figure out what had gotten into his wife. He took off his glasses, making him look at least ten years younger. "Of course. Why would you ask that?"

"I just..." she took the last drink of wine, pushing her chair out from behind her. "I haven't gotten the chance to show you just how much I appreciate you." She bit her lip seductively, her fingers sliding up Jon's bare arm. If Ava was going to blow up her marriage she could at least have one final act of love and intimacy with her husband.

She stood behind him, running her nails across his chest, her lips on his neck. "I need to take a quick shower," she whispered, her teeth grazing his ear. "But in fifteen minutes I expect you in my bed, naked and ready." She pushed her hands lower on his abdomen causing him to nearly jump from his chair.

"You'll get no arguments from me," he said, laughing as he turned his head to kiss her.

Wendy nearly fell to the floor she pulled back so fast, leaving Jon a little hurt and confused. "I just... garlic breath. I want tonight to be sexy. Let me brush my teeth first."

"Fifteen minutes," he said, a look of contentment on his face, despite the fact that Wendy refused his kiss.

In the shower, Wendy spent extra time scrubbing her face. She'd done her best to wipe off the evidence in the bathroom at work, but now she was worried about smelling different. She wanted every part of tonight to be about Jon's enjoyment, not degrading him by making him smell another man's...

Once out, she brushed her teeth twice, then applied the lotion that Jon loved. By the time she was through there was no trace of the unspeakable things that she... that gold dress Wendy, had done. If this was going to be their last night together she was going to make it perfect. She owed Jon that much.

When she emerged from the bathroom twenty minutes later, wearing nothing but a towel and a smile, she found Jon sprawled across their bed wearing only a pair of boxers, snoring softly.

For a moment, she just stared at him. Really? She'd practically thrown herself at him, promised him a night to remember, and he'd fallen asleep on her?

Resentment flared in her chest as she dropped her towel for an audience of zero. She'd spent twenty minutes preparing herself like some kind of offering, and for what? So Jon could pass out fully clothed? When had she become so easy to ignore?

As she walked toward her dresser to find a nightgown, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her chest stood high and proud, defying gravity despite its size. The whisper in the back of her mind came despite herself. This was exactly the kind of body that made men like Jack and Brian lose their train of thought. Real men with power would never let such perfection go to waste. Her freshly shaved sex glistened in the reflection, now wasted because Jon had taken her for granted.

Wendy shook her head, trying to dismiss the intrusive thoughts, but they persisted. If Michael had been here, there was no doubt he'd be eagerly waiting for her to appear from the bathroom, his impressive cock hanging free, daring her to step closer and—

"No!," she cried out a little too loud. Jon stirred on the bed, but didn't wake up. Christ, what was wrong with her? She was standing naked in her bedroom fantasizing about another man while her husband slept ten feet away. This wasn't about Michael. Jon had made her favorite dinner, opened wine, tried to celebrate her success. He was tired. It was late. She was being unfair.

Besides, wasn't this better? Now she had until morning to figure out how to tell him. Time to prepare, to find the right words. Maybe fate was giving her one more night of normalcy before everything fell apart.

She pulled on her nightgown and slipped into bed beside him, laying her head on his chest and listening to the soft patter of his heart as she drifted off to sleep. Tomorrow she would confess everything. Tomorrow she would face the consequences.

But, at least for now, she got one more night to sleep in the same bed as her husband.

Wendy woke up the next morning to an empty bed. For a moment, her heart rate spiked and she feared Jon had somehow already found out and left. However, the smell of fresh coffee floating in from the kitchen brought her back to reality. Jon had simply woken up before her. She took a deep breath, letting her legs hang off the bed, before heading toward the kitchen.

Today was the day.

When she got there, Jon was already sitting at the table, sipping his coffee, or rather his creamer with a hint of coffee, while scrolling through his phone.

"Sorry about last night," he said, as she padded toward the counter. "I guess the wine hit me harder than I thought."

"It's fine," she said, reaching for a cup. He was always so quick to apologize. Even when he didn't fully understand what he did wrong he would say how sorry he was. He really was a good man who didn't deserve any of this. "But we should probably talk. We never got a chance last night." She took a deep breath. "Jon, Michael... No, I mean, I—"

He squinted, confused about where exactly this was going. His gaze went back to his phone as it buzzed softly in his hand. "Oh my God!"

Wendy gave him a confused look, setting her coffee down at the table next to him.

"Marcus and Ava..." He paused, continuing to read the email. "Is this what you were trying to tell me?"

The color drained from Wendy's face. Had Ava already reached out? Did she go to Marcus last night and now he was contacting Jon? She grabbed his forearm, tears already beginning to well in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Jon. I truly am. I got so caught up with the Fireball stuff and then last night I saw Ava and..."

Brian sat behind his desk, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at the anonymous email still open on his monitor. He'd gotten it just before midnight, and hadn't slept since. No signature, no explanation, just a subject line that read: *Do all of your execs act like this*. A high definition video was attached to it, and it was enough to ruin his company.

He hadn't bothered drinking his coffee, he still felt sick to his stomach. Betrayal wasn't something he took lightly, and that's how he felt right now, betrayed.

The soft ding of the elevator made his jaw clench. Right on time.

Marcus entered first, his smile faltering when he saw Brian's expression. Ava followed, her face pale in the harsh morning light. She didn't have the same smile as Marcus, probably wasn't much of a morning person. But after this conversation, she'd be wide awake.

"Sit down. Both of you."

His tone was serious, much like the allegations. He'd fired plenty of people in his time in the corporate world, but never someone he'd felt so close to. Marcus was his friend, his right hand for nearly six years. He clenched his fist under his desk. Their friendship actually made this whole thing worse. He'd told Marcus to be careful, had seen the signs himself. Why didn't he just listen before it had to come to this?

Marcus settled into the leather chair, his face etched with confusion. "Brian, what's this about? The email said urgent—"

"This." Brian spun his monitor around, the video frozen on its first frame. Marcus leaning close, Ava's hand on his arm, her eyes closed as he whispered something. "I received this last night. Anonymous sender."

The color drained from Marcus's face. Ava's hands shot to her mouth in shock.

"That's not..." Marcus started, then stopped. His eyes darted between the screen and Brian's face, reading the verdict already written there. "Brian, you know me. You know I would never—"

"No. What I know," Brian's voice cut through the room like a blade, "is that I warned you about appearances. About perception." He gestured toward the monitor. "What I know is that someone felt compelled to document this and send it to me anonymously. Which means others are noticing. Others are talking. If word gets out, we lose contracts. We lose credibility. We lose everything."

Ava shot forward in her chair, desperation cracking her voice. "This isn't what it looks like! Mi—"

"Stop." Brian's voice thundered off the walls, making Ava cower. "I don't want to hear explanations. I don't want to hear excuses. I want to understand how you thought this was going to play out. You put this company at risk."

"Those pictures are being taken out of context. Christ, Brian, you don't actually think—"

"It doesn't matter what I think," he slammed his hand on the desk, harder than he intended. "I told you, perception is reality. And the perception is the two of you are having an affair, right under my nose. Right when he signed one of our biggest contracts."

"We were trying to help," Ava whispered, her last attempt at salvaging the wreckage. "There was a—"

"I don't care." Brian shook his head in disapproval. "Whatever your intentions, the optics are damning. Ohio is an at-will employment state. That gives me the right to terminate anyone I see fit."

Marcus lifted his head, suddenly realizing this was much more than just a reprimand. "My family, Brian. Sandra and the kids. Please."

Brian nodded, he didn't want to put Marcus's family through that. He was right, they didn't deserve it. He and Marcus had been through so much together, he hated that this was how it had to end. But, it had to end.

"I'll provide two months severance," he said, his voice softening slightly. "Good references for future employment. But there's a condition."

Both of them looked up with tears in their eyes.

"I want this to go away quietly. If I hear either of you have contacted anyone, other employees, clients. If I get so much as a whiff of rumors or retaliation, it disappears." His gaze moved between the two of them, watching as they slowly nodded. "I'm serious about this. We don't need any drama right now."

Ava's tears finally spilled over, silent tracks down her cheeks that she wiped away with angry swipes. Marcus nodded slowly, understanding the cage Brian had just built around them.

"Can you at least let us resign so we have some shred of dignity?" Marcus was trying to be reasonable. He knew Brian had already made his decision, there was no use arguing with him, the best he could hope for was a compromise.

"I'm afraid not. I need whoever sent this to know it's being dealt with, swiftly and deceptively."

"But aren't you curious about who sent it?" Ava said, getting her emotions in check. "Because I think—"

"No," Brian practically yelled, he was losing his patience. "What I want is for this to be done, forgotten about, without any more drama."

Marcus stood, Brian wasn't going to budge and the longer this went on the worse it was going to get. "I understand."

Ava followed, clutching her purse with white knuckles. As they reached the door, Brian called out, his voice softer, the emotion of the meeting having taken a toll. "For what it's worth, I wish it hadn't come to this."

Marcus turned back, his eyes glassy. "So do I."

Jon ran his hands through his hair. He couldn't believe this. "You saw the two of them together last night? That's what you were trying to tell me?" The words were flying from his mouth now, not allowing Wendy time to interject. "Jesus, Wendy, I'm so sorry you had to see that. You had no idea before?"

The coffee mug slipped from Wendy's grasp, spilling across the kitchen table. "... what?" She couldn't understand what Jon was saying. It almost sounded like he thought Ava and Marcus were having an affair, but that didn't make sense, did it? She could see Jon's lips moving, but she couldn't hear anything past the roaring in her ears.

"It's going to be okay," she finally heard, as Jon stood and wrapped his arms around her. "I just... I can't believe it. I know 41 percent of marriages end in divorce, but I just never thought Marcus was the type. Poor Sandra."

Wendy shook against Jon's chest. She still had no idea what was going on, it was all happening too fast to process. She waited until he left the room, sopping paper towels in his hand, to grab her phone and check her email. What she found left her breathless and shaking.

_It has come to my attention that an inappropriate relationship has formed between one of our executives and an employee. As you all know, I have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to this type of behavior. I had met with the executive prior and warned them of the consequences of their behavior. Unfortunately, it's come to my attention that the relationship continued despite my warning and I had no choice but to terminate all parties involved.

_Effective immediately, Marcus Campbell and Ava Wright are no longer employees of The Buckeye Branding Company.

_Going forward, Michael Reynolds will be the new Vice President of Operations. Michael, along with Wendy Taylor, has done a masterful job leading the largest marketing campaign in company history. I have no doubt he will continue to succeed and grow in his new role.

_There will be a company party at the Marriott Friday evening to celebrate Michael's promotion and allow the team time to get over the shock of this announcement.

Brian

Wendy blinked, reading the email for a second and then a third time. Marcus and Ava had been terminated. Michael had been promoted? "What did he do?" she whispered to herself, knowing that somehow Michael had a hand in it. Not only did he get them fired, but then he got himself promoted on top of it?

She wanted to be disgusted. Michael had manipulated everyone, cost people their jobs, their lives. Ava would lose her apartment, her husband, probably have to move back with her parents. Marcus had a family - Sandra, the kids. How would they explain this to their children?

The guilt twisted in her stomach like a knife, but beneath it... relief. Shameful, terrible relief that made her hate herself even as she felt it. With Ava gone, she'd have no way to tell Jon what she saw. Even if she reached out to him, Jon would never believe her now.

Wendy pressed her palms against her eyes, trying to push away the thought. These were her friends, or had been. They didn't deserve this. But the anxiety she'd felt for the last twelve hours was slowly fading away, replaced by a warmth that she was starting to get far too familiar with.

She stood from the table, her breathing back under control. She needed to get ready for work.

Wendy stared out the car window, watching trees pass by in a blur of lights as she tried to process the last twelve hours of her life. After reading the email from Brian for a fourth time, she'd decided to wear a cream colored maxi dress that brushed the floor as she walked. It was more in line with the more conservative version of herself, and that was exactly what she needed to portray walking into the office today knowing the rumor mill would be in full effect. However, there was a voice that she couldn't quiet. One that gave her a rush, and made her keep the top two buttons of the dress unfastened. It was far from the brazen display gold dress Wendy was used to, but it was a needed compromise.

"You look like you're on another planet," Jon said, breaking her thought and putting his hand on her knee. She placed her hand on top of his, the diamond of her ring catching the light and her

attention. She turned her hand from side to side examining it to ensure she had properly scrubbed off any hint of last night.

Jon saw the way she was examining her ring and cast her a reassuring smile. "It's going to be okay. We're not them."

"I... yeah, I know." She squeezed his hand, letting out a silent sigh as she realized why he was saying that. "It's just... I still can't believe it." It wasn't a lie, they just weren't quite talking about the same thing.

"Me too. I sent Marcus a text. I thought he could—"

"You what?" Wendy nearly ripped her hand away, her pulse skyrocketing.

"I sent Marcus a text. I know he messed up, but he's been a mentor to me for so long. I want him to know he still has a friend."

"Jon, you can't," she said, before she could really process what she was saying. "People who were caught cheating will say anything to save face. You never know what they'll make up." It suddenly felt too hot in the car, she was suffocating. She cracked the car window and an old fast food napkin took flight from the center console and escaped out the window.

"I guess you're right," Jon said, after taking a minute to think about it. "I hadn't considered that. You're always so much better at these social situations than I am."

She gave a nervous laugh, setting her head back on the seat as she tried not to hyperventilate.

As expected, The Buckeye Building was in full gossip mode as Wendy stepped off the elevator. Clusters of employees were gathered around cubicles, all gravitating toward their given cliques. All talking in hushed tones no doubt about the latest bombshell email. She tried her best to make it through the whispers, but it was impossible not to hear clipped conversations.

"—Marcus didn't seem the type—"

"—Was she really so desperate to advance that—"

"—I'm not surprised, did you see the two of them—"

Each step she took felt like she was getting closer to her own execution, like someone would eventually put together the pieces that were missing. How could they not see that Michael had been the one to orchestrate this? Surely someone would eventually stop her and accuse her of all the things that were being pinned on two innocent people.

But as she rounded the corner away from the mass of humanity, the accusations never came. No one looked at her differently. No one suspected a thing. They all just took the accusation at face value while she... Wendy stopped cold as she passed the last row of cubicles. The row where she and Ava spent years forming a friendship.

Ava's desk sat stripped bare, the personal touches that had made it uniquely hers already erased. Gone were the framed photos of her and David, the succulent she'd named Fernando, the coffee mug that read "World's Okayest Wife." The cleaning crew had been thorough, leaving behind only generic office furniture and the ghost of friendships past.

Wendy sank into Ava's chair, running her fingers along the desk's edge. How many lunches had they shared here? How many whispered conversations about office politics, dating disasters, career frustrations?

Wendy chewed on the inside of her cheek trying to fight back tears. Sure, her friendship with Ava had been strained recently. Wendy had gotten busy with her new promotion and Ava was pushing so hard too... no, that wasn't fair. Ava was doing what any good friend would have done. She was trying to protect Wendy, and now what did she have to show for it? Just another empty desk waiting for the next occupant. She felt sick, like the guilt was eating her from the inside out. She couldn't take this. She needed to come clean. To tell Brian, tell Jon. Let everyone know that she was the guilty party, not Ava.

But what if she was wrong? What if this wasn't Michael's doing? She still hadn't had a chance to confront him. And after all, if there was any question about his involvement then Brian wouldn't have promoted him so quickly.

Maybe Marcus and Ava really had been having an affair. People could hide things, couldn't they? Keep secrets that would shock those closest to them. After all, wasn't she living proof of that? Of course, deep down she knew that wasn't true, but it was enough to rationalize her decision to keep quiet.

"Crazy about Marcus and Ava, right?"

Wendy looked up to find Jenny hovering beside the desk, a look of genuine sympathy on her face. She noticed the way that Jenny's dress clung to her body in just the right places. It was almost disgusting how hard the younger woman was trying to use her body to get ahead.

"I had no idea they were... you know." Jenny sounded shocked, but her eyes seemed to sparkle with fascination. "But I guess you never really know people, right?"

Something about Jenny made Wendy's skin crawl, but she couldn't pinpoint why. Perhaps it was because right now she was interrupting a private moment Wendy was having. Or, maybe it was the way she seemed to be talking about Ava like she knew her at all.

"Anyway, since Ava's gone, I was wondering if maybe I could help with some of the social media campaigns? You are a bit of a legend around here with the way you've handled that account. I have some ideas that Michael really seemed to respond to. I thought they could complement your Fireball strategy."

The way she pivoted from fake sympathy to opportunity was almost staggering. Wendy couldn't believe the audacity. Her chest tightened, the moment to mourn her friend having clearly passed.

"I'm not sure what's happening with campaign redistribution yet," Wendy said, her tone colder than she'd realized. "You'll need to wait until I have time to coordinate all of that with Michael."

"Of course! I really appreciate the chance. You two work so closely together. It would be an honor."

Perhaps the wording was meant to be innocent, but Wendy couldn't help but feel territorial at the comment. "I need to get back to work," she said, leaving Jenny standing at the empty desk looking confused.

As she hurried toward her office, irritation burned through her body. Jenny hadn't earned the right to step into Ava's role. Hadn't put in the years of hard work, the late-night meetings, the shared struggles. Some people just expected opportunities to be handed to them, thought they could swoop in and claim what others had built.

She made a mental note to talk to Michael about Jenny's involvement as she finally made it to her office. Jenny hadn't earned her seat at the table yet, it didn't seem right that she felt like she could just approach Wendy with campaign ideas.

Michael, she'd almost forgotten about him. He wasn't in his office when she walked by. She needed to talk to him, to figure out exactly what happened with Ava and Marcus.

Before she could dwell on it any longer, she opened her inbox to see an email from Jack Peterson. A smile tugged on her lips, at least Michael had followed through with his word to keep her involved in the project.

Wendy - Michael mentioned you were the brains behind revised projects. I just got back from Broadway and the reception to our premium blend was nothing short of amazing. I haven't seen the numbers yet, but I expect them to be even better than what you projected. Your forward thinking and ability to make bold decisions is nothing short of fascinating. I look forward to our continued success together. Can't wait to have you and Michael back in New Orleans so we can have a proper celebration. - Jack

The rush was back, hitting her system like the best kind of drug. The CEO of a multinational company just called her fascinating. Michael had once again given her credit on their work on the Fireball case and now the recognition that came with being great at her job made her forget all about her guilt over Ava.

She spent the rest of the day absorbed in work, trying her best to avoid Ava's desk entirely. She still needed to talk to Michael, to understand exactly what happened last night after she left. But, every time she walked by he was in a closed door meeting with Brian. Probably going over his new role as Vice President. Heat pooled in Wendy's stomach as she considered the powerplay Michael must have made in order to secure the position. Here she was belittling Jenny for trying to take Ava's lesser role, while Michael had not only done the same thing but most likely played a part in Marcus's downfall. Why wasn't she more disgusted by that?

At four-thirty, Michael finally emerged from Brian's office. Wendy had been walking by on her way to the restroom when the door opened. She gasped as he emerged, he looked taller more... put together? Even from the other side of the hallway she could feel his gaze on her, the hungry glare he always seemed to have when he looked at her.

"Wendy," he called from the other side of the hall, making her blush for reason unknown to her. "Walk with me. We have some things to discuss."

His words carried more weight now, his tone slightly more commanding than it had been in the past. How was Michael able to make himself seem more magnetic at a time like this, when Wendy was struggling to keep it all together? She fell into quick lockstep with him, despite every instinct screaming warnings, her gaze trained on her feet as they moved toward his former office. Marcus and Ava's absence grew larger with each step. No one was coming to save her.

The office felt smaller now, despite the fact that most of Michael's personal belongings had already been moved. The office was bare, but needed a good wipe down. Outlines of dust scattered the room where pictures once stood. The carpet was discolored in spots, in desperate need of a steam.

"I assume you've seen the email, and heard about my promotion?" Michael pushed the door behind her, leaving it cracked just enough to make Wendy feel slightly more at ease. He stood in front of her, arms crossed looking more authoritative than she'd seen him in a while.

"I did." She let out the breath she was holding, reminding herself that she didn't need to feel so on edge, not for professional reasons, anyway "What the hell happened, Michael? How did—"

Michael took a step back, giving Wendy the space she needed to breathe. His face twisted into a smile, a self-satisfied grin he couldn't control, as he considered how much to tell her. "Those two were relentless." He took another half step backward, perching on the side of the desk. "They've been looking for reasons to sabotage us from day one. Surely you saw the way Marcus would pop in here every chance he got. How he and Ava would have secret meetings after they saw us together."

Wendy opened her mouth to say something, then paused. Marcus had told her more than once that he was there to talk when she was ready. Ava had practically blown up her phone when she went to New Orleans. But that was because they were trying to help her, because they knew the type of person Michael was... wasn't it?

"Sabotage us how? Ava was my friend, Michael. She wouldn't have done anything to hurt me."

Michael laughed. "Your friend? She threatened to blow up your marriage, your career. And Marcus..." Michael rolled his eyes like he was the most obvious traitor of all. "He tried to hamstring us every step of the way. You saw how hard he pushed to get Jon on the team, because he thought you couldn't handle it yourself. I had to book the New Orleans trip at the last minute because I knew he was waiting in the shadows to shut it down. We would have never gotten the ball rolling if you weren't there in person to dazzle Jack."

He could see Wendy process the information, looking at the events through a different lens. He softened his tone. She just needed one more gentle nudge. "They were trying to take us down, Wendy." He tried to summon tears, but not even he was that good. "Everything we worked so hard to achieve. All the sacrifice you made. They wanted to destroy it all."

Wendy leaned back against the wall. The room was spinning. She suddenly felt hot. Could what Michael was saying be true? Had she misread their kindness? She didn't think so, but suddenly she wasn't so sure.

Her conversation with Ava in the break room came flooding back. "Marcus and I talked to Lisa," she'd said with such conviction. "She told us about Michael." But where was Lisa now? If she really had this smoking gun evidence, this damning testimony about Michael's behavior, why hadn't she come forward? Why did she suddenly drop the entire thing the second Wendy didn't play along? She could have gone straight to Brian, had Lisa come in and tell her story.

Unless... Wendy's stomach twisted, her knees buckled. Ava had sounded so sure about Lisa, but when push came to shove and Wendy didn't immediately accuse Michael, Lisa was nowhere to be found. Had the whole thing been a fabrication? A convenient story designed to make Wendy doubt herself, doubt her choices?

"But, the rumors about them... those aren't true, are they?"

Michael pushed off the desk, seeing the way Wendy's shoulders sagged slightly. She didn't believe him, not completely. But it was enough of an opening. "Perception is reality. They were seen leaving together, caught in what appeared to be compromising positions. Who knows what else was going on behind closed doors?" He put his arm on the wall near Wendy's head. "Don't you get it? I was protecting you. Doing what any good leader would do."

"But you lied." She watched his face wanting to see if he would flinch at the accusation.

"No." His eyes hardened with conviction. "I did what needed to be done. While those two played by the rules, sitting back and waiting to see exactly how we would fall, I made my own rules. Power plays they couldn't possibly understand."

Wendy's hand shot to her mouth as the pieces began to click in place. Michael's promotion wasn't a coincidence, he planned the whole thing. Anger began to swell in her chest. This was all just a game to him where she'd been a pawn. Was she really that disposable?

"You orchestrated all of this." Her eyes went wide with the realization, her hands clenching into fists. "You used me." The words came out flat, matter-of-fact rather than accusatory.

Michael's expression shifted, genuine surprise flickering across his features before settling into confusion. "Used you?" He stepped closer, forcing her to crane her neck to maintain eye contact. "Wendy, do you feel used? I've given you everything you wanted. People know who you are now. People respect you. Hell, I think Jenny is actually afraid of you."

A smirk appeared on her face before she could help it. He was right, he had given her everything she wanted. She certainly didn't feel like a victim. In fact, hearing it all listed out like that for her gave her a strange, almost dark, satisfaction. Was Jenny really scared of her? Part of her wanted to reach out, to let her know she could be an ally if Jenny just wouldn't come on so strong, but a darker part burned with delight hearing the news.

He was right, of course he was. She didn't feel used. She felt... elevated. Seen. The woman who'd gained Jack Peterson's respect, who'd made Brian stumble over his words, that wasn't a victim. That was someone who'd learned to wield power.

Their stock was rising because of their work on Fireball, because of bold decisions while others clung to safe mediocrity. Marcus and Ava had seen their meteoric rise and gotten jealous, tried to tear it all down. Maybe the methods were harsh, but hadn't they forced Michael's hand?

"You don't feel used," Michael continued, reading her silence perfectly. "You feel alive." He put his hands on her arms, making Wendy gasp as electric energy passed through them like they were wielding magic. "You finally feel like the woman you were always meant to be. The woman I knew you could be."

Before she realized it, Wendy was backing into the chair on the other side of the desk. Her legs brushing against the cool leather. She sank into the seat, suddenly looking over the room from a perspective she'd never had.

"As new VP, I'm going to need a right hand." Michael's presence loomed behind her, his reflection visible in the darkened computer monitor. "A director I can trust. Someone who isn't afraid to get a little... dirty when the time calls for it."

His hands settled on her shoulders, causing her to close her eyes as the familiar warmth passed through her body. Director. The word held such power. Running an entire department, strategic meetings she could shape, the picture of a woman who could make decisions instead of just implementing someone else's vision.

"I..." she squirmed in the chair, her excitement growing. "I only just got this promotion. I'm not ready for director yet. Am I?" Despite her lack of confidence, she allowed herself to be seduced by the idea of it. She spun the chair, looking out past the cracked door at the people walking by. She saw them walking into her office, asking her suggestions on campaign slogans. For permission to run with a campaign plan she'd spent all night crafting. The fire building in her core made her breath catch as Michael's fingers traced her collarbone. "What would people say? What would they think?"

His grip tightened as he spun the chair around, turning Wendy so he could face her. The sudden rotation left her dizzy, disoriented by the shift in perspective.

"You look good in that chair, Wendy." His eyes swept over her, making her blush. "It suits you."

She watched his eyes fall to her chest, something that used to make her want to run in disgust. But now, sitting in this chair, envisioning herself as the woman who would occupy it, she felt a familiar thrill. The same rush she'd experienced in New Orleans when Jack Peterson's attention had wavered, when she'd leaned forward and watched him stumble over his words. This was what power looked like. Men losing focus, forgetting their carefully thought out sentences, becoming distracted by what she chose to reveal.

She smiled at her decision to leave a button or two undone, no longer an accident but a calculated choice. "Up here," she said, playfully. She placed her fingers under his chin, tilting his head to meet her gaze.

The hunger in his eyes didn't intimidate her anymore. If anything, it validated her. This was her effect, her influence. He was putty in her hands just like Jack, and Brian, and anyone else she decided. The director's chair beneath her felt less like furniture and more like a throne.

She pulled her hand away slowly, savoring the moment of control before allowing him to continue.

He licked his lips before continuing. "If you keep delivering on the Fireball account, people will only ask why I didn't promote you sooner." Michael's voice carried the seductive weight of prophecy. "In a couple months max you'll be in this chair permanently, and they will all respect you. Besides, even if you don't..."

He dropped to his knees before the chair, placing his hands on her legs with deliberate intimacy. Panic shot through Wendy as she craned her neck to look at the partly open door. If someone were to come in now they may see him. She turned back to scold him, but stopped. The position they were in transformed the office into what felt like a throne room. Wendy sat deeper into the chair where power was both given and taken. Not a pawn, a queen.

Michael's hands found their way under Wendy's dress before she could stop him. His digits pressed against the smooth flesh of her calf. "You don't need their permission, or even their respect, because you make your own rules." He massaged her calf with a sort of tenderness before sliding to her knee. "People like us, Wendy. We take what we want. We don't care about

office norms or rumors." He squeezed her knee making her eyes slip shut. "And we sure as hell don't feel sorry about the choices we make to get to the top."

The cool air of the AC brushed against her leg and she opened her eyes to see that Michael had raised her dress as he worked his way up her leg. She placed her hand on his shoulder pausing him. She could hear the steps of people as they walked by the door. The added danger suddenly adding to the thrill of it all. When she didn't apply additional pressure, Michael bent forward placing soft kisses on her knee, his tongue sliding up her already wet thigh.

"Every major decision will have to go through you," he whispered, just as Wendy, almost instinctively, parted her legs. "The only whispers you'll hear will be about how Wendy Taylor is the most badass director this place had ever seen."

"Michael, what are you...the door..."

He silenced her with another kiss on her thigh, almost mocking in its tenderness. His nose grazed the front of her soaked panties, dragging across her lips as he lingered there. He inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of her arousal... of his victory. The sound alone was obscene, primal. She gasped, she should have been disgusted. Creeped out. No one had ever smelled her like that before, not even Jon. It was too much, too intimate... too filthy. And yet, her body didn't recoil, it exploded.

A sharp, involuntary sigh escaped her lips, laced with heat and shame. Something inside her snapped. She wasn't saying no. She wasn't pushing him away. Her mind still screamed this was wrong, but her thighs were parting wider.

Michael was thrilled by her response. She was no longer saying "no" or "this isn't right", instead she was a willing participant only worried about who was going to see them not if she was going to let him... checkmate.

"I told you before," he murmured, his breath hot against the thin fabric clinging to her, causing her to shiver. "The next time I tasted you would be straight from the source."

"Ohhhh f-fffuck," Wendy moaned, her hands sliding up to Michael's hair, tangling her fingers in it. Her eyes slipped closed again, waiting... anticipating the moment Michael's tongue would slip across her most sensitive area.

"Tell me you want it," he said softly, his voice muffled by Wendy's thighs.

Her eyes snapped open. Michael's head was still buried between her legs, his hands on her hips to control her movement. Someone had stopped just outside the office door. A hushed conversation that she couldn't focus on enough to know what was being said or by who. All she knew was that they were just fifteen feet away from her. If they were to open the door, or even just turn enough to see through the crack they would see her sitting in the directors chair, her dress pulled up above her knees. Would they be able to see Michael too?

"Tell me," he said again, his teeth scraping against the inside of her thigh.

"Ahhh," she cried out, a little too loud for her own liking. Her hands flew to her mouth, giving Michael free reign, as her eyes once again fluttered closed..

"I... I want it," she finally admitted. Although, as she pulled Michael's head closer to its target she had a hard time knowing exactly what it was she just admitted to.

Michael didn't wait for another command. The second the confession left her lips he was on her. He pushed the wet fabric of her panties to the side, taking only a second to admire the way her bald sex glistened with need. Her lips pressed together tightly, begging to be split.

The first flick of his tongue sent a full body tremor through Wendy. She bit down on her knuckle terrified that someone would hear her. Her hips immediately rose to greet his mouth, desperate for more contact. His thick tongue slid across her folds at a torturous pace, like he was savoring the taste of her. She spread her legs as wide as they would go, all pretense gone as his tongue circled her swollen nub.

"Mmmnnngh," Wendy whined, her words incoherent, muffled by the way she bit down on her own hand. She couldn't believe this was happening. The office wasn't even completely empty yet and she was already hooking her legs around the wide frame of Michael.

Before she could chastise herself too much, Michael slurped greedily at her clit, making her buck against his face.

"Mmmm fuuuck," she cried out, her hands moving from her mouth to the back of his salt-and-pepper hair. She looked back at the door, relief passing over her as she realized whoever was out there was now gone.

Michael must have seen her reaction, because at the same time he pushed a finger deep inside Wendy's core, adding to the already overwhelming sensation of his tongue.

"That's... oh God... Too much someone will hear." Despite her pleas, Wendy's knuckles were white from holding his head so tight. She rotated her hips, her body burning with need.

"So much sweeter, from the source," Michael chuckled, breaking free of her death grip to come up for air. Wendy's face burned with shame, her juices were smeared across Michael's face making it look like he'd just gone for a swim. "I'm going to need this sweet treat every day."

"No... this has to be the last.... fffffuck." Michael added a second finger, curling them upward enough to make her legs shake.

"Stop pretending Wendy. By the looks of it, you're getting off on this more than I am."

"That's not... Uuuugggghhn." Michael dove back in, his fat tongue joining his fingers as he pushed it past her walls. He waited for her hips to slide back down onto the chair before slowly moving his tongue up her folds, teasing her clit with it.

"Tell me you don't love this. That you're not about to explode all over my face."

Wendy didn't answer. She couldn't. Her body was vibrating with tension, the kind that came from knowing she'd already fallen off the edge, but still pretending she hadn't jumped.

Michael curled his fingers again, this time finding that perfect spot inside her, the one that made her whine with need. His tongue danced over her clit at the same time, quick flicks alternating with deep sucks that left her gasping.

"Say it," he said into her skin. "Say you're about to cum all over my face."

She shook her head, a weak, useless gesture. Her fingers tightened in his hair.

"Say it, Wendy. Admit that no one has ever made you feel this good, not even Jon."

"I—" she started, the word trembling on her lips. Her thighs were clamping around his head, her body betraying her. She couldn't belittle Jon. That part of her life was separate. She grinded against Michael's face, wanting desperately to believe her own lies. She didn't want to hurt Jon.

His lips created a vacuum around her clit, sucking it into his mouth as his fingers pistoned into her like a real life cock. "Oh God, Fuck I'm gonna..."

She moaned shamelessly, her voice echoing off the office walls no longer worried about the dangers that may cause. Her head lolled back, eyes rolling shut as Michael devoured her with pure, obscene focus. She knew she was a goner, her body was past the point of no return. The rhythm of his tongue matched the curl of his fingers, building her back up with dizzying precision.

"You gonna come on my face, Wendy?" he asked between strokes. "Let go right here? Legs open, pussy dripping down my chin? Mark your territory?"

"Michael!" she hissed, scandalized, but her hips lifted again, chasing the release he was so wickedly coaxing out of her. She was suddenly very aware of the cool leather seat on her legs. Her butt slipped across the surface of it, her juices covering it... claiming it just as Michael had said.

"This is where you belong, Wendy." His mouth pressed against her slick heat as he spoke. "This is what you need." He pressed a third finger against her lips. It was too tight a fit to slip in, but just the pressure was enough to send Wendy into a frenzy.

She whimpered, a broken, hoarse sound. Her hips jerked as he sucked her clit again, harder this time, and her thighs clamped down on either side of his head like a vice. She wasn't even trying to stop herself anymore. All she could think about was how good it felt, and how close she was to exploding.

"Give it to me, Wendy. I want to feel you let go. To taste every last drop. To remind you no one can make you feel this good."

"Oh God," she breathed. Her fingers tangled deeper into his hair, nails scraping his scalp. Her body was coiled tight, every muscle locked in place and trembling. She could feel it building, not just between her legs, but behind her eyes, at the base of her spine, spreading like fire through her belly.

Michael sensed it. Of course he did. He flattened his tongue and flicked faster, determined to give her the biggest orgasm of her life. "You're gonna cum for me, Wendy," he murmured against her clit. "Not for Jon. Not for anyone else. *Me.*"

That did it.

"Fuuuck, Oh God. Oh mmmm fuck." Her whole body tensed, if there was anyone within thirty feet of the office there was no way they didn't hear it. Her vision went white. Her thighs clamped around Michael's head, trapping him there as her hips bucked uncontrollably. Her hands slid down to his shoulders, clutching at him like she might fall apart if she let go.

Michael didn't stop. He kept working her, riding out every pulse, licking and sucking her through the waves until her body sagged limp in the chair. Her legs twitched with aftershocks, her breath stuttered out of her lungs in shallow pants. Her head lolled to the side, hair stuck to her damp forehead.

"Delicious," Michael said, emerging from between her legs, wiping his face with the back of his hand. The smug look on his face should have sent Wendy into a fury, but she barely noticed, still trying to recover.

Her arms shook as she tried to sit up straight in the chair, pushing her dress back down over her legs. "Jesus Michael. That was reckless, and —"

"Fun?" Michael laughed, standing up straight and walking to the other side of the desk. He adjusted his tie, smoothing it down against his shirt. The casual gesture felt obscene after what had just transpired, like watching someone straighten their collar after committing murder.

"Before I go," he said, reaching into his shirt pocket. The familiar crinkle of paper made Wendy's stomach clench. He placed the IOU on the desk between them, the candy cane wrapping paper now wrinkled and worn from being folded and refolded so many times.

Wendy stared at it, confusion clouding her still-hazy mind. "What are you doing?"

"I don't need it anymore." He smiled down at her, still devouring her with his gaze. "Do whatever you want with it."

Her fingers twitched toward the paper, then pulled back. This was what she'd wanted, wasn't it? Freedom from his leverage?

"Why?"

Michael walked toward the door, his confidence both infuriating and causing the fire she just quenched to rekindle. "I think we both know why."

She snatched the paper, crushing it in her fist. Relief should have flooded through her. This was over. She could focus on the Fireball campaign and not worry about him being inappropriate or making dumb comments. So, why didn't she feel more relieved?

"Oh, before I forget," Michael paused at the door. "There's a company party Friday night. The Marriott downtown. To celebrate my promotion." His eyes held hers, that predatory gleam returning. "I can't wait to see you there to... celebrate."

Wendy laughed, she couldn't help it. "Michael, you just gave me the IOU. If that was your plan you should have waited. Do you not know how these things work?" She crumpled the IOU in her hand, like it was the ultimate power play.

"I'm aware." His smile widened. "Make sure Jon comes too. I'm sure he'll enjoy seeing how far we've both... evolved."

After he left, Wendy sat alone in the empty office, the crushed paper warm in her palm. She should feel free. The chain was broken, the leverage gone. She smoothed out the wrinkled note, reading her own handwriting: *One night of making your wildest dreams come true.*

A bitter realization hit her, or maybe it was always there and she just refused to acknowledge it. Michael was right, he didn't need it. Maybe he never did. After all, it was just a silly piece of paper, a facade to trick herself into making the choices she wanted to make all along.

She could tell herself it was over. Destroy the note, avoid Michael, return to her safe life with Jon. But even as the thought formed, she knew it was a lie. The woman who'd sat in this chair, who'd

claimed it in the most primal way possible, that woman wasn't going anywhere. Gold dress
Wendy had tasted power, and she was hungry for more.

The IOU hadn't been a leash. It had been an excuse.

Her fingers found her wedding ring, spinning it in that familiar pattern. But even that couldn't calm the storm inside her. She had a taste of the good life. Of power, and respect. Michael had shown her how to tap into her potential in a way she'd never known possible. She loved Jon, she truly did. But she was addicted to the power Michael had shown her, had promised her.

Wendy Taylor. Director material. The woman who made her own rules.

She stood on shaky legs, tucking the IOU into her purse. Not because she needed to keep it, but because destroying it would mean admitting what she already knew. Michael owned her in ways that had nothing to do with paper promises.

Friday night at the Marriott. A celebration.

Executive Privilege Ch. 9

"Ohhhh. Mmmph," Wendy tried to muffle her moans as Michael lapped eagerly at her swollen clit. She sat back in the leather chair, spreading her legs wide as her fingers dug into the thinning, salt-and-pepper hair.

This had become somewhat of a routine since Michael's promotion to VP just a few short days ago. She'd burned the IOU the moment she got home on Monday. That had all been an excuse, a lie she told herself while she chased the respect she rightfully deserved. They would meet in his old office, the one that Wendy hoped would soon be hers, while everyone was at lunch. The first time it happened, she told herself they were going to go over the Fireball numbers, he was going to mentor her into being a director. After that first day, she dropped all pretenses.

Today was no different. She would find herself in the chair, fantasizing about how she could use the new position to get some of her best ideas into the world—all while Michael was between her legs bringing her pleasure that no one who looked like that should be allowed to give her.

The ache low in her belly she got when she thought about these lunchtime encounters was about the intoxicating rush of power. The way Michael would kneel in front of her, seeing his hunger for what only she could give him. It certainly wasn't about the way his touch could set her body aflame, the way he seemed to know exactly how to...

"I'm close... oh God, don't stop. I'm almost there." She began grinding her hips into his face, rotating them in a circular motion that coated him with her juices. She closed her eyes, stifling another moan. Behind her closed eyes she could see the nameplate on the door shifting.
Wendy Taylor - Director.

She could see herself leading meetings in the conference room, no longer disappearing against the wall, forgotten. Jenny would no longer look at her like she was some type of equal. The younger woman would look on in amazement, maybe tinged with the healthy fear that came from recognizing real authority.

"Please sign off on the Henderson campaign, Director Taylor." She could hear the deference in voices that had once dismissed her. Could feel the weight of decisions that would affect millions of dollars, hundreds of jobs.

"Ohh. Yes, yes. MMMPPHHH." Her breathing quickened as the fantasy deepened. Brian calling her into his office to congratulate her on yet another record-breaking deal. "That Coca-Cola contract, I don't know how you did it, but great work as always." Jack Peterson flying her first-class to presentations, introducing her as his strategic partner, not Michael's lapdog.

"Ahhhhh fuuuuck," her hips lifted off the chair, her heels hooking behind Michael's back as he brought her to orgasm. Her nails dug into his shoulders, pulling his face flush against her thighs as wave after wave of pleasure rolled over her.

Michael rose from between her legs slowly, a smirk on his face as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I think it's time for you to repay the favor. Don't you?"

Through half-lidded eyes, Wendy watched as he undid his belt, his sausage-like fingers fumbling on the button of his pants.

"Sorry, big guy," she teased, running her manicured nails up his thigh. "That's not really my thing, remember?" She gave him a wink before standing up on shaky legs.

"But if you behave yourself the rest of the day," she added before he could quip about past experiences, "then maybe I'll give you an extra special gift tonight after your party."

She smoothed out her dress, the red matched her lips perfectly. The fabric was silk. It was the kind of investment piece she'd justified as "professional development." The dress extended just past her knee, making it longer than most of the women in the office, but still shorter than she was used to. Three short months ago, she would have paired it with a cardigan, worried about drawing the wrong kind of attention. Now she appreciated the low cut of the dress—how she could use it as a way to grab attention before wowing people with her brilliance.

Her hand stopped on the knob of the door, expecting Michael to say something that would remind her of her place, but instead, when she turned around, he was chewing on his bottom lip, already fastening his belt.

She really did have all the power.

"Wow, that's the fourth time this week," Jon marveled, letting out a satisfied sigh as he tossed the used condom into the wastebasket next to the bed. "I'm not sure what's gotten into you, but I'm loving it." He kissed Wendy on the cheek before reaching for his boxers at the foot of the bed.

The familiar four count played in Wendy's head as she spun her ring unconsciously. If she was going to open this door with Michael, the least she could do was throw herself into Jon completely. She owed him that much. The scale had to balance somehow.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," she said, and she meant it. "But now my hair's a mess, and we're going to be late." She glanced at the clock on the wall, half-considering skipping the event entirely. But she knew that wasn't really an option. Now that she was out of the shadows, she needed to stay visible. Michael had told her that, to make the promotion to Director feel less abrupt, she needed to stay at the front of Brian's mind. That meant speaking up at every meeting, cc'ing him on every client email. Brian would certainly be at the party tonight, which meant Wendy would be too.

"I'm going to hop in the shower real quick and wash off," she said, running her fingers through his hair. "I laid your khakis and red button-down out on the dresser."

"You didn't have to do that." It had been ages since she'd laid out clothes for him.

"I know, but I enjoy seeing you happy." She gave his hand a quick kiss before rising from the bed and letting him watch her naked form disappear behind the bathroom door.

Fifteen minutes later, she emerged, her hair dripping onto her shoulders, a white cotton towel wrapped snugly around her body. Jon was in the closet, khakis already on, reaching for his dress shirt.

"We're going to be so late," Wendy sighed, a touch of panic rising in her voice as she crossed to her closet.

"I'm sure no one will notice. These things start late the majority of the time, anyway." He stepped out of the closet, fingers working the bottom buttons of his shirt.

No one will notice, not exactly the words any woman wanted to hear. She pulled the Luxe cover out from the back of the closet, a fire already building inside her. She'd stopped yesterday on her

way home from work and picked out a dress. Not being noticed wasn't going to be a problem tonight.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Jon said, standing in front of the mirror. "I've been thinking about applying for the open director position."

Wendy's fingers froze on the knot of the towel. "Director position?"

"Michael's old role." Jon was buttoning the last button on his shirt. "Marcus had been grooming me for something like this before... well, before everything happened. I'm the most senior account manager now, and despite Michael's dislike of me, I think I'm the most qualified for the job." He smiled at himself in the mirror. "Plus, the pay bump will be nice. We'll finally be able to do that bathroom remodel you've always wanted."

Ice ran through Wendy's veins, and for a second she forgot how to breathe. That was her promotion. Her opportunity. She hadn't even considered that Jon may want it too.

"That's..." She finally found her voice. "That's great, honey."

"I know it's a long shot." Jon flattened his hair with his palms. "But I've been looking at the numbers, and I'm part of almost forty percent of the company's projects. I think I could make a case." He turned to her, that boyish enthusiasm that had first drawn her to him now twisting like a knife. "You've been working so closely with Michael lately. I was hoping you'd put in a good word for me. I know how much he values your opinion."

Her hands glided across the soft fabric of the towel. She thought she might hyperventilate.

One-two-three-four. One-two-three-four.

How could she have been so short-sighted? How had she not realized Jon would want the role too? And now he expected her to bring it up to Michael.

She closed her eyes, imagining Michael between her legs, casually asking him to consider Jon for the promotion while he brought her to climax. She almost laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of it.

"I... of course I'll mention it." She could tell Michael that Jon was interested. She couldn't risk another lie, not when the house of cards felt so precarious already. There was no harm in simply passing along Jon's interest, was there? The only question was when to bring it up, and the electric thrill that shot through her at the thought of that meeting was something she chose to ignore entirely.

Jon's face lit up like Christmas morning. "Really? You're a lifesaver." He abandoned his hair and walked over to the closet, kissing her forehead. "I knew you'd support me in this."

His words were like a gut-punch. Would her taking the position mean she wasn't supporting him? Would he be just as supportive as she was?

"Can I ask you something?" The words slipped out before she could stop them. "Do you think I'd make a good director?"

Jon paused, halfway back to the mirror. His brow furrowed, her head tilted slightly, not the look of encouragement she'd hoped for.

"Someday, absolutely," he said, a smile tugging on his lips, like he was proud of how "supportive" he was in that moment. "You've got incredible instincts, and you've done amazing work on Fireball. But..."

Now it was Wendy's turn to tilt her head, her eyebrows arching.

"You just got promoted. Director-level responsibilities..." He shook his head dismissively, like he was doing her a favor. "It's not just about one successful campaign, no matter how great it is. You're talking about budget oversight, personnel management, strategic planning across multiple accounts. You're not prepared for what that job entails."

Her mouth fell open. *You're not prepared.* As if everything she'd accomplished meant nothing. As if months of late nights, rock-solid campaigns, and a very happy client were just lucky accidents. So much for supporting each other.

"I see."

"Hey." Jon's eyes found hers in the mirror. "I'm not saying you won't be ready someday. In a few years, with more experience..." He smiled warmly, a warmth that felt ice-cold to Wendy, "But right now, you'd be in over your head."

In over your head. The phrase seared through her mind like a brand as she turned back toward the dress. This from the man who'd never stepped foot in a boardroom where every eye was calculating whether you were worth listening to or just worth fucking. Who'd never had to weaponize his own attractiveness while simultaneously fighting to be seen as more than a pretty face. Who'd never had to master the art of using every advantage at his disposal, turning what others saw as weakness into the very source of his power.

Jon lived in his pristine world of numbers and projections, where everything could be quantified and predicted. He couldn't comprehend the kind of strategy she'd had to use just to get where she is, the tightrope she'd been walking, the careful choreography of demanding respect from men who undressed her with their eyes before she even opened her mouth.

Strategic thinking? He had no idea what strategy looked like when the playing field was rigged against you from the moment you walked through the door.

"You're probably right," she said, blinking back tears as she tried to control the emotion in her voice. "I should focus on excelling in my current role, make people see my value." She never thought Jon would be the "people" she was referring to.

"Exactly." Jon's relief was audible. He'd dodged a bullet. "Besides, if I get the position, we'd be working even more closely together. I'd be your boss." His laugh held no malice, just innocent pleasure at the prospect. "I could finally give you all the recognition you deserve."

Recognition you deserve. The patronizing undertone made her hand shake against the hangers. She deserved recognition now, not as a favor from her husband's hypothetical promotion.

She nodded, forcing the movement to appear natural. Time to move past this. They were already running late, and she couldn't afford to unravel now. Her towel dropped to the floor, out of Jon's eyesight, and the soft crackle of tissue paper as she freed her dress from its wrapping was nearly drowned by the white-hot fury roaring in her ears.

The dress was like none she'd ever owned. The gold sequins shimmered in the light. It wasn't as revealing as the one she'd worn in New Orleans, but it was more than enough to make every head turn the moment she walked through the door.

She slipped it over her head, feeling the cool silk cascade down her body like water. The fit was perfect, like it was tailor-made just for her. The neckline formed a deep V that showcased her chest without venturing into scandalous territory. The hemline landed just above her knee, a length she was slowly getting used to.

But it was the back that made the dress truly unforgettable. A series of delicate gold chains crisscrossed her bare skin, trailing all the way to her hips. A bra was simply out of the question.

She fastened the clasp at her neck, watching her reflection transform. Looked like Gold-Dress Wendy was making an appearance tonight. The thought alone sent goosebumps racing across her skin.

When she appeared from the closet, Jon's reaction was exactly what she'd hoped for. His lips parted slightly, his eyes traveling over her body, taking in every inch of her perfection. "How do I look?" she teased, bending forward to grab her four-inch heels. His gaze fixed on her chest, his khakis growing tighter around his thighs.

"Wow. You look..." He swallowed hard, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Glad you approve," she said, licking her lips seductively as she stood back up slowly. Perhaps it was him that was in over his head. "Just need to put on some light makeup and do my hair, and we can go."

She turned her gaze to the mirror, smiling at the woman in front of her. She had a party to attend.

Conversation and light jazz music poured out of the Marriott's grand ballroom as Wendy and Jon approached the large glass doors. A knot formed in Wendy's stomach, one she couldn't quite describe. She took a deep breath to steady herself before swinging the doors open.

As Jon had predicted, the formal part of the evening hadn't started yet. People were still milling around, snacking on appetizers, and trying to be noticed. A smile formed on Wendy's lips. She'd have no trouble with that part.

The click of Wendy's heels as she descended the few marble steps into the main room might as well have been trumpets announcing her arrival. The gold sequins of her dress seemed to catch every light source, sending tiny sparkles around the room like a disco ball. The effect was exactly what she'd hoped for. Entire conversations paused mid-sentence, heads turned, and she could feel the weight of dozens of gazes watching her every move.

Fragments of conversations drifted past her, making her stand a little taller with each step. Words like "stunning," "captivating," and "gorgeous" filled her with pride as she smiled at a few of the junior associates gawking at her.

Jon's fingers curled around the small of her back, the skin-on-skin contact sending fire shooting through her body. "Everyone is staring," he whispered, a slight tremble in his hand.

"Good."

“I... I thought you hated being the center of attention? Especially when it came to your looks?”

The fire in her veins cooled, embarrassment crashing over her. They'd barely made it ten feet into the room, and already Jon was killing her mood. But he was right, wasn't he? When had she become this person? The one starved for attention.

She opened her mouth to respond, maybe even to tell him he was right and that they should leave. But before any words came out, Michael materialized beside them with two champagne flutes in hand.

The suit he wore looked expensive, custom-made just for him. For a brief second, he almost didn't look half bad. His suit jacket hid his bulk well, and his hair was styled in a way that made him look put together. Like a vice president.

But as he neared, Wendy noticed the subtle signs of the real Michael. Breadcrumbs littered his lap, there was a mustard stain on his shirt, and something dark—chocolate, perhaps?—was smeared across his chin.

"Wendy." His eyes swept over her dress with undisguised appreciation, lingering on the plunging neckline before meeting her gaze. "You look absolutely magnificent tonight. Damn shame Jack Peterson isn't here to see this. We both know how much he... appreciates gold." He saw the way her posture straightened, how her chin lifted with renewed confidence. "Maybe we should send him a picture, remind him of what he's missing."

Heat crept up her neck, as she saw the perplexed look on Jon's face. Michael was already fishing his phone from his front pocket before she realized he was serious.

"Jon, be a good sport and take our picture." He thrust his phone into Jon's chest before he could respond, then moved to position himself beside Wendy. His hand settled on her lower back, and where Jon's touch had felt like fire, Michael's was molten lava flooding her system. Every nerve ending sparked to life under his palm.

As Jon fumbled with the phone, trying to frame the shot, Wendy, without thinking, reached up to brush away the chocolate still smeared on Michael's chin.

Michael's free hand caught her wrist mid-motion. His eyes locked with hers, making it suddenly feel entirely too hot in the room. "What would I do without you?" he whispered, sending electricity through her chest.

Jon cleared his throat, cutting through the shared moment, a tightness forming in his chest. "Should I... are you ready?" He held the camera up.

"Of course," Michael said with a grin, releasing her wrist while his other hand pulled her closer to him. "I'd tell you to get her good side, but we both know she doesn't have a bad one."

Jon snapped a couple of pictures from different angles, still trying to process what he'd just witnessed. He didn't want to cause a scene, especially not when he'd just asked Wendy to put in a good word for him with Michael. But something about the whole interaction made him uneasy. Sure, Michael was just being his normal creepy self, but Wendy...

Jon studied the images on screen. In the first picture, Wendy was looking at Michael, not the camera. The way she wiped chocolate from his chin, the chemistry that seemed to run through them when Michael grabbed her wrist. The rational part of his mind dismissed it as professional camaraderie, but the image unsettled him in a way he couldn't quite articulate.

"Can I have my phone back?" Michael's deep voice broke through his thoughts.

Jon handed it over, forcing a smile. He needed to set up another appointment with Dr. Carson.

"Oh, we're taking pictures? I want one!" A voice rang out from behind them just as Jon had given Michael back his phone and Wendy shifted back toward her husband.

They turned to find Jenny approaching, and Wendy had to admit the younger woman looked good. She looked trendy, dressed more like an Instagram model than someone in a professional setting.

Her outfit was technically appropriate, though barely. A high-waisted skirt hugged her hips and stopped at the knee, but a high slit ran up one thigh, flashing her flawless skin with every step. Her top was cropped and barely thicker than lingerie. It clung to her chest and left a sliver of toned stomach exposed. A look Wendy could no longer pull off. Nude heels added a few inches, but still left her shorter than Wendy.

As Jenny approached, Wendy noticed how Jon's attention shifted. It wasn't anything obvious, but she knew him well enough to recognize the signs. She watched as his eyes tracked the sway of Jenny's hips, the way he forgot to breathe for just a split second. Even after all the attention she'd given him this week—all the effort that had gone into transforming into Gold Dress Wendy—her husband's gaze still drifted to another woman.

"Jenny," Michael beamed, looking over her body without an ounce of shame. "Don't you look youthful tonight."

Youthful Wendy rolled her eyes. That was just another word for slutty.

"Thank you!" Jenny's smile was genuine. It was like she couldn't see the way Michael was undressing her with his eyes at all. "I was just chatting with the other associates about how helpful you've been with getting me up to speed." Her gaze flickered to Wendy. "And Wendy too. You've both helped me so much. I can't wait to get to work more closely with the two of you."

There it was, the subtle positioning. Jenny making sure everyone knew how excited she was to be here. How she couldn't wait to work more closely with Michael. The comment was innocent enough, but Wendy caught the underlying message: *I want what you have.*

"Thanks. You're certainly... eager." She saw the surprised look Jon gave her, the way Jenny's shoulders sagged just a fraction. "Which is exactly the type of spirit we're looking for on our projects," she added, realizing she'd come across too harsh.

Michael checked his watch with exaggerated importance. "As much as I love being sandwiched between two beautiful women..."

Jenny giggled and touched his arm. Wendy almost gagged. It sounded so fake.

"I need to prepare for my speech." His fingers brushed the small of Wendy's back. "Catch up with me after. We need to discuss expectations."

The lava had made its way to Wendy's core, and she could only nod. Michael didn't even glance in Jenny's direction as he walked off. She wasn't even a blip on his radar, not with how focused he was on Wendy.

Meanwhile, Jon was already leaning toward Jenny, whispering something that made her laugh.

As Michael disappeared into the crowd, Wendy turned back to see Jenny and Jon both staring at her. "I admire you, Wendy," Jenny started with her perfect smile. "The way you're able to keep up with Michael so effortlessly. The way you still find time for work-life balance. Jon was just telling me the story about how you two met. I would have never pictured you the type to frequent the casino."

Something about the way she said it, the way she smiled and acted like she was best friends with Jon made Wendy's skin crawl. She could feel herself about to lose control, about to say something that would shatter all the progress she'd made for her career over the last few months.

"Well," she started, raising her eyebrow. "There's a lot about me you don't know. It's actually really freakin' exhausting." She balled her hands into a fist, but was unable to reach her ring.

Jenny's eyes went wide. "Oh, I didn't mean..."

"Wendy..." Jon had an equally surprised look on his face. "She was paying you a compliment."

Of course he was taking her side. He thinks he can handle something like being the director, but he can't even tell when someone like Jenny is playing him. And what kind of husband doesn't take his wife's side? She was spiraling fast. She felt that familiar knot of frustration tightening in her chest.

"Right, sorry," she said, forcing a tight smile. "I'm going to get a drink."

She turned away from both of them. It was best to not make a scene. Behind her, she could hear Jon's quiet explanation to Jenny, probably apologizing for his wife's "sensitivity," too naive to understand how underhanded Jenny was being.

Time for something stronger than champagne.

"Shot of Fireball with a Coke back," Wendy said to the bartender as she leaned over the bar. She rolled her eyes as his gaze fixed on her exposed chest.

She relished the burn as she took the shot, ordering another one with the wave of a finger. She waited until she felt the fire deep in her belly before she grabbed the Coke. She needed the burn.

"Wendy."

She turned to find Brian approaching, a warm smile on his face. He'd always been pleasant to her, always had nice things to say. But still, when the CEO engages you in conversation, you can't help but get a little nervous.

"Brian." She straightened, muscle memory from countless presentations kicking in. "Beautiful event you've put together."

"Thanks. Everything was so last minute, I wasn't sure if we'd pull it off." He gestured to the bartender and ordered a whiskey. His expression turned somber, remembering the events that led them here. Then he turned his attention fully to Wendy, smiling, "Just got off a call with Jack Peterson. Seems our Nashville launch exceeded his every expectation."

Wendy's eyes sparkled. She'd spent countless hours this week ensuring every event in Nashville would go off without a hitch—last-minute phone calls with venues, marketing changes at the eleventh hour. Whenever she'd sensed the winds changing, she pivoted.

"And your decision to shift to Memphis yesterday instead of following the original plan and launching in New Orleans..."

Wendy held her breath. That decision was her most risky yet, one that not even Michael agreed with. He thought it was too risky, too reactive. But of course she had ways to make Michael see her reasoning.

"What made you change your mind?" Brian sipped his whiskey slowly, his expression unreadable.

"That opening band from the stadium show. Chase... something," she said, reaching for her ring. "The last song they played got a massive reaction. Every social media platform exploded with clips of it. They went viral before the show even ended." She watched his face carefully. "A moment like that, I knew they'd be hot for at least a couple of weeks. I checked their tour schedule."

"Brilliant," Brian whispered, truly impressed. "Jack said you called it a game-time decision when you pitched it. Said he'd never seen someone so passionate before." He gave her an approving nod before downing the rest of his drink. "He wants you on every future project his company does with us."

Wendy's breath caught. "Future projects?" Her skin tingled with excitement.

"That's right." Brian couldn't hide the smile on his face any longer. "You, Wendy Taylor, just secured this company's future for a very long time. Well done."

"I just... I saw the opportunity," she managed, her pulse quickening with the magnitude of what Brian was telling her. Jack Peterson wanted her specifically. Future projects. The validation she'd craved for years finally materializing in ways that exceeded even her boldest fantasies.

"Well, keep up the great work." A new glass of bourbon sat in front of him, and he raised his glass to her. "Preliminary reports suggest the Memphis strategy will provide twenty-three percent more revenue than what New Orleans would have brought. Hell of a game-time decision."

He moved away into the crowd, leaving Wendy's head swirling. Twenty-three percent. Jack Peterson already requesting future work. She ordered another shot, her earlier anxiety completely melting away.

"Hey."

Jon's voice, soft and concerned, made her turn. He stood a few feet away, his boyish features creased with worry.

"Hey yourself." She tipped her head back, letting the Fireball burn away the anxiety.

"Are you okay?" He stepped closer. "What happened back there with Jenny? These last few weeks you haven't seemed like yourself. You seemed... stressed."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she pushed them back with a deep breath. He was right, she was stressed, but not for the same reasons he thought. The weight of living this double life was

consuming her, suffocating her with every decision she made. She hated the lies. Hated seeing that crease form between Jon's eyebrows when he tried to solve what was wrong with her. But Brian's praise burned hotter than the Fireball. Jack Peterson wanted her specifically. Her decisions had secured millions in revenue. How could she tell Jon that the very thing eating her alive was also the first time she'd ever felt truly powerful? That Michael hadn't taught her to want more—he'd just shown her how good it felt to finally take it?

"It's just..." She searched for words, unable to lie. "Everything's been so intense lately. The pressure, the expectations. Sometimes I feel like I'm drowning."

Jon's expression softened with understanding. "I know the feeling. These past few months have been crazy for both of us." He moved closer, close enough that she could smell his cologne. "You've been carrying so much weight with the Fireball account."

She nodded, grateful he was giving her an out.

"That's why I think me taking the director role will make so much sense," Jon continued, unable to see the way her pupils dilated. "I could help you balance things better. Take some of the pressure off." His eyes brightened with the possibility, while hers burned with rage. "You wouldn't have to stress about so much of the administrative stuff. I could handle the budget oversight, the personnel management, all those headaches that take you away from the creative work you're so good at."

Wendy's stomach dropped. Even his attempt at support felt patronizing, as if her struggles were simply a matter of being overwhelmed rather than what they actually were.

"That's sweet of you," she managed, meaning the sentiment if not agreeing with the solution.

"I really think it could work." His enthusiasm was building now, the way it does when he solves logical problems. "We'd be the perfect team. We could revolutionize how the company approaches major accounts."

Revolutionize. Like the way she had just done with Fireball? All by herself.

"It would be amazing," she said, because what else could she say?

Jon reached for her hand, his fingers intertwining with hers. She squeezed them affectionately. He was trying, she could see that. He recognized something was wrong with her, and offered a solution. Even if she didn't agree with the solution—even if she thought it was patronizing—at least he was trying.

"Are we good?" he asked.

"We're good." She squeezed back, anchoring herself in the warmth of his palm against hers.

Around them, conversations began shifting toward the small stage area where a microphone stood waiting. The formal part of the evening was beginning, and with it, whatever Michael had planned for his moment in the spotlight.

"Come on," Jon said, tugging gently at her hand. "Sounds like they're getting ready for the speeches."

She let him lead her back toward the small row of tables, their fingers linked, moving through the crowd together. Jon was her anchor in every storm, steady and reliable, always there to pull

her back to safety. But lately the swells were rising, the pull beneath her feet growing stronger. Each lunch with Michael, each lie by omission, each moment she chose the intoxicating burn of power over honesty dragged her farther from shore. Somewhere between Michael's office and Brian's praise, between the taste of Fireball and the promise of bigger projects, Wendy began to wonder how much strain that anchor could take before the chain snapped and everything she'd built with Jon went under.

Brian took the stage first, thanking everyone for attending and reiterating how sorry he was that it was under these circumstances. He spoke about family, loyalty, and respect, all tenets of what Buckeye Branding stood for, before formally announcing Michael as the company's new Vice President and welcoming him onto the stage.

The lights dimmed as Michael took his spot on the small stage, making Brian turn sideways in order to move past him. The applause was thunderous, and Wendy found herself leaning forward in her chair, drawn by what Michael may have to say.

"Thank you, Brian," he started, looking out over the crowd like a king. "Just a few short months ago, life at Buckeye Branding was very different. We had smaller accounts, and while we did more than enough business to keep the lights on, we weren't exactly swimming with the big fish."

He looked around the room, locking eyes with Wendy. "We had a leader who was more concerned about his... personal relationships than that of the partnerships we were building." Behind him, Brian fidgeted nervously. He had told Michael he didn't want to dwell on Marcus and Ava. He needed to make this quick.

"All of that changes today." Polite applause rippled through the audience. "We are now partnered with one of the largest whiskey brands in the nation. A company that just today has all but guaranteed additional long-term partnerships." Wendy's pulse quickened; he was talking about her success.

"This success didn't happen by accident. It happened because we have team members who refuse to settle for good enough—who see opportunity where others see risk." His smile widened as his gaze found Wendy's. "We've learned that success requires leaders who understand priorities and recognize talent regardless of... previous assumptions."

Wendy felt herself blush under his deliberate stare.

"Professionals like Wendy Taylor, whose strategic instincts and unwavering commitment to excellence turned what could have been our biggest failure into our greatest triumph."

Jon's hand found her thigh, squeezing gently as heat flooded Wendy's chest. She felt the weight of dozens of gazes, the murmured appreciation of colleagues who finally saw her as more than Jon's wife or the former model.

"I had the privilege of witnessing this firsthand during our trip to New Orleans," Michael continued, his gaze holding hers. "Watching Wendy in action, seeing that fire in her eyes when she really wanted something..." He let the pause stretch just long enough to make her pulse quicken. "The way she went after it—relentless, uncaring—until she had exactly what she asked for."

Molten heat shot through Wendy's core as the double meaning hit her. Her face flared crimson as images flashed through her mind. The way she kneeled before him in his hotel room, the way her body responded when she saw his size, the sheer amount of... She forced her breathing steady, scanning the shadowed room to make sure no one else caught the true weight of his words.

"Relax," Jon said, squeezing her knee. "You deserve every bit of this recognition. Michael's right, you've worked so hard for this moment."

Wendy managed a nod, not trusting her voice as Michael watched her from the stage.

"That level of dedication, that willingness to do whatever it takes. That's what I expect from each and every one of you as we work to be the biggest marketing company in the great state of Ohio." Cheers erupted from around the room as Michael gave a small nod and turned to head off stage.

As the crowd began to disperse, Michael made his way down from the stage, accepting congratulations and handshakes. When he reached their table, Jon stood immediately.

"Great speech, Michael. Well-deserved promotion."

"Thank you, Jon. I appreciate the support." Michael's handshake was firm, professional. "It's been great of you to lend me your wife during all of this. I wouldn't be here without her."

Wendy shot up beside her husband, still struggling to compose herself after Michael's loaded words. Her legs felt unsteady, her pulse refusing to slow.

"I um... yeah of course," Jon said, confused by Michael's wording. "She's pretty great."

"She's actually phenomenal. And also standing right here, thank you very much," Wendy said, finding her voice in an attempt to put a stop to whatever it was Michael was trying to do.

Jon let out a nervous laugh before turning it into a yawn and checking his watch.

"I can get a car home if you want to call it an early night," Wendy said, running her hand through Jon's hair. "I know you have that run early tomorrow morning."

"You sure?" Jon hesitated, looking back at Michael. Something felt off, but he attributed it to the night he'd had. "I could stay a bit longer."

"No point in both of us being exhausted." She squeezed his hand, then leaned in close to ensure Michael couldn't hear her whisper. "It will give me a chance to put in that good word for you."

Jon's fears melted away; he was just being paranoid. "Congrats again on the promotion," he said, reaching out and shaking Michael's hand. Then he kissed Wendy's cheek. "Don't leave me waiting too long," he said before turning to walk away.

"Me either," Michael said with a chuckle, causing Wendy to spin around just as he dropped a keycard into her purse. "After all, I think I've been well behaved."

Wendy's face went white as she watched Michael's retreating figure interject himself into another conversation. She'd nearly forgotten about the promise she'd made earlier today at lunch. He'd been pleasuring her all week while she sat in the empty director's chair fantasizing about what the future would hold. Now he expected reciprocation.

She moved toward the bar, trying to escape the thought. The bartender had another shot of Fireball waiting before she even arrived. She set her purse down, the keycard visible against the dark leather, taunting her.

The excuse formed automatically. She could go upstairs to discuss Jon's promotion, a perfectly legitimate business meeting. But it crumbled immediately. She wasn't going up there for Jon's career. She was going because those lunch sessions had revealed something darker in herself. Because his hunger made her feel powerful; it had awakened something insatiable in her.

The liquid courage only added to her anxiety as she weighed her decision. She glanced around the ballroom; it seemed larger now that people were leaving. There were still enough stragglers that her lingering wouldn't raise suspicion. Michael was gone, probably already waiting in his room. She pulled out her phone, her lifeline, pulling up the Uber app as she considered all the reasons she should leave.

But safety wasn't what made her blood sing. Safety didn't give her the rush she'd felt when Michael dropped to his knees in front of her, when she'd controlled every moment of his pleasure.

Her feet carried her toward the elevator bank before her mind fully committed. When the brass doors slid open, her reflection stared back from the polished interior. Gone was the newly promoted account manager who'd arrived earlier that evening on Jon's arm. This was someone else. Someone who wanted more and knew exactly how to get it. Gold sequins caught the light as they swirled around the elevator like a nightclub, her dress dipping lower on her chest than she'd ever dared.

Gold Dress Wendy smiled at her reflection as the elevator began its ascent.

Time to show Michael exactly who held the real power.

Room 847 was the topmost floor of the Marriott. Wendy stood in front of the door, the keycard trembling in her hand. The hallway was empty in both directions, but Wendy still looked over her shoulders before holding the card up to the magnetic lock. The soft click as it disengaged took her breath away.

Wendy pushed the door open slowly, half expecting to see Ava and Marcus standing there, judging her. Instead, it was Michael whom she saw. He was standing in front of the window, unfazed by someone walking into his room. She took a cautious step forward, allowing the door to quickly shut behind her.

"You sure took your time," he said, not bothering to turn around. He'd taken off his suit jacket and tie. The cuffs of his dress shirt were rolled up. The city sprawled beneath him, making him seem even larger. From this angle, he certainly looked every bit an executive.

"I wasn't sure I was even coming." Wendy took another step inside. She expected to feel nervous, anxious. Instead, there was a confidence in the way she held herself.

"I never had any doubt." He turned, the moonlight cutting across his face, stripping away the executive veneer. In this light, he looked more ogre than man. His shirt sagged untucked over the swell of his stomach, the fabric pulling where the buttons strained. The roundness of his face seemed exaggerated in the pale light, jowls soft and loose beneath his jaw.

Wendy averted her eyes, taking in the surroundings of the room instead. There was a single king-sized bed against the wall and a chair in the corner covered in clothes and empty bags of potato chips. "If you're going to be an asshole, I can still leave."

Michael laughed, stepping out of the moonlight and closing the distance between them. "God, I hope you never lose that fire." His eyes studied her, making no apologies for the way he spoke to her.

"Actually..." She ran her palms against the front of her dress. "I'm here for Jon." She closed her eyes, cursing herself for even muttering the words.

Michael halted mid-step, head tilting as if she'd just said something amusing. In two strides he was behind her, the heat of his presence brushing her exposed back. His eyes traced the length of her spine to the curve of her ass. "Really? Well, that tracks. He's always had that... cuck energy."

"What? No, not like that. Jesus, Michael." She rounded the table in the center of the room, keeping her distance from him as she approached the window. "He... he wanted me to put in a good word for him. About the director position."

Michael's expression shifted; it seemed Wendy was full of surprises tonight. For a moment, he said nothing, he just watched her look out the window at the world beneath them. Slowly, he crossed the room toward her, stopping just behind her without actually touching her. Far below, the people looked small enough to crush with a fingertip.

"Is that what you want?" he asked. His voice was soft, almost soothing. "I didn't picture you as the type to settle."

'Settle' she hated that word. Her entire career she'd heard some variation of that, all said in a way to try to hold her back. *Be grateful for what you have. Don't reach too high. Know your place.* Was that really what she was doing, or was Ava right all along? Was Michael manipulating her?

His hands came to rest on her shoulders. While expected, there was a tenderness that she hadn't accounted for, a warmth that shot through her body. "If you'd rather I give the promotion to him than to you, then just say the word." He leaned in, his voice soft. "You're the boss".

Why was it so easy for Michael to give her control, to let her make her own decisions. But with Jon, it was like pulling teeth, like nothing she did could possibly be good enough to warrant the next step.

But his hands were so warm, and the way he looked at her through the glass... like she was capable of anything.

His palms slid slowly down her arms, fingertips grazing her skin. Sparks seemed to leap between them at every point of contact. "There's a reason people like us are up here, looking down on the rest of the world. Most people spend their entire lives down there... wishing for just one shot at this kind of power."

People like us. Michael actually believed they were cut from the same cloth. He saw her willingness to play his game and thought she was just another predator in a pretty package. But the Memphis pivot proved he was wrong. She was doing what she needed to do to even the playing field, to get what she had earned. He was the one taking advantage, using underhanded tactics. The view from here may be the same, but how they got here couldn't be more different.

She pressed her palm against the cool glass, imagining herself in an office like this. Corner suite, executive wing, the kind of woman kids aspired to be like.

His touch shifted, hands curving over her hips, his fingertips inches from the swell of her ass. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her neck, could smell the faint burn of liquor on it. "You've had a taste of that life. Do you really want to give all of that away?"

"I..." Wendy held her breath, not because she didn't know what she wanted, but because she was afraid to say it out loud. As much as Gold Dress Wendy wanted to take over, the old Wendy still clung to her last strand of dignity.

"I want to be a good wife to Jon," she whispered, her voice catching on the confession. "But..."

"But what?" In the reflection of the window, Wendy caught the smirk on his face and the predator-like gaze in his eyes. She wasn't sure what she hated more, what she was about to say or that he already knew she would say it.

"I want what I've earned." The words came out stronger than she'd intended.

Michael's hands shifted, fingers splaying across her ass, even as his voice took on that familiar mentoring tone that had guided her. "You know what Jon doesn't understand? The real cost of being director. The weight of it." His lips brushed the shell of her ear. "He thinks he's protecting you with all that talk about you not being ready, but he's actually stunting your growth."

She found herself nodding, unconsciously agreeing to everything Michael was saying. He was right. Jon was already talking about taking away some of her responsibility, all under the guise of helping her.

"You'd be doing him a favor by taking this position," Michael continued, his hands digging deeper into the soft flesh of her ass. "Think about it. Could Jon handle people like Jack Peterson? The pressure, the constant decision-making... the politics?" His voice dropped lower. "He would have never made that Memphis call. Too afraid of the risk, too focused on the numbers to see the real opportunity."

A warmth engulfed Wendy, burning hotter with each word Michael uttered.

"He'd be in over his head," Michael whispered, and the familiar phrase sent fireworks through her system. "Stressed to no end. Is that really what you want for the man you love?"

The logic was intoxicating, wrapping around her guilt and transforming it into something that felt almost noble. The warmth burned hotter, brighter. Michael was right. Jon wouldn't just hold her back. He would fail, miserably.

Her breathing quickened, hips betraying her as they rolled instinctively in Michael's hands. "I made Jack see our vision. I made the Memphis call that resulted in a twenty-three percent profit increase." Each word came faster now, years of suppressed frustration pouring out. Her body pressed against Michael's hands, seeking more of his gratifying touch. "He thinks I need more experience? I have all of the experience."

"That's right." His voice was like gasoline. "You're the one Jack Peterson specifically requested. You're the one who saw the opportunity everyone else missed."

"I deserve that promotion." Her body exploded, the heat consuming her. "Not because of how I look. Not because someone's doing me a favor. Because I earned it."

"Yes." His hands slid up her sides, cupping her breasts. "There she is."

She turned in his arms, her back now against the window, the cool glass a stark contrast to the heat radiating from his body. The city lights created a halo behind her, making her look ethereal, untouchable.

"Good," Michael said with a grin. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way..." his hands came to rest on her shoulders, applying steady pressure. "I believe you made me a promise at lunch today."

"Well," Wendy bit her lip, a hint of seduction in her voice. "I suppose you have been a good boy." She sank to her knees without much resistance, looking up at Michael through her lashes so as not to break eye contact.

She let her hands rest on his thighs as he slipped the straps of her dress down her arms. "You know, I wasn't kidding when I said I never do this."

"Sounds like Jon needs a lesson in being more assertive," Michael said, moving his hands to his belt to unfasten it. His large gut lifted in the process, giving Wendy an unobstructed view of the outline of his manhood. "Maybe you can show him a thing or two when you become his boss."

A soft, unexpected moan escaped Wendy's lips. She wasn't sure if it was from the talk of promotion, the suggestion that Jon should be more aggressive, or the way Michael's cock continued to expand after he unbuttoned his pants.

"So, when are you going to announce it?" she asked, feeling her dress slip past her elbows and fall off her chest. She saw his eyes go dark, he wasn't expecting that question, not now, not with her...

"Take it out," Michael demanded, ignoring her question and turning the tables.

Her heart hammered against her exposed chest, her nipples hard despite the warmth coursing through her body. She sucked on her lower lip, still unsure why her body was reacting the way it was, even while unzipping him.

"Someone's excited," she teased, reaching into his slacks, her soft hands running along his shaft.

"Indeed, somebody is," he taunted, reaching out and pinching her diamond-hard nipple.

"Ahhhh." The rough treatment made the heat radiating from between her legs magnify. Her fingers curled around his shaft, unable to make her fingers meet.

"Jon doesn't treat you like this, does he?" Michael tweaked her nipple again, eliciting another soft moan. "He's too gentle, too timid. He has no idea how to really get you going."

Her grip tightened, making Michael cry out. "Careful, big boy. You seem to have forgotten who is in control here." She loosened her grip, stroking him slowly. "If you don't want me getting up and leaving then I suggest you keep my husband out of it."

Michael's eyes darkened as Wendy's strokes sped up. "Of course." He released her nipple, allowing his fingers to slide through her hair. "Director Taylor. Whatever you say."

"Mmmm, good boy," she teased, brushing her hair out of her face and letting her head slide forward into his lap.

Michael groaned, feeling the warmth of her breath against his manhood. He wanted to push his hips forward, to take her mouth like he'd done before. But he knew patience was the better option. He saw the intoxicated look in Wendy's eyes, understood exactly what was turning her on.

"So, about that timeline..." she looked up at him through her lashes, her tongue hanging out just past her lips, not quite making contact with his shaft.

"Two months," Michael said, a little too fast. She was good at this, and he felt his self-control slipping by the second.

Wendy pulled back slightly. "Not good enough."

His grip tightened in her hair, but he didn't pull her forward. "Fine, next month. We can't move too quick or people will..."

Her tongue ran across the underside of his cock as she held the base, angling it at Michael's gut. "Good answer."

Michael released a strangled gasp, causing Wendy to practically drip with desire. The power she had in this moment was staggering, her body aching for release.

Michael smiled, looking down at the woman kneeling before him. He could see the hunger in her eyes. "By this time next month you'll be Director Taylor. The one making decisions not just on the Fireball account, but every account in the department."

A faint smile formed on her lips as she grazed the ridge of his cockhead. She was lost in a haze of lust. She ran her tongue along his glans, ensuring he was nice and wet. Then, without breaking eye contact, she took the tip into her mouth.

"Ohhh fuck," Michael groaned, the soft, wet feeling of her mouth wrapped around him making his toes curl. Wendy moaned as well, caught between the rush of power and the creeping surrender that felt as inevitable as it was intoxicating.

"Jesus, you're good at that. Maybe even the best ever." Michael's words dissolved into a strangled groan. His hands tangled in her hair, then released, then gripped again, like he was fighting for control of his own body.

A 'pop' vibrated off the walls as Wendy released him from her mouth. "Maybe?" she teased, before taking him back into her wet suction. He watched as half his manhood disappeared, her tongue swirling in zig-zags across the most sensitive parts of him.

"A little more practice and there won't be any doubt." He stroked her hair, encouraging her to bob a little faster, to take him a little deeper. "Are you able to take Jon this deep?"

"Mmmppphh," she moaned around his cock, tears streaking down her face from choking. "I told you to keep my husband out of this," Wendy warned, with a flash of anger in her eyes as she pulled off his glistening shaft.

"Relax," Michael chuckled. "I'm just trying to figure out if you're good enough to take it all. Or if we're going to need more practice."

Her pussy tingled at the words. She wanted to be angry at Michael, to tell him this wasn't going to happen again and he should shut up and enjoy it. But as her tongue snaked down his shaft she couldn't help but unconsciously grind her thighs together.

"Mmmm yesssss. I'm glad to see you still remember what I like." Michael watched with a satisfied smile as Wendy pumped his cock faster, her lips closing around his freshly shaved sac.

She kept her eyes on Michael's face as her tongue flicked over the other swollen weight. She knew at some point he was going to cum. She had no intention of letting him finish in her mouth or across her face; the humiliation of last time still burned in her memory. This time, she'd feel the moment building, then angle him toward his own stomach. Let him see how it felt.

She kissed her way up his length, feeling the steady throb of his pulse beneath the thick veins, each beat stoking her urge to please him. "Has anyone been able to get the whole thing in their mouth?" She didn't mean for it to come out so inquisitive, but the competitor in her had to know. Her tongue lazily circled his crown while she waited for his response.

"Only one," he said, fisting his hands in her hair and guiding her lips back around him. This time she managed a little more than half before pausing to take a steadying breath. "I bet you could do it though." His fingers massaged her scalp, letting her adjust to his size. "I bet you could get it down your throat."

The reassuring words, paired with her competitive spirit, were like a drug to Wendy. She ached to touch herself, but forced every ounce of focus onto the task at hand. Drawing in one last deep breath through flared nostrils, she sank lower onto the monster before her, taking another inch or two until it pressed against the back of her throat.

The thickness was unyielding, and with nearly three-quarters of him between her lips, her throat rebelled, convulsing around him. His cock arched in her grasp, heavy enough to curve under its own weight. The spasms sent a shiver up his spine, but her watery eyes and the muffled choke had her pulling back. Frustration flared in Wendy's chest, she was close.

She coughed into her hand, catching her breath, feeling her heat sliding down her inner thigh.

Michael cupped her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. "It's okay," he said, voice warm and sure. "You'll do better next time. These are still world class."

"Who said there was going to be a next time?" she asked, even as she allowed him to nestle himself between the soft swell of her breasts. She pressed them together, catching her lip between her teeth as the slick head disappeared into the valley of her cleavage as his hips began to rock.

Before she could protest, he eased her down, nestling himself between the soft swell of her breasts. She instinctively pressed them together, the slick head disappearing into the valley of her cleavage as his hips began to rock. The heat of his skin and the slickness from her mouth made each stroke glide, his shaft throbbing against her chest with each pass.

Her hands slid beneath her breasts, pressing them tighter around him. The weight of him dragged along her skin, hot and slick, and she began to sync her movement with his hips. Every time the head pushed through at the top, she'd give it a slow swirl of her tongue before letting it disappear again into the warm, yielding valley.

"Mmm, are you going to cum for me now Michael? I can tell by your breathing you're getting close." she murmured, looking up at him with a spark in her eye.

Michael groaned, his fingers flexing against her scalp. "And I can tell by yours you're just as turned on as I am. I bet the hot little pussy of yours is drenched right now isn't it?"

Wendy ignored the jab, even as she felt her juices continue to pool. Instead, she focused on getting Michael off. Her breasts bounced around him, the glide becoming wetter with every pass, and she found herself chasing his reactions. Each strained breath, each twitch of his hips, made her push harder, squeeze tighter. She was panting, she was so eager to see him break.

"Give it to me big boy. You know you want to. Don't my tits feel good? Don't you want to cum in my mouth?"

The crown began to linger at the top of each stroke, fat and flushed against her chest, and she leaned forward to take it between her lips. Just the tip, just enough to push him over the edge, she told herself. But his groan deepened, and the salty heat on her tongue made her forget the exit she'd planned.

"Arrrggh, FUCK!" Michael growled as his cock exploded in Wendy's mouth. He held her head as the first blast erupted and struck the back of her throat, making her gag and wrench free with a startled noise.

The second spurt caught her under the chin, warm and slick, sliding down to her chest. Before she could even wipe it away, another hit her cheek, the heat spreading across her skin. Swearing under her breath, she fumbled his shaft into position, forcing it to angle upward so the last pulses painted his stomach instead of her face.

"Jesus," she whispered, sitting back on her heels as she struggled to catch her breath. Her cheeks were flushed, not just from exertion. Embarrassment burned through her, tangled with disgust and a flash of anger. "There's so much." She wanted to sound angry as she wiped a sticky glob from her chin, but it came out sounding like wonderment.

"That was on the lighter side," he said, dismissively, as he fumbled to get his pants off his ankles so he could get to the bathroom for a towel.

Michael disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Wendy alone with the electric energy still coursing through her body. She wanted to be angry at what just happened, at the audacity of him going in her mouth. But there was something about the entire experience, about the way he just took what he wanted that made her want to surrounded completely.

When Michael returned with a damp towel, his expression carried his usual smugness. "Here," he said, tossing it at her.

She accepted it, wiping away the evidence while fire still burned in her core. As she stood, the gold dress surrendered to gravity, falling to the ground around her ankles in a shimmer of sequins. She stood there in nothing but her black lace thong and four-inch heels.

"I was right," Michael said, his gaze dropping to the obvious dampness. "You want this more than you're willing to admit."

Heat flooded her entire body as she realized how true that was. She was still burning, still aching for more. The dampness between her thighs was growing, she needed a release.

Instead of reaching for her dress, she walked toward the bed with a smirk, swiveling her hips like only someone with years of training could do. Her heels clicked against the hardwood floor, her gaze fixed on the powerful, thick shaft between Michael's legs. Even soft it still looked intimidating, making her mouth water in a way that was getting harder to deny. She wasn't just looking, she wanted a reaction, wanted to see how quickly she could make it respond again. The thrill of being able to control something that looked so powerful sent a shiver straight through her like nothing she had ever felt before.

"Well then," she said, settling onto the edge of the bed and opening her legs to his stare. "Why don't you come get a closer look at what you think you've done to me." She arched her eyebrow as she brought her leg up straight, reaching for the strap of heel.

Michael's eyes blazed as he moved toward her. "Leave the shoes on. I love a woman in sexy underwear and heels."

He kneeled in front of her, grabbing her hips and pulling them off the edge of the bed slightly. He pressed his nose to the center of the damp fabric inhaling her scent and causing her to squirm. "When are you going to admit that you're starting to look forward to these meetings?"

Wendy grabbed his thinning hair, grinding her slickness against his face. "When are you going to shut up and give me what I came for?" She closed her eyes, relishing in the friction sliding across her lips.

"You're so fucking wet. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you wanted this even more than I do," he teased, reaching up and grasping the side of her thong. He ran his tongue across his lips at the eagerness Wendy displayed, lifting her hips off the bed, and allowing him to drag the fabric down her legs.

Without waiting for Wendy to respond, he leaned in, dragging his tongue against her wet folds. Wendy shuddered, clawing at his head as her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Unngh, fuck," she whined, rolling her hips. She clamped her legs around his head, her heels driving into his back. "God, that feels so good."

"Better than Jon?" Michael knew he was playing with fire, but he was betting on Wendy being too far gone to care. When she opened her mouth to protest, he drove his tongue into her depths like a small cock.

"Ohhh, ffffff..." Her mouth worked hungrily, tongue darting in and out as if she could taste the pleasure building inside her, her body trembling with the need to let go. When Michael's fingers slid across her clit, she saw stars, ready for her impending orgasm... but it never came.

Instead, Michael removed his tongue from her velvet grip and stood between her legs.

"Wh... why'd you stop?" she complained, her hips still rolling against the imaginary cock between her legs.

"You already got yours in the office this afternoon. I think it's only fair that the next one is together, or not at all."

Wendy's eyes went wide as she realized what he was suggesting. She reached between her legs, determined to get herself off, but he denied her, swatting her hand away. In all of their encounters together, Michael had never denied her. Never challenged her when it came to this. "I...I told you before, Michael. I'm not going to fuck you."

"You said a lot of things before. Things that don't hold true anymore." He watched her chest, the way her breathing went from ragged to more controlled. He reached out, his fingers finding her clit again, adding just enough pressure her hips jerked off the bed.

"Ohhh," she whined, her thighs trembling as her toes curled into the sheets. She grabbed his wrist, understanding what he was trying to do, but only making him press harder against her nub. "I... oh. I can't. Just let me cum."

He pulled his hand away again, just as her orgasm was about to crest. He knew he had her, he just had to push a few more buttons. "Either you cum with me, or you wait until you get home to your husband. But, do you really think he can give you what you need?"

"I told you not to —"

He pushed two meaty fingers past her folds, her body immediately clamping down on them.

"Shiii... uuhhhhh, fucck." Her hands flew to his wrist, and then to her sides, digging at the sheets.

"Your body wants this, Wendy." He held his fingers up, letting her see how coated they were, her juices dripping down his arm. "You want this."

Her body ached from the denial, every nerve screaming. "I..." Her breathing was labored. "Even if I wanted to—you already went." A smile forming on her lips, she found the perfect excuse to get her out this situation and still get what she wanted. She lifted her head to look at the man between her legs. "You can't possibly be read—"

Her words caught as he shifted, the thick length of him sliding along her slick slit. The heat radiating from him was almost shocking, the weight of him, hard and pressing, caused her to cry out.

"H... how?"

Michael leaned down, taking her nipple into his mouth. "What? Are you not used to a man who can rise to the occasion?" He rocked against her again, the head of his cock nudging her entrance before gliding back up to her clit.

"Uhh... Uhh..." Wendy clenched her jaw, trying to ignore the electric pull between them, but her hips betrayed her, tilting just enough to chase the friction.

"That's it," he murmured, covering her entire chest with spit. "I know you want to feel it."

"I don't—" she started, but her voice cracked as he rolled his hips, sending a deep, throbbing pulse through her core. Her fingers fisted the sheets.

"Keep telling yourself that," he said, dragging his length slowly, deliberately, until her breath hitched on every pass.

Each stroke blurred the line between defiance and surrender, her resolve eroding with every molten sweep of his body against hers.

Michael's movements slowed, the head of his cock dragging in slick, lazy strokes over her clit. Wendy was shaking now, torn between shoving him away and pulling him closer.

"Michael..."

“Say it,” he murmured. “Say you want me to fuck you.”

“I... don’t.” The words came out tight, breathless, and her hips betrayed her again, keeping contact with his cock.

He shifted his angle just enough that, on the next stroke, the thick head of him slipped lower. It pushed past her clit, past the soft petals of her flesh and just barely inched into her entrance. The sudden stretch made her gasp, her body clenching around him instinctively.

“God...” she hissed, her hands flying to his chest, though she didn’t push him away. “You—” She swallowed hard. “Fuck, you feel so big.”

His smile widened. “That’s not even the tip. Just wait until—”

“No,” she gasped, pushing harder on his chest. “Do... do you have a condom?” Her stomach flipped, she couldn’t believe those words came from her mouth, but she was so close.

He sat back on his heels, watching her face. “I hate them.”

“What?” Her eyes snapped open, and for a moment he was worried he pushed her too far.

“I don’t like the way they feel.” He pushed just a fraction deeper, savoring the way she tightened, hoping she’d get it back. “Nothing between us. That’s how I want it.”

Her pulse was pounding in her ears now, and some buried instinct forced its way to the surface. “No. That’s not happening.” She pressed her elbows onto the bed, pulling herself a fraction of an inch away from him.

He chewed on his bottom lip, she was a stubborn one. “There’s one by your head. Top drawer.”

Her breath caught. She couldn’t tell if it was relief or dread as she turned just enough to glance at the nightstand.

“But,” he said, voice low and deliberate, “this is the only time I’m ever going to use one with you.”

Her gaze snapped back to his. “You don’t have to worry about that, because this is the only time I’m going to let it happen.”

The corner of his mouth curled as she opened the drawer, letting her believe for now that it was her win.

Wendy turned back to him, her hand trembling as she held the magnum between her fingers.

“Put it on,” he said with a confidence that made her want to run from the room just as much as it made her want to obey.

She bit her lip, recognizing the moment for what it was. Leaning forward, her eyes never left Michael’s slick shaft as she pinched the tip of the condom and rolled it slowly along his length, the latex stretching over him inch by inch.

With the last of her resistance slipping away, Michael pushed her onto her back. He loomed over her, cock poised at her entrance, his shadow falling across her bare chest.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

Her eyes flicked up, meeting his. Heat flared in his gaze, a steady, unblinking dominance that rooted her to the spot. The rest of the world vanished; there was only the weight of him between her thighs, the scent of sex thick in the air, and the pounding in her ears.

Wendy's breath caught. She didn't nod, didn't say yes, but her thighs parted slightly.

Michael's smirk deepened as he pushed forward, the first stretch of him drawing a gasp from them both.

"Oooohhh." Wendy's eyes slammed shut, the pressure and heat flooding her senses in a dizzying rush. She felt herself stretched to the brink, inch inch sliding deeper inside her. The sensation was unlike anything she'd known before. It was a perfect storm of ache and pleasure, sharp enough to steal her breath yet impossible to turn away from.

Above her, Michael's expression shifted, the usual smirk nowhere to be found. His jaw slackened, eyes half-lidded as the first tight pull of her body gripped him. For just a second, he forgot to move, caught in the shock of how good it felt.

He hadn't been sure this moment would ever come, not even while she had been rolling the condom down his length. But now, buried in her heat, he knew he would never be able to get enough.

"Christ..." he breathed, marveling at how tight and wet she was. The warmth of her body wrapped around him, her muscles drawing him deeper in with every shallow thrust.

"Unngh, fuck," she groaned, grabbing his bicep. "It's so... fuuuuck." Her hips lifted off the bed to meet his thrusts, driving him deeper inside her, the need to prove she could take all of him burning in her chest.

Beads of sweat formed on Michael's forehead, his thrusts matching her rhythm and meeting her halfway, each collision driving deeper into her. "Uhhhh... yes!" Wendy whimpered as her body began to wither beneath him.

Michael steadied her hips, holding her in place underneath him, fucking her faster and harder. She forgot to breathe, clawing at his chest as the pressure continued to build.

"Oohhhh... fuck... ugh, God... yes... yes... UGGGNNNGH!" Wendy screamed, her face flushed as an orgasm ripped through her, every nerve in her body on fire. Michael didn't let up. He drove into her harder, watching the muscles along her stomach ripple. He was thankful he'd cum earlier; otherwise, he'd be right there with her.

"Wait... wait," Wendy pleaded, swatting at Michael's chest as her orgasm began to fade. "Too much. Too sensitive. I need a minute."

Michael eased his pace, finally pulling free and letting her collapse back against the mattress. Her chest rose and fell in quick bursts, hair sticking to her flushed cheeks.

He stayed still for a moment, dragging in deep breaths, letting his own racing pulse settle. The truth was, he wasn't giving her this pause out of mercy. He could feel himself teetering on the edge, and if he didn't slow down, it would be over before he was ready.

Wendy slid herself up toward the headboard, her arms trembling slightly as she pushed back against the pillows. "Mmm... I'm done," she murmured, turning away from him. "I told you

before, I'm a one and done kind of girl. Sorry you couldn't get there again," she said, though her voice carried no hint of sadness.

Michael watched her with a faint smile, his gaze fixed on the way her thighs still glistened, the faint twitch of her hips as her body calmed. He said nothing, just stepped forward and caught her ankle, dragging her back down the bed.

"Michael—" she started, but her protest turned into a gasp as he pulled her hips back toward him.

"Just cause your pathetic husband can't get you off twice, doesn't mean I can't."

Before she could respond and tell him not to mention Jon, he pressed himself back inside with one hard thrust.

Wendy's eyes widened, her fingers clutching the sheets. "Hhhnn... oh, God..."

From this angle, Michael was able to drive even deeper into his employee's tight, trembling body. Each thrust buried him to the hilt, his hips slamming against her ass with a satisfying crack of flesh on flesh.

Wendy couldn't believe how good the new position felt. His thick cock dragged against her g-spot, making her bow her body back, as a new wave of fire engulfed her.

terrified of how quickly the pleasure was climbing, but his grip on her hips was unyielding.

"You feel that?" Michael's words were choppy, his own release sprinting closer. "Right... there."

She bit her lip, refusing to answer, but the heat flooding her face and the shiver that wracked her body betrayed her. "Uh, uh, oh, uh."

Michael planted one foot on the bed, angling himself for maximum leverage. The new depth made her cry out, the edge of her vision turning black as his pace quickened.

"Don't... ohhh God. Don't stop. Mmmmm, fuck, Michael. I'm close."

"God, you're squeezing me so fucking tight," he growled, feeling his impending release.

"Aaaagghhh, FUCK," Wendy's vision turned to black. An intense warmth spread out from her core and covered every inch of her body as she collapsed onto the bed.

Michael drove into her one last time, burying himself fully. The sound of their mingled moans and skin meeting filled the room, echoing in the haze of her fading climax.

She let the numbing bliss hold her, breathing in short, shaky bursts. Her thighs quivered with every aftershock. It had felt unreal, almost otherworldly. Never in her life had she believed she could come twice in a single encounter, much less with this intensity.

For a moment, she just lay there, chest heaving, the edges of reality soft and unfocused.

The sharp snap of latex broke through the haze. She blinked, disoriented, watching Michael toss the used condom aside.

"Even better than I expected," he said, his white shirt now clinging to him, translucent with sweat.

Her stomach clenched, but not for the reasons it should have. She wasn't drowning in regret, or shame, or the disgust she'd always imagined she'd feel if... this ever happened. What unsettled her most was the absence of those things.

Her gaze flicked down between them, to where his cock hung soft and spent. It had taken two rounds, but she had tamed it. The thought sent a flicker of satisfaction through her, a heady rush that she didn't want to admit.

She knew she needed to get home to Jon. She knew this was too far, that she could never let it happen again. But as she gathered herself, a small, stubborn ache coiled in her chest. Why, when she was so certain it had to end here, did the thought of never feeling this again make her feel... sad?

Executive Privilege Ch. 10

The studio lights felt hot against her skin as Wendy shifted slightly on the concrete steps they'd constructed for the photoshoot. She'd been a model for three years now. As soon as she turned 18 she made the decision to pursue the career. Up to this point, she had barely done anything meaningful. A couple of local ads here and there, barely enough to scrape by. But this had the opportunity to be huge. She was working with Richard Clemens, a bigshot photographer out of New York. One of the girls from a previous shoot gave her Richard's contact info and after some back and forth via text message he had flown out to Columbus for the day for some big regional magazine.

The black mesh top left little to the imagination, especially for someone with Wendy's measurements. Richard dismissed her concern, insisting the strapless bra would make it chic. "This is what all the models in New York are wearing," he assured her, even as Wendy tugged at the neckline.

Despite her reservations, she told herself she needed to trust the photographer. After all, he'd been doing this a lot longer than she had. The top was paired with black, wide-legged pants, and a pair of 6-inch black heels that she struggled to keep her balance in. Richard had assured her she'd look powerful in the pictures, like a CEO. But as she looked at herself in the mirror all she felt was exposed. Her hair fell across her shoulders, the only thing covering her exposed skin. Once again, she tugged at the front of the top, wishing she could get it to sit higher. No matter how Richard spun it, there was no way any version of these photos she'd ever want her parents to see.

"Gorgeous, absolutely stunning," Richard boasted from behind his camera, as she held her hands in front of her, sitting on the steps that were made to look like they led up to a beautiful mansion. "You're exactly what I've been searching for, Wendy. The camera adores you."

Pride swelled in Wendy's chest, melting away the unease she'd felt just moments before. She tilted her head, smiling at the camera like a lover. Maybe Richard was right, sitting here she did feel powerful.

"Reach back for me, sweetheart, and rest your hands on that backstep."

Wendy did as she was told, tossing her head back and forth, as the click of the camera took shot after shot.

"Beautiful, Wendy. You're a natural. Push your chest out a little for me, let's really grab their attention."

Wendy hesitated, the flush of pride washing away as quickly as it arrived. She swallowed the lump in her throat, forcing her smile back into place, and did as she was told. She convinced herself he was just trying to get different angles, to see what worked. But the way the mesh tightened across her chest, the way the top hung just a little lower, made her feel less like a model and more like merchandise.

"I have some connections in New York," Richard continued, lowering his camera as he stepped closer to her. "Fashion Week connections. Someone like you could really do well there." Each step narrowed the space between them, his eyes studying her in a way that made her feel even more exposed than the camera. "You have that it factor, Wendy. It's something that could take you to the very top of this industry."

"You... you think so?" Her pulse quickened, hands twisting together as she tried to rub the nerves away.

"Of course." His gaze lingered on the mesh panel, his tongue darting across his lips. "I know every major company in New York. You stick with me and the sky's the limit, baby."

Her face went pale, and she sat up a little straighter, palms brushing her thighs in four quick passes. She told herself he wasn't suggesting what she thought he was, but the way he was leering at her made it impossible to believe otherwise.

"So what do you say, sweetheart?" He reached out and brushed her bare shoulder with his hand. Goosebumps prickled across her skin, despite the panic racing through her system. "You scratch my back, I scratch yours." His fingers slid over the front of her shoulder.

The sheer fabric of her top felt impossibly thin now, every brush on contact a reminder of just how exposed she was. "I'm... um. I'm not sure I understand."

"Of course you do." He looked over his shoulder, ensuring no one else was around. "A smart girl like you. You must know this business is all about the connections you make." His hand slid across her collarbone. Suddenly she couldn't breathe.

Wendy bolted upright from the concrete steps, legs trembling so hard she nearly tripped on the fabric of her wide-leg pants. "... I need to." Her voice cracked on the last word, as she wobbled in her heels.

"Aww don't be like that," Richard chuckled, catching her wrist before she could back away. Tears welled in Wendy's eyes, she was starting to hyper-ventilate. "I work with beautiful women all the time, and I can assure you, none of them got to where they are today because of their talent. Well, at least not their talent in front of the camera." He gave her a wink that made her skin crawl. "Sweetheart, if you're not willing to play the game, you might as well pack up and go teach third grade. Because this industry? It will chew you up and spit you out without a second thought."

She opened her mouth to respond, to defend herself, to tell him she was different, that she was going to prove herself on merit and hard work. But as she opened her mouth, the warehouse began to shift and blur around the edges. The lights grew so bright everything turned white.

Suddenly, Wendy was no longer at her photoshoot. She was in a conference room, executives sitting around the circular oak table all staring at their phones. Beside her stood Michael. His suit carefully tailored to hide his bulk, his thinning hair slicked back. He was looking at Wendy the same way Richard had been. His gaze was hungry, wanting, yet it felt different.

"Your insights are absolutely brilliant, Wendy," Michael said, in a way that made her chest swell with pride. "But look at Jack." He nodded toward the head of the table where Jack sat scrolling. "You need to keep his attention."

Frustration sparked in her chest. He was right. She had the vision, all of the relevant information, but these CEOs acted like distracted children. How could she prove her worth if they couldn't be bothered to look up from their screens?

"You have everything you need right here to get their attention. Stop handicapping yourself and embrace your fire, Wendy." Unlike Richard, his hands never strayed. He just watched her, waited.

"You're right," she said, with a renewed confidence. "They just need a little reminder that what's happening here is more important than what's on their phone." Her fingers slipped across the buttons of her blouse. Each one like a shot of adrenalin through her veins. She smiled as heads snapped up one by one, their phones forgotten, their attention hers.

This was nothing like what Richard had done. Richard had been a creep, tried to paw at her. Jack's mouth hung open as her blouse slid off her shoulders and hit the floor. This wasn't about being taken advantage of, it was her choice, her fire.

"The consumer data shows clear preference patterns," she continued, unzipping her skirt. Everyone was watching her now, their phones a million miles away. "And if we leverage the premium positioning correctly..."

She stood nearly naked in the center of the boardroom, yet felt more powerful than she ever had fully dressed. She wasn't shy, or timid. She wasn't worried that someone would take advantage of her. She held every gaze. Controlled every breath. A warmth spread between her legs. She bit her lip, wondering if they could smell the arousal blooming from her, if they could sense how much this kind of power thrilled her.

For a second, she thought about Richard fucking Clemens, with his greasy ponytail, and his stupid camera. He wanted to use her, to use the promise of power in exchange for sex. Here, she was the one setting the terms. Here, her body amplified her voice, ensured she got what she had earned.

"I trust you'll find my projections to your liking, Mr. Peterson," she purred, as she climbed up on the conference table in front of Jack. She unclasped her bra, pressing it to her chest with one hand as her hair fell around her shoulders. "All we need is your signature on this three-million-dollar change order, and our partnership will be closer than ever."

Wendy's eyes snapped open to the pre-dawn darkness of her bedroom, her heart hammering against her ribs like a caged bird. The bedside clock read 5:47 AM, and Jon's side of the bed was already empty. He must have already left for his run. She sat up in the bed, brushing her sweat covered hair from her face, as she tried to shake the dream from her system.

She hadn't thought about Richard Clemens in years, had buried that humiliation so deep she'd almost convinced herself it had happened to someone else entirely. But lying here, her body still carrying the memory of Michael's touch from the night before, the parallel her subconscious had drawn felt brutally, undeniably obvious.

But it was different, wasn't it? Michael actually respected her intelligence, valued her insights in ways Richard never had. He wasn't some sleazy photographer trying to exploit her desperation. He was genuinely brilliant, and he recognized that same potential in her. She thought about New Orleans, about last night. Every decision was hers. Michael may have put the option in front of her, but unlike Richard he had given her a choice, allowed her to see the power she had.

Even as she formed the rationalization, though, she could hear Richard's mocking laughter echoing in her memory: *none of them got to where they are today because of their talent. Well, at least not their talent in front of the camera.* Her chest tightened. Wendy did have talent. Jack recognized her brilliance. Brian was practically gushing as he spoke to her last night. Her looks were just a means to an end. She was respected by those men, revered for her quick thinking.

She took a deep breath, laying back down in bed to try to fall back asleep. That dream had done a number on her, her heart was racing, her skin clammy. She pressed her thighs together. She was soaked. She wished Jon was back from his run. She fought the urge to touch herself, unsure of whose face would appear in her mind. The stress of the last few weeks had taken a toll on her. That was all it was. Her subconscious spinning out of control because of stress and lack of sleep.

It was just a dream, and she didn't need to read any more into it than that.

Sleep came in waves after that. Before she knew it, she heard the front door shutting, followed by the sound of Jon walking across the house to the kitchen. Wendy sat up in bed, pulling the sheet with her as she heard Jon near the bedroom. A dread seemed to fill her as the steps got closer, like she was afraid he'd be able to see her thoughts.

"Oh hey, you're already up," Jon said, appearing in the door. His grey t-shirt was soaked through with sweat, and he was toweling off his face.

"Yeah, couldn't sleep." She watched him as he lifted his shirt over his head, his flat stomach and toned chest coming into view. "How was your run?" She blinked and saw Michael behind her eyes. His large frame wedged between her legs, the way his gut seemed to press into her thighs moments before he—

"You okay? You look a little pale." He walked to the bathroom, turning the shower on, before reappearing at the door.

"Yeah, sorry. I... I think I drank a little too much last night."

"I get it," he said, walking over to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead. "You've been under a lot of stress lately. That's probably why things felt so awkward when you got home."

Wendy's stomach clenched, she had hoped he didn't notice. Coming home from the hotel, she was desperate to wash away Michael from her memory. Jon woke up as soon as she slipped into bed. She couldn't refuse him, not after what she'd just done. But every touch felt wrong, with every kiss she was sure he would taste the difference. Her mind kept drifting back to the hotel room. She'd never had multiple orgasms before, didn't even know it was possible for her. She was so lost in the comparison that by the time she realized Jon was already finishing, she hadn't even begun.

"It's fine, really," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed. He rubbed the back of his neck, not quite looking at her "It was probably on me. I'm still trying to get my head around Marcus being gone. I wasn't as focused as I should have been."

She rested her head against his shoulder, ignoring the salt and sweat clinging to his skin. The absurdity nearly made her laugh. Jon was apologizing for not satisfying her when she was the one who had betrayed him. With Michael, she had also discovered a kind of pleasure she hadn't even believed her body was capable of. Multiple orgasms, wave after wave, until she was left trembling. Now Jon sat here blaming himself, while she still carried the echo of another man inside her.

Jon was always like this, quick to shoulder blame that wasn't his. She used to find it endearing. Michael would never diminish himself like that. He was cocky to a fault, unapologetic in

everything he did. Yet as Jon's arm circled her waist and pulled her closer, a different hunger stirred. It wasn't gratitude for his gentleness. It was the electric pull toward Michael's kind of confidence, the kind that took what it wanted without asking permission first.

"We should probably start getting ready," she said, glancing at the clock. "I want to get to the bookstore before they get too busy."

Jon's eyes went wide. "I completely forgot that was today."

"You don't want to go?"

"I..." He took a deep breath. "I've been seeing Dr. Carson the last month or so. I have another appointment this morning."

Wendy studied his face. "You started seeing Dr. Carson again? Why didn't you tell me?" She was trying to act calm, she didn't want to jump to any conclusions. Jon had started seeing Dr. Carson after he accused his last girlfriend of cheating.

"I just..." he gave a nervous laugh. "I didn't want to worry you. I'm just trying to be a better version of myself. For you."

"Aww, baby, that's so sweet. You're already a great version of yourself." She gave a warm smile. "You get ready for your appointment. I can go to the bookstore alone."

"You sure you don't mind?"

"Of course. I'll even pick up the newest copy of the journal for you."

"Thanks, Wendy." He moved toward the bathroom, then paused at the doorway. "Hey, we never got a chance to really talk last night when you came in. How'd it go with Michael? Did you get a chance to mention me?"

She chewed at her cheek. She knew that conversation was coming, but still her hand drifted to her ring. "It was... productive. We talked about the Memphis expansion mostly."

"But did you bring up the director position?"

"We um..." *Put it on.* Wendy spun her ring frantically. Remembering the moment she completely submitted and gave Michael what she'd been denying him, the hunger in his eyes, the way it felt as he pierced her with his massive—

"Yeah, we discussed it. He said he's looking for someone who can take initiative."

His voice rang in her ear: *If you'd rather I give the promotion to him than to you, then just say the word.* The memory sent heat rushing through her. Michael was giving her his power, allowing her to make the decision. Meanwhile, Jon wanted the power for himself.

"That's incredible." Jon slipped out of his shorts, his cock springing free as he walked toward the shower with the door open. "Did he say anything else?"

Wendy's gaze held his manhood. He was soft, had just gotten back from a run, she didn't want to compare the two, but Michael's taunts whispered anyway: *Just cause your pathetic husband can't get you off twice, doesn't mean I can't.*

"N... no, nothing else. You should talk to him though. Speak up for yourself." Her chest tightened. "He likes that sort of thing."

Instead of getting into the shower, Jon appeared back in the door, a towel wrapped around his mid section. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"What?" Wendy felt the panic start to creep up her throat. How did he know? They were just having a normal conversation. Was there something in the shower? Some piece of Michael that she'd washed away but left forgotten in the tub?

"It just feels like you're holding something back." Steam was beginning to billow out of the bathroom, as Jon walked back over to the bed.

Her pulse spiked. "I... um... wh... What do you mean?"

"I don't know." He was studying her face now, those analytical eyes missing nothing. "It's like... you're being careful about what you're saying. Like you're editing."

Panic clawed at her throat as she held back tears. "I'm not editing anything." Her response was too loud, angrier than she meant for it to be.

"It feels like you're hiding something from me," he said quietly. "And I get it. If the conversation didn't go well, just tell me. I know Michael doesn't exactly love me. So if he laughed at the idea or shut it down, you don't have to spare my feelings."

Relief shuddered out of her. She grabbed his hand. "He didn't laugh," she said, which was true. "But you know Michael. He can be... demanding." She squirmed in the bed. "Just talk to him. Show him you can command a room and not back down." Michael's voice continued in her ear: *He's always had that... cuck energy.*

Jon nodded, already planning his approach. "You're right." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Thank you. For advocating for me. I know it probably wasn't easy."

Jon turned and headed for the shower, leaving Wendy alone with her thoughts and a light throbbing between her legs.

The business section of Barnes and Noble was nearly empty, exactly what Wendy had hoped for on a Saturday morning. She wanted to get lost in the books, to forget all about Jon's therapy appointment and things Michael had made her discover about herself. She glanced over the leadership titles. Books like *The First 90 Days*. *Good to Great*. *Lean In* catching her eye. If she was going to be a director, then she would earn it just like she'd earned everything else up to this point.

"Wendy?"

She turned to find Marcus emerging from between the psychology shelves, a couple of larger books tucked under his arm. He wore a pair of blue jeans and an SNL t-shirt. He almost looked younger, like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Then she saw his eyes. They were red and puffy, with bags that suggested he hadn't slept in weeks. A low ache began to form in her chest.

"Marcus, hi." Her smile came naturally. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"Picking up some reading for Jon?" He nodded toward her armload of books, his expression warm with what appeared to be genuine interest.

Wendy laughed, unconsciously pulling the books closer to her body. "Something like that, I guess." She wasn't sure why she lied instead of just admitting they were for her. She had no reason to be ashamed of all that she'd accomplished so far.

"Glad to hear something positive is coming out of this whole mess." Marcus's eyebrows lifted slightly. Before Wendy had a chance to ask what that meant, he pressed on. "Congratulations are in order. I've been following the Fireball coverage in the trade publications. Impressive stuff."

Her annoyance died as a swell of confidence spread through her chest and Wendy straightened. "Thanks. The consumer insights were spot-on, and I pushed hard for the authentic expansion strategy. The Memphis rollout exceeded every projection I had." She realized she was talking faster, her excitement bubbling over. "And honestly, the social media engagement surprised even me."

The slightest smirk formed on Marcus's lips as Wendy paused for air. "Michael's... business acumen seems to have rubbed off on you."

The comment floated past her like background noise. She could tell by the look on his face that he didn't mean that as a compliment. But Marcus had already moved on. "Have you talked to Ava recently?"

Wendy's grip tightened on the books, their weight suddenly more noticeable. "No, I... things have been so busy with the campaign."

Marcus nodded, the smirk on his face replaced by a look of sadness. "She's been taking it pretty hard. The firing, I mean. David asked her to leave. He's considering divorce."

"Oh God." Wendy's free hand went to her mouth, covering it in shock. David and Ava had always had such a great relationship, she didn't think they would actually get divorced over rumors. Her gaze darted to Marcus's left hand. He still wore his ring, did that mean his relationship was okay?

"She had to move back in with her parents while she looks for work. She's having trouble finding references, obviously."

Guilt continued to twist in Wendy's chest. For a moment she considered dropping the books and rushing out of there. She didn't want to be having this conversation. It wasn't her fault Ava had gotten caught up in all of this. Ava wanted to act like some sort of hero, but Wendy told her, she didn't need saving. "I... I should have called."

"I think we both know why you didn't"

Panic flared in her throat. Marcus didn't look angry, or judgmental, just disappointed, like a father who found out his daughter was working as a stripper. "I don't know what she told you—"

"It doesn't matter now." Marcus's voice was dismissive, in a way that made her blood turn to ice. "What's done is done."

But it did matter to Wendy. The way he'd said it, the implication that Ava had shared whatever she thought she'd seen. Her grip on the books shifted, no longer heavy with guilt but firm with purpose.

"I think Ava realizes she let office politics get in the way of what was important."

"I told her she needed to worry about herself. That whatever she thought was going on wasn't." Wendy felt herself getting more defensive. Marcus's stare more accusatory than when the conversation first started.

"She was worried about you. We both were."

"There was nothing to be worried about," her voice started to rise. "She was manufacturing problems that didn't exist. I'm better off now than I ever was before."

"She was trying to protect you," he said, keeping his voice low and calm.

"I didn't need protecting!" Her voice carried, the few people in the bookstore turning to look at her. She took a breath, composing herself. "Some people know how to adapt to new situations, and others don't. Ava couldn't accept the fact that I was succeeding without her."

Marcus expression shifted, like he was looking at someone he no longer recognized. "I don't think she saw it that way."

"Of course she didn't. Ava always thought she knew what was best for everyone else."

The silence that followed stretched for minutes. Marcus was studying her face with an intensity that should have made her uncomfortable, but instead she felt a strange sense of power. She'd faced down his judgment and emerged stronger.

Marcus nodded slowly. "Those books aren't for Jon, are they?"

Wendy smirked, a new sense of pride rushing through her that made her stand a little taller. Marcus had already begun to walk away before she could answer.

"Take care of yourself, Wendy." He paused, eyeing the books in her arms. "And Jon."

The mention of her husband felt oddly pointed, but Marcus was already gone, disappearing between the psychology shelves like a ghost.

She made her way to the checkout counter, the encounter replaying in her mind. Had she been too harsh? Maybe. But she'd stood her ground, refused to let herself be made to feel guilty for succeeding where others had failed. There was something oddly satisfying about that. Marcus had once felt like this powerful VP whose sheer presence intimidated her. Now, she'd faced down his judgment and emerged stronger, ultimately made him back down because he knew she was right. Some people understood how to seize opportunity. People like Marcus let fear and judgment get in the way.

As she handed her books to the cashier, she could almost hear Michael's voice in her ear, that conversation from the hotel room echoing through her thoughts: *Most people spend their entire lives wishing for just one shot at this kind of power.*

Ava had missed her shot. Had let fear and moral superiority get in the way of real opportunity. Wendy wouldn't make the same mistake.

The weekend went in the blink of an eye, with no mention of Marcus or Ava. Jon came back from his therapy session with a smile on his face and thanked Wendy for the latest edition of the business journal. She was almost sad to see it go.

Before Wendy realized it, Monday was already here and she was back to sharing an office with Jon, looking over the Fireball numbers for any type of discrepancy. She'd decided to wear a white silk blouse today, and smiled to herself every time she caught Jon stealing glances at her exposed cleavage. She'd adjusted the neckline perfectly to ensure it couldn't be considered inappropriate, but left just enough on display to ensure she was the focus of every room she entered. She was done dressing to try to blend in. Now, she was dressing to show off, to wield the power she had.

"These numbers are incredible," Jon said. They'd been staring at the same screen for the last ten minutes. "I've run the projections three times. The Memphis expansion is outperforming every model we built by at least thirty percent."

Wendy leaned back in her chair, unable to hide the smile on her face. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Not at all, but..." he rubbed his eyes like that would somehow change what he saw on the screen. "Wendy, if these numbers are right this will be our most successful campaign ever."

The satisfaction in her chest expanded. It wasn't very often she'd seen Jon bewildered, especially when it came to numbers. She was giddy with excitement, like she was riding the biggest high of her life. Just a couple of short months into her job as an account manager and she had already produced the most successful campaign in the company's history. There was no way anyone could say she wasn't ready for the director role now.

"I guess I'm a natural," she said with a giggle. "Maybe I need to set my sights higher."

Jon's eyebrows rose slightly, but before he could respond, Wendy gestured toward their empty water bottles on the desk. "Could you grab us some water? I'm parched, and I have a meeting with Michael later to go over all of this. I'm sure it will be a long one."

She realized too late how it sounded. But her muscles already buzzed with the drug of validation. The careless phrasing only added to the heat. The implication struck like a spark, hot and unexpected but not unwelcome.

"Um... yeah, of course." Jon stood, grabbing both of the bottles. "Be right back."

She watched him walk toward the break room, his shoulders slightly hunched like he was still trying to figure out why the numbers didn't make sense. She felt bad for him. He couldn't see the world the way she did. It was as if he couldn't fathom how she could be so good at her job.

"Wendy?"

Jenny had turned the corner and appeared in the doorway. The younger woman wore a navy dress that was about the same cut as Wendy's, but of course she didn't look nearly as good in it. It was like she was screaming for attention, but she was unsure how to capture it.

"Jenny." Wendy tried to keep her face neutral, waiting to see what this was about.

"I hope I'm not interrupting." Jenny stepped inside but didn't close the door. It was a small detail that made her seem less calculated than Wendy remembered. "Look, I've been thinking about the other night. At the party." She ran a hand through her hair, messing up her careful styling. "I keep thinking about how I must have come across and feel like an idiot"

Wendy sat up a little straighter, her eyebrow raising.

Jenny kept looking at her feet, barely making eye contact. "I realize now how that looked, like I was trying to insert myself into something I hadn't earned a place in."

The admission caught Wendy off guard. She'd expected defensiveness, maybe even competition, but this felt genuine. "It's fine. You were just excited."

"But it wasn't fine." Jenny moved closer. "You and Michael have done something with Fireball no one else has. I hear the whispers, see the coverage." She bit her lip. "Watching you and Michael. Seeing the ideas you two come up with together. It's like... magic. It's stuff they don't teach in marketing classes."

Recognition shot through her like a live wire. The kind she'd been craving for years. Jenny was finally starting to understand what she'd accomplished. She was finally seeing past the surface to the strategic thinking that had made it all possible.

"Sorry, I'm sort of fangirling." She brushed a strand of hair from her face. "I want to learn from someone who's actually achieved what I'm hoping for someday. The way people talk about you in the halls. The respect you've garnered. I want that."

The flattery was expertly delivered, hitting every note Wendy needed to hear. People valued her mind. Her work was being discussed, analyzed, admired. She wasn't just the pretty face who'd gotten lucky.

"That's... that's very kind of you to say."

"Look, I know this might sound weird, but would you maybe consider... I don't know, letting me shadow you sometimes? Not officially or anything." Jenny was twirling her fingers together, her foot bouncing with nervous energy.

Wendy wasn't sure how to respond. Not because it was unexpected, but because of how it made her feel. Powerful. Respected. Like someone worth emulating.

"I don't want to get in your way," Jenny added quickly. "I know you're busy with everything. But even just occasional advice would be..."

"I mean, I'm still learning myself," Wendy said, but even as the modest words left her mouth, she was already thinking about ways she could use the extra set of hands, and claim the authority Jenny was offering her.

"That's exactly why I think you'd be such a good mentor," Jenny pressed. "You remember what it's like to be where I am now. You know what it takes to break through and actually get noticed for your ideas."

"Don't sell yourself short," Wendy said, suddenly unable to remember why she didn't like Jenny. "Michael seems to notice you. He has an eye for talent."

"I don't know, sometimes I think I have his attention, but then I lose it and can't gain it back."

Wendy found herself nodding along, all too aware of that feeling.

"Okay," she said finally. "But just so you know, success in this industry isn't just about being smart or creative. It's about being willing to do whatever it takes, about showing how bad you want it. To succeed here, you have to be fully committed."

Jenny's eyes sharpened with interest, her nervous energy fading away. "Fully committed, got it."

The rest of the morning drifted by like an ordinary Monday, but Wendy was on cloud nine, still shaking with the buzz of this morning's news. Every time she looked at the Memphis numbers she felt goosebumps pimple on her skin, sending another jolt of electricity through her body. After Jon had returned with their water he'd spent the better part of an hour confirming, and reconfirming the data, unable to process the massive swing in sales. And then there was Jenny's visit. The younger woman had finally admitted to herself that she needed Wendy's help, that she couldn't just bat her eyes at Michael and get him to give her access without earning it. She wasn't sure how this day could get any better.

"Ready for lunch?" Jon asked, closing his laptop with a smile. "I'm thinking that Mexican place you like."

"Sure," Wendy stood, stretching, "I just need to swing by Michael's office first. Then we can go."

Jon nodded, already reaching for his phone. "No problem. I'll catch up on emails."

As Wendy's heels clicked down the hallway, she realized it was her first time entering Michael's office since his promotion. The thought sent something hot and restless through her veins. She'd been there plenty of times when it belonged to Marcus, could still picture the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking downtown Columbus and the walls dotted with golf photos and motivational quotes. Michael, despite his round in New Orleans, didn't strike her as the type to share Marcus's enthusiasm. Nor could she picture that space occupied by a man of his size.

But when she pushed the door open after a polite tap, the sight stole her breath. Michael sat behind a massive oak desk, the Columbus skyline framing him through the windows. The desk concealed much of his bulk, transforming him into something larger than life. In that moment, with the city spread out behind him, he looked almost presidential.

"Nice setup," she said with a smile, pushing the door closed behind her. The golf art was gone, just as she'd expected. Michael's belongings, however, were still packed in boxes, leaving the walls bare while he typed away on his computer. In the corner, the only splash of color was a polished mahogany liquor cabinet, its shelves lined with an impressive array of premium spirits. Dominating them all, like a trophy, was a massive bottle of Fireball Premium, sitting front and center.

"Wendy." Michael's face brightened as she appeared in his doorway. "Perfect timing. I was just reviewing the Memphis reports."

"Have you seen the overnight numbers?" She stepped inside, unable to contain her excitement. "They're beyond anything we projected."

"I have indeed." The leather chair groaned under his weight as he leaned back, satisfaction radiating from him. His grey dress shirt was perfectly tailored, the expensive silk concealing his bulk and transforming his frame into something presidential. The red and gold tie caught the office light, and she saw him for what he was: powerful, and unapologetically untouchable. "I just got off the phone with Jack. For the first time since I've known him, he was speechless."

She bit her lip, feeling her nipples tighten as she allowed the praise to wash over her. "I have to admit, when I pitched the Memphis idea, I had no clue the market would react like this."

"I may have had something to do with that," Michael said, with a grin.

"Oh? Taking credit for my ideas already?" Wendy's tone remained playful as she crossed the office, letting her hips sway as her gaze locked with Michaels.

"I wouldn't dream of it." He rolled his chair back from the desk, his eyes never leaving Wendy's. "I did make a call though. I convinced the band that since it was the last night of their performance they should drink Fireball Premium on stage, talk about how great it was in between songs."

Wendy's mouth fell open. "That's... that's incredible. How did you possibly arrange that?"

"Let's just say I can be very persuasive when the situation calls for it." His smile was pure satisfaction. "Don't worry, I told Jack it was your idea. After all, had I not listened to you we would have never been in the Memphis market."

"Michael, I..." Her thighs trembled as she rounded his desk, her legs unsteady. The scent of his cologne made her body hum. It was more than that. It was his power, his success. The aura of a man who achieved something remarkable and treated it as routine, certain there would be dozens more. Her fingertips brushed the polished wood of his desk as she moved closer, seeking balance in a moment that felt like falling. No one had ever handed her power like this, wrapped in genuine respect for her own business acumen. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," he said casually. "You earned it."

Something playful sparked in her chest, a confidence that only seemed to grow every time she met with Michael. She slid onto his desk, positioning herself between his legs.

"And I bet you think that entitles you to some kind of reward, don't you?" She leaned forward, pressing her breasts together as her toes hooked around his ankles to draw him closer.

Michael laughed, but his eyes held no humor. "Actually, now that you mention it." He undid his belt. "I was thinking about Friday night, and how we might—"

She placed her hand on his. "Slow down Casanova." She maintained her playful tone, allowing her nails to dip just past his fingers and press lightly on his manhood. "I was being overly generous Friday night. I already told you, it's not going to happen again."

"Is that so? Because—"

A knock at the door froze them both. Wendy's stomach lurched as the handle turned. Without thinking, she slipped off the desk and dropped to her knees, scrambling beneath. The confined space swallowed her as Michael rolled his chair forward, pressing her back into the shadows. His belt still dangled loose, swaying above her face as if to remind her.

"Sorry for interrupting," Jon's voice filled the room and Wendy's face went white. "I um... I was actually just looking for Wendy. I thought she came in here."

From her hiding spot, she could see his shoes. He was so close she could have reached through the gap beneath the desk and touched him. Her blood turned to ice. She pressed back against Michael's leg, tucking her feet under her, terrified Jon might catch the faintest trace of her perfume or the sound of her breathing.

"You just missed her," Michael said, casually, as he reached under the desk. His fingers tangled in her hair. Wendy swatted at him in panic, terrified he'd give her away, every nerve on fire. She just needed Jon to leave. If she could hold still long enough, she could slip out after him unnoticed.

"Ok, um.. sorry to bother you." He turned to leave and Wendy let out a sigh of relief. However, just before he reached the door he turned back toward Michael. "Actually, if you have a second. I'd love to take a minute to talk about the director position."

Wendy's heart stopped. Now. Of all times, he chose now to finally listen to her advice.

"Please, have a seat." Michael gestured to the chair across from him with one hand, while the other guided Wendy's face toward the front of his slacks. "I love someone who takes initiative."

The hardness of his shaft pressed against her cheek. Even beneath all the clothing she could feel the weight of it, the casual assertion of power. She placed her palms on her thighs, trying to resist his pull. He had to be out of his mind.

"Thanks. I know Wendy mentioned it to you the other night, but I thought it might help to share my vision for the department directly."

"I think I can spare a few minutes." His hand went to the zipper of his pants, slowly sliding it down much to Wendy's dismay. She glanced toward the opposite side of the desk, catching sight of Jon's ankles as he settled into the chair.

The timing was catastrophic. Jon, who never asserted himself, had chosen this moment to advocate for himself. Meanwhile, Michael seemed intent on prolonging the conversation for reasons that made Wendy's pulse thunder in her ears.

Wendy pressed herself tighter into the shadowed space under the desk, barely daring herself to breathe. She wanted to scream at Jon to leave, to stop lingering, but Michael leaned back comfortably, more than happy to let him talk.

"I'll be honest," Michael began, "when Wendy said you were interested in the position I was shocked. I expected her to advocate for herself."

The chair creaked as he shifted, forcing Wendy to scurry around his feet. His hand disappeared inside his fly turning her blood cold. He couldn't be serious. Just behind her, Jon's shoes scuffed softly across the floor, close enough she could reach out and touch them.

"Wendy's success on the Fireball campaign has been nothing short of amazing," Jon started, bringing a smile to Wendy's lips even as Michael tugged his cock free. She edged closer to her husband's side of the desk, thankful he was finally seeing her as an equal, as someone deserving of the promotion.

"But," Jon went on carefully, making Wendy's heart break. "It's just one account. Impressive, absolutely, but anyone in analytics will tell you one data point doesn't prove a trend. I just think she needs more time to show consistency."

Tears pricked the back of her eyes. How could he say that? She had gone to Michael for him, had nearly sacrificed her own chance, and the first time Jon had Michael's ear, he dismissed her? In her stunned silence, she barely resisted as Michael's hand closed around her head, dragging her toward him. The thick head of his cock brushed across her cheek. She wrenched back, shaking her head desperately, but Michael only smirked above her, patient as ever.

"I disagree," Michael said, seemingly undeterred by Wendy's resistance. "I've seen Wendy in action. She's got fire. A drive to win, no matter what. You can't teach instincts like that."

"Oh, I agree she's been tenacious." Jon's voice wavered with false generosity, and Wendy bit the inside of her cheek, bracing for the sting. Her father used to say you couldn't trust anything said before the word *but*. "But, you of all people should know that sort of dedication isn't possible across multiple projects. In a few years she'll be ready, but she doesn't have the experience I do managing account managers and getting them to see your vision."

Wendy clenched her fists. She'd dealt with CEOs, she'd put out more fires, and handled more personalities than Jon could ever dream. How dare he suggest she was unproven. Michael caught her wrist and pressed her palm against his shaft. Her nerves lit up like a match. She stroked him once before tearing her hand back.

"She's still early in her career," Jon continued, suddenly more confident than she'd ever heard him. "But she doesn't have the experience I do. She still gravitates toward her big ideas instead of looking at the data."

Wendy's lungs emptied in a silent gasp. Even after everything this morning, all the praise, he still didn't believe in her. Not really. Not when it counted the most.

"That's an interesting take," Michael said, calmly as his thumb brushed over Wendy's cheek and settling at the base of her neck. This time she didn't fight him. "From what I've seen from your wife she's more than capable of... wrapping her head around big problems. She just needs someone willing to believe she has it in her."

It was the way he said it, the conviction in his voice. Michael believed in her when no one else did, not even Jon. Something inside her cracked. She exhaled, slow and shaky, then let her tongue circle his swollen head before sealing her lips around him.

Other than the subtle tightening of his hand in her hair, Michael's face betrayed nothing. To Jon, he was a calm executive at ease in conversation. But Wendy felt the tremor in him when she sealed her lips tighter and pushed him deeper. The faint shudder ran through her like current, making her body quake.

"It's not that I don't believe in her," Jon said, earnestly. "I think she's going to be the best account manager we've ever had. I just think she needs more time. The Memphis pivot was a huge success, but it was an unnecessary risk. You need someone levelheaded."

Her hand clenched around Michael's base. She opened her mouth wider and the taste of him was a hot, shocking truth. It was a raw, defiant answer to the quiet, casual betrayal happening just inches away. *Jon doesn't believe me. He's betraying me.* The words hammered through her mind with every desperate intake of breath, a jagged rhythm to the relentless pressure. *Michael is the only one. He's the only one who's ever seen me.*

"That's what I like about her." His voice only slightly strained, but Jon didn't seem to notice. A smile formed on Michael's lips as he leaned back slightly. "I need someone with..." he paused slightly for emphasis, "balls."

Jon chuckled nervously. He didn't expect a VP to be so blunt, but then, nothing with Michael surprised him. "I think I've proven I have plenty of courage just by having this conversation."

In the darkness below the desk, Wendy rolled her eyes understanding Michael's game. She dropped his shaft from her mouth, twisting her wrist as she continued to stroke him. Her tongue slid across his sensitive underside, sucking his large, hairy sac into her mouth as she felt him throb against her palm.

Michael's eyes fluttered shut as Wendy drew his other heavy sac into her mouth. When they opened, Jon was giving him a puzzled look. Michael cleared his throat, tugging Wendy back for a breath only to feel her sink down on him again.

"Sorry, did you want me to grab you a coffee or something? I'm sure these long days are taking it out of you."

"What I need," Michael said with a grin and an edge in his voice, "is for you to not be so damn boring. Stroking my ego isn't going to get you anywhere."

A mix of pride and arousal flared in Wendy's chest. She could tell by the exchange she was having an effect on Michael, but he barely faltered. Instead he mocked Jon mercilessly and despite herself it only stoked her fire. Her free hand slipped under her dress, stroking her wet furrow. A small moan escaped her lips as she swirled her tongue around his sensitive crown. When she found her clit, she sucked him even deeper.

"One thing you need to understand about this position," Michael continued, trying to refocus the conversation. "is that I'm looking for someone who can handle more than they think possible. It's one of the things I admire more about Wendy. Her ability to take even more than she believes she can."

Jon's chair squeaked as he shifted, crossing one leg over the other. Wendy barely registered it. Her eyes squeezed shut, her nose flared, and she forced her mouth farther down Michael's shaft. Her throat burned as she heard Jon saying something about believing he can take on even more. Her lungs begged for air, her jaw ached and still at least an inch of thick flesh hovered just beyond her reach.

Her throat convulsed, and she nearly broke away, terrified she would gag and Jon would hear her, but Michael's palm flattened against the back of her skull. He wasn't applying pressure, he wasn't making her go deeper, he was letting her know he believed in her. He knew she could do it, and suddenly she didn't want to disappoint the only person who ever truly had faith in her.

Above her, Jon remained oblivious. He didn't seem to notice the way Michael's teeth clenched together, or how his hips lifted slightly off the chair. "And that's why I believe I'm the best person for the role. My faith is in the numbers. They ensure I don't panic and stay the course."

Michael gave a low hum of acknowledgement, rolling his hips once more. "Those are great qualities to have." With a final thrust, Wendy's throat yielded, her lips sealing at the root of his thick shaft.

Tears streaked her cheeks as she forced herself to breathe through her nose. She had done it. She had taken him completely. Her slick fingers circled her clit as a tremor ran through her body, her hum vibrating against his length and making his balls draw tight.

Michael's grip in her hair loosened just enough to let her ease up, nothing more. "And you think you can handle the load? Because I need someone who can," he paused seeming for effect, but in reality he was trying to hold out just a second longer, "savor the moment. Swallow their pride when the moment calls for it."

Even though Wendy knew it was coming, hearing him say it made her breath shallow, her thighs tensing on reflex. She absolutely hated the taste of cum, but she knew it was the only way to get out of this mess without being seen. And still, the audacity it took for Michael to practically give Jon a play by play had her grinding her hip against her palm, her own release coiling fast.

She hollowed out her cheeks, her tongue flat against the underside of his shaft. His thighs tensed beneath her palms. She felt the tremor ripple through his body as the first blast hit the back of her throat. She swallowed quickly, struggling to keep pace as more filled her mouth, her body quaking as though his climax had triggered her own.

Above her, Michael's voice purred through his release. "We'll pick this up tomorrow," he said, smoothly. "Let's plan on meeting up for lunch."

"That sounds great, Michael... um, sir. I appreciate your time." The squeak of his chair was just loud enough to allow Wendy to release Michael's deflated cock from her seal, her head resting on his bare thigh as she rode out her own orgasm.

She stayed crouched in the shadows, counting four steady breaths before she dared to slide out. When she did, Michael's cocky smile was waiting for her. She ignored it, smoothing her blouse and checking for any trace of what had just happened.

"I guess I got my reward after all."

She rolled her eyes, even as her shoulders tightened against a shiver. "You're reckless, and that was stupid."

"And yet, you seemed awful driven to prove yourself."

Her lips pressed tight. His taste lingered, it wasn't as unpleasant as she'd expected. She tried to ignore the slick heat between her legs. "I want another account. Something big."

His eyes lit up. "I'd say you've proven you can handle big now."

"I'm serious, Michael." Her thighs rubbed together, restless.

"Trevor's got the Skyline account. It used to be our flagship, but he's been coasting. Numbers are slipping, and there's talk of them jumping ship."

The spike of adrenaline hit her like a freight train. She could already envision how she would right the ship. "Great. Send me the deck, and the last two quarters of sales."

"You'll have to get that from Trevor. He's held it for years. He won't hand it over without a fight."

Wendy flinched. That wasn't what she expected. "You're the VP. Can't you just take it from him?"

"Of course I could," Michael said with a shrug. "But you want to be director. Time to show your diplomatic side."

"Trevor's a pig and an asshole."

"People say worse about me."

She chewed on her lip. This wasn't how she envisioned it going, but maybe Michael was right. If she wanted to be a leader she had to stand on her own two feet. She could make Trevor listen to reason. She'd take over the Skyline account and prove to Jon she was more than capable of handling multiple projects. "Fine. I'll handle it." She rounded the desk and headed for the door.

"He doesn't value you, ya know." She paused at the door. "He doesn't see your potential."

She turned to face him, her gaze sharp enough to cut him. "Just sign off on the account when I bring it to you. And stop trying to pit me against my husband."

She left before he could answer. She headed toward the break room, wanting a minute to herself before she went back to find Jon waiting for her. She wasn't sure how she would explain where she disappeared to. She wasn't even sure she'd be able to look at him without breaking into tears. His betrayal cut worse than anything she could imagine.

Her phone buzzed in her hand as she reached the break room. She fumbled it, her hands still shaking as she glanced at the screen. She expected Jon's name, or maybe Michael's. Instead, it was an unknown number: *Got your number from your email signature. Michael sent me this picture of the two of you Friday night. you're practically our brand ambassador in that dress. Looking forward to next time you're in New Orleans. -Jack.*

Wendy's pulse drummed in her ears as she reread the message. Jack Peterson was texting her directly. Not going through corporate channels, or using Michael as a buffer. The CEO of their biggest client felt comfortable enough to skip all the layers of corporate hierarchy and go straight to her.

Her hand trembled as she enlarged the attached photo of her and Michael, the one Jon took. The dress, the one that once made her feel so exposed had opened doors for her she never dreamed possible. Years of hiding behind conservative blazers got her nowhere, but just one night out in that dress and Jack Peterson was texting her.

Even more than that, he was already talking about another visit to New Orleans. Something coiled tight in her as she thought about another visit. A new contract, an even bigger budget with an entire team at her disposal. A smile formed on her lips. She felt indispensable.

Executive Privilege Ch. 11

The cool breeze coming from the vent just above Jon's head seemed to calm him, despite how he fidgeted in his chair. He watched the second hand on the wall clock as he struggled to find the words. Dr. Carson wasn't actually on his side at all.

"I can see you're upset, Jon. Do you want to start over?" Dr. Carson crossed his legs, jotting down another note in his legal pad.

"It just feels like..."

"Deep breath," Dr. Carson reminded him, seeing the way the vein in his neck began to pulse. "Remember, let's focus on the facts first. Then we can talk about how they make you feel and why."

"Fact, yesterday, Wendy and I planned to grab lunch together. Things have felt off with her and I thought..."

"Stick to the facts," Dr. Carson reminded him, calmly.

Jon's hands clenched. He closed his eyes, trying to remain calm. "We planned to grab lunch. But just before we were set to leave, she said she needed to swing by Michael's office. I told her I would wait."

"Very good, Jon. Remember, it's important to think about things through this type of lens. Once you start to cloud it with feelings and interpretations, that's when you start to manifest some of those bad habits we've discussed."

"I waited for at least twenty minutes, but she never came back." His jaw tightened, and he shifted his weight in the chair as he recounted yesterday's events. "I checked my email, went through another proposal. I tried to fill the space while she was out. Finally, I got up and walked to Michael's office. I figured I would intercept her."

"And, did you?"

"No, I thought I heard her voice when I got to his office, but when I knocked and went inside, she wasn't there."

Dr. Carson nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"I asked if he'd seen Wendy, and Michael said I'd just missed her. Then asked me to sit and talk about the director role." Jon paused and brought his nail to his mouth. It was a disgusting habit that he picked up when he started noticing all of the signs with Olivia, but as he chewed, he knew Dr. Carson wouldn't like the next part. "But Michael was acting strange. It was almost like..."

"Facts only," Dr. Carson reminded him, but Jon blew it off.

"It was like he was toying with me. I saw it in his eyes, his smirk. Like he knew something that I didn't."

The pen being placed on Dr. Carson's notepad sounded like a car backfiring. Jon could immediately see the look of disappointment written all over his face.

"And what do you think that was, Jon?" His voice had an edge to it, a roughness that Jon wasn't familiar with. "You think Wendy was hiding in his closet?"

"Of course not, I just—"

"Under his desk? What exactly are you trying to convince yourself of?"

"Jesus, doc. Come on."

Dr. Carson held up a hand. "I know it sounds harsh, but I need you to hear how it sounds when you say it out loud." He removed his glasses, cleaning a smudge that didn't exist.

"You sound like you're taking her side."

"I'm not taking sides, Jon. But I need you to understand that the further you drift from the facts, the more your mind tries to fill in the blanks. And in your case, it always seems to want to show your significant other cheating on you." He put his glasses back on his face, and Jon noticed for the first time how crooked his nose was. "Why do you think that is?"

Fire began building in Jon's chest. He wasn't one to lash out. He knew this was exactly where Dr. Carson was going to go when he told him what happened yesterday. "Fine... fact, when Wendy finally met up with me almost an hour later and I asked her what happened, she acted mad at me. Told me not to worry about it and that I wasn't being supportive. When I asked what she meant she stormed out of the office and told me I never take her seriously. So you tell me, doc. What am I supposed to make of that?"

Dr. Carson was quiet for a long moment, his pen resting idle against his notepad. Jon's leg bounced with nervous energy. He needed answers. Dr. Carson had been great with helping him get through things with Olivia, but now it was like that was the only thing he could see.

"I think," Dr. Carson finally said, his voice measured. "That you're making yourself miserable over interpretations instead of truths. And until you can separate the two, you're going to keep seeing threats that aren't there."

"This isn't like Olivia, doc. This is more than just... paranoia." He leaned over his legs, hoping that getting closer would somehow get his point across. "Where did she go yesterday? And why did she suddenly come back mad at me?"

"And you think that's evidence of—"

"I think people who have nothing to hide don't act like that." Jon sat back in his chair and rubbed his temple, needing Dr. Carson to understand. "She got defensive immediately. Picked a fight for no reason. I asked about lunch, and suddenly I'm the bad guy?"

Dr. Carson made a note, his expression remaining neutral. "Deflection can mean many things, Jon. It doesn't automatically indicate guilt."

"But it can indicate it." Jon heard the desperation creeping into his voice. "You said to look at facts. Fact... she disappeared. Fact... she won't explain where she was. Fact... she immediately made me the problem when I asked."

"Those are facts," Dr. Carson acknowledged. "But they're not the only facts. Did anything else happen over the weekend? How's your working relationship with your wife?"

Jon shifted in his seat, uneasy with where this was going. "It's great, really. She put in a good word for me with Michael, about the open director role."

"That's wonderful, Jon. I'm sure you'd be great in that role." He paused and looked at his notes. "But would that make you Wendy's boss? What does she think of that dynamic"?

Jon chuckled, brushing the question off. "It's fine. We've already discussed it. At first, she thought she might be interested in the role, but I made her realize that she doesn't want the added stress. It would actually help her career," he continued gaining confidence in his assessment. "If she reports to me, I can shield her from some of the political stuff she's not experienced with yet."

Dr. Carson's eyes went wide, and Jon knew he'd said something he shouldn't have. "What now?" he asked, replaying the conversation in his head and not knowing where he messed up.

"Jon." Dr. Carson set his notebook aside and leaned forward. "Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly. Wendy expressed interest in the director position, and you... talked her out of it?"

"Not talked her out of it. I just helped her see the reality of the situation." Jon's defensiveness kicked in immediately. "She's only been an Account Manager for like a month. She's not ready for that kind of responsibility yet. I was being honest with her about what the role requires."

Dr. Carson nodded. "And how did Wendy respond to this honesty?"

Jon smiled. "She understood. Eventually. I mean, she agreed that I have more experience, that I've been in project management roles before. It just makes sense."

"Jon, help me understand something. You came in here worried that Wendy doesn't think you support her career. And in the same breath, you're telling me you convinced her not to pursue a role she was interested in. Do you see the disconnect?"

Jon opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. His hands gripped the armrests. "I was trying to be helpful. She would have been overwhelmed. You don't understand the kind of stress she's been under lately. The late nights, the trips to New Orleans, and that's just one account."

"Or she would have risen to the challenge." Dr. Carson picked up his pen again. "Jon, being truthful and being supportive aren't always the same thing. Sometimes support means stepping back and letting someone try, even if you're not sure they're ready. Even if they might struggle."

"I've worked there for five years," Jon said, realizing how immature it sounded, but he couldn't help himself. "She's been there for two. And suddenly she's the golden child because of one successful campaign."

"Which brings us back to your earlier concerns." Dr. Carson made another note. "Last session, you mentioned Wendy was dressing differently. Has that continued?"

Jon's stomach tightened. "Yeah. More... attention-seeking, I guess. It's like every day her dresses just get shorter and shorter. She used to hate all the attention. She would spend days looking for shirts that would make her chest look smaller. And now it's like she wants the entire office to see just how good she looks."

"I want to ask you a question, Jon. And before you answer, I need you to really think about it."

His fingers dug into the expensive leather of the chair. "Go ahead."

"Are you jealous of your wife's success?"

The hairs on Jon's arms stood up. Of course, he wasn't jealous of Wendy... was he? He wanted to deny it, to call it outrageous and tell Dr. Carson he wanted to find someone else, but the more he thought about it, the more Dr. Carson's gaze bore into him, the more it made some sense. He was Marcus's golden boy, the man who could do no wrong. But, Marcus was gone now, and in his place was Michael.

"I don't know," Jon finally admitted. "Maybe. I mean, I've put in my dues, and she works one project with Michael, and suddenly there's talk about her taking the director role."

"And that makes you feel...?"

"Like I'm being overshadowed." The words came out raw, unfiltered. "Like everything I've done doesn't matter because Michael has always taken an interest in her and..." His hands unclenched slightly. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong about her not being ready. Both things can be true."

Dr. Carson sat up a little taller, his eyes flicking to his watch face. "They can. But Jon, what you're describing right now. That sense of invisibility was exactly how you said Wendy felt before she got this big break."

Dr. Carson leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I want to try something with you, Jon. A practical exercise we use in cognitive behavioral therapy. Are you familiar with thought records?"

Jon shook his head.

"It's a tool for distinguishing between what actually happens and how we interpret what happens." Dr. Carson pulled out a small notebook from his desk drawer. "I'm going to ask you to keep a journal this week. But I'm going to ask you to use a very specific format."

He opened the notebook and drew three columns across the top of a blank page, labeling them as he spoke.

"Column one: Facts. Observable, verifiable events. Time, place, what was said, what was done. Like a court reporter would document."

He tapped the first column. "Column two: Your interpretation. What you think it means, the story you're telling yourself about those facts." He tapped the second column. "And column three: Alternative explanations. Other possible reasons for what happened."

Jon leaned forward, studying the page. It looked almost like one of the spreadsheets he kept at work.

"So if Wendy comes home late," Dr. Carson continued, "column one would be: 'Wendy arrived home at 8:47 PM. She said she had a late meeting.' That's a fact. Column two might be: 'She's avoiding me. Something's wrong. She's acting guilty.' That's interpretation. And column three would force you to consider: 'She could actually be working late. Her new responsibilities have been overwhelming. She mentioned it's been stressful.'"

"I can do that," Jon said, accepting the notebook. He turned it over in his hands, examining each side of it like it was the key to all of his problems.

"The goal isn't to ignore your instincts, Jon. It's to separate them from the facts. Because here's what I've observed in our sessions. You're very good at building logical arguments for your suspicions. But you're starting with a conclusion and working backwards to support it. This will help you start with the evidence and see where it actually leads."

Jon nodded, already thinking about how he'd organize it. Maybe he could add a fourth column for supporting data points, or a rating system for how certain he felt about each interpretation.

"One more thing," Dr. Carson added. "If you find yourself filling the interpretation column before you've finished writing the facts, stop. That's your old pattern trying to reassert itself. Facts first. Always facts first."

"Facts first," Jon repeated. "Got it."

Dr. Carson smiled and made a final note. "Same time next week?"

Jon stood, tucking the notebook into his messenger bag. "Same time."

"Jon?" Dr. Carson's voice stopped him at the door. "Remember, facts. Not interpretations. Don't let your imagination fill in the blanks."

Jon forced a smile. "Right. Facts only."

But as he walked back to his car, one fact kept echoing: Wendy had disappeared, and when he found her, she'd been angry at *him*. Dr. Carson could call it deflection all he wanted. Jon knew defensive behavior when he saw it.

He had lunch with Michael soon to talk about the director role. He and Michael had never really seen eye to eye, but at least Michael seemed to be taking his candidacy for the director position seriously.

As he slid into his car, Dr. Carson's question still echoed: *Are you jealous of your wife's success?*

Maybe. But that didn't make him wrong.

*

Wendy sipped her coffee in silence as she stared at the dimly lit monitor in front of her. After the success in Memphis, Wendy had to keep her foot on the floor with the marketing blitz. Michael had sent her dozens of contacts in other markets, all eager to see what the buzz was about.

The black dress she'd chosen this morning clung to her thigh as she sat. Instead of tugging at the hem, she slumped back in the chair. She liked the way the brush of cool air against her skin felt. She caught a glimpse of herself in the monitor. The neckline wasn't as low as some of her other choices, but the way it pressed her breasts together, offering a sultry glimpse of cleavage, was enough to make her bite her lip and feel her pulse quicken.

The office was still mostly empty at 7:15. She'd left the house before Jon was out of bed, still too angry to want to deal with him this morning. They'd argued most of last night, with Jon unwilling to understand why she was so upset. After she'd returned from Michael's office late, he'd asked where she went, why she couldn't bother to text him. She hadn't even given him the courtesy of

a real excuse. Instead, she fired back at him, calling him selfish and accusing him of not wanting her to succeed.

The guilt she'd expected to feel didn't hit nearly as hard. What she was doing with Michael was wrong. She knew that. But Jon had gone from a supporting partner to someone who consistently made her second-guess herself. He used to champion her ideas, but now it seemed like all he did was question them. When had his support become conditional on her staying smaller than him? Maybe Michael was right. Jon didn't value her. Not anymore. Not since she'd started outgrowing him.

She closed her eyes, intending to push the anger away with deep breathing. Instead, the memory of Michael's office burned behind her eyes. It washed over her, and she let out a low laugh at the absurdity of the situation. How she'd ended up on her knees under his desk. The way his hands felt in her hair as Jon sat on the other side of the desk, lobbying for the position she deserved.

A rush of air left her lungs as her fingertips drew goosebumps on her legs. The terror of almost being caught had somehow enhanced the moment, given it a thrill she didn't know she'd like. Her tongue slipped past her lips as she closed her eyes, her touch drifting up her thigh, feeling the heat of her core as she inched closer.

Michael hadn't even flinched during the entire exchange. He held an entire conversation with Jon while guiding her mouth to his...

A moan escaped her lips as her fingers pressed against the black lace fabric of her thong. She was soaked. She spread her legs, intending to give herself the relief she never got last night, thanks to Jon's need to fight.

A light in the hallway caught her attention, and Wendy sat back up in her chair, clearing her throat. Her heart hammered as she adjusted her dress with shaking hands. Whispered conversation floated into her office as people prepared for their day. The office would come alive soon. She needed to focus on work and not let herself get distracted.

Wendy barely made it through the next email when her phone buzzed on her desk. She glanced down, expecting a text from Jon saying he was sorry, but the name on the screen read Jack Peterson.

A flutter of excitement rippled through her stomach. She and Jack had exchanged a couple of texts yesterday, and now here he was again reaching out.

Jack: After the success in Memphis, the team wants to extend the rollout to Louisville. Thoughts?

She stared at the screen, considering what Michael would say. The heat already pooling in her core intensified as she thought about how Jack brought this decision to her before even Michael.

She typed quickly, before she could second-guess herself.

Wendy: Louisville's ready. Demographics align perfectly with Memphis' success. We can soft launch as soon as you give the word. I have a list of contacts already chomping at the bit to be included in this.

Three dots appeared, then disappeared. Her pulse hammered in her neck as she waited for his response.

Jack: Let's make it happen. I'll have my people set something up.

She smiled to herself, already pulling up a new window on her computer to see who she had contacts with in the Louisville market. Her phone buzzed again, and as she read the message the warmth she felt building in her core spread across the rest of her body.

Jack: Next time I'm in Columbus, I expect you to show me the city, in that Fireball gold dress of course. I'm not sure I can stand another golf outing with Michael.

Wendy: Looking forward to it. Just let me know when.

Her hand shook with excitement as she set her phone down and exhaled slowly. This was real. She'd earned Jack's trust, his respect. Jon may have thought this was a fluke, but he never had the CEO of a major brand like Fireball texting him directly. And soon she'd have Skyline too.

She pulled up the account files for Skyline. She'd spent most of last night memorizing them, but Michael had taught her that even when you thought you knew every detail you should go over it one last time. She took a sip of her lukewarm coffee as she skimmed the screen. He'd been account manager for two years. The first year was solid, ten percent growth in marketing spend, but then it started to fall closer to five. The last note in the file was from a month ago saying they wanted to explore fresh perspectives.

Wendy shook her head. That was code for Trevor failing. She clicked through a couple of their slogans. Each one was a recycled version of the last. They needed something fresh. They needed her.

With a smile, Wendy stood, running her fingers over her dress to ensure there were no wrinkles. The fabric on the dress clung to her skin in a way she was sure Trevor would notice. It would help soften the blow of her taking his biggest client from him.

She knocked on his already open office door, taking note of the way his feet were propped up on his desk, and he was swiping on his phone. Trevor looked every bit the part of someone coasting on past successes. He looked a little older than thirty, his dark hair styled in a way that made it look messy. His dress shirt wrinkled at the elbows, tie loosened. She could tell that at one point in his life he'd been a ladies' man. Now he was just living in the shadow of who he used to be.

The smirk on his face suggested he hadn't figured that out yet.

"Wendy, to what do I owe the pleasure?" He removed his feet from his desk, his eyes traveling over her body just the way she'd predicted. Just three short months ago, that would have made her skin crawl. Now she welcomed it, knowing it would dull his reaction and keep him on his back foot.

"Sorry for dropping in unannounced," she said with a smile, despite the fact that Trevor's attention never left her chest. "I was hoping to talk to you about the Skyline account."

"What about it?" His gaze never wavered. Not when she crossed the room, not when she sat down, not even when she crossed her legs, allowing her dress to travel higher up her thigh.

"Skyline's underperforming. I want to help you with it." She leaned forward as she said it. Just slightly, enough to where he couldn't help but notice.

"Who told you that?" He finally looked up. His dark eyes bore into hers, more intense than she anticipated. Her stomach dropped, expecting him to be more flustered.

"Does it matter?" She recrossed her legs, more out of nervousness now than seduction. For a long moment, the room was silent, Trevor's heavy gaze throwing daggers at Wendy. Then he laughed. A hearty laugh that made him throw his head back and close his eyes.

"You know what? You're right. I bet having you on the project would open lots of doors." He stood and moved around the desk. He stopped next to Wendy, his leg brushing hers as he leaned down and whispered in her ear. "So is that how you got the Fireball account? Everyone thought you were this rockstar with a mind for the business, but I see you now." His fingers moved toward her exposed neckline, and she swatted his hand away with a gasp.

Wendy's stomach tightened. "I'm not sure what you—"

"Come on, sweetheart. Don't play the sweet and innocent card. Not after the way you just walked in here." His eyes dragged down her body again, slower this time. Demeaning. "I get it now. Michael's mentorship. The fast promotion. The whispers about making you director." He brushed her hair away behind her shoulder. "I'm not judging. I'm actually impressed. You played it smart."

The words hit like ice water. She stood fast enough that her chair rolled backward into the wall.

"Excuse me?" Her right hand found her ring, giving it four nervous spins.

"We both know how this works." He moved closer, his voice dropping. "You want Skyline? I'll hand it over. But there's a... consultation fee." His gaze locked back onto her chest, and he licked his lips. "Professional courtesy between colleagues."

Her blood went hot. "Are you kidding me? I earned that account because I work my ass off."

"After all, if Michael's enjoying the benefits of your... collaboration, why shouldn't the rest of us get a turn?" He smiled. "Or is there a waitlist I should get on?"

Wendy's vision tunneled. "Fuck you, Trevor."

"That's the pl—"

She turned and slammed the door before he could finish. Tears burned the corners of her eyes as she rushed to the bathroom. She'd never been so humiliated before in her life. How dare he say those things to her, about her.

The cold water was refreshing on Wendy's face, but it did little to cool the fire of rage burning inside her. Her plan had completely backfired. Not only had Trevor seen through it, but he had humiliated her, making her feel like nothing but a common whore.

I see you now.

He was wrong. He was only seeing what he wanted to see. Maybe dressing that way to get a response out of him was a mistake, but he was completely clueless about who Wendy was. She'd earned everything she'd gotten so far.

Except.

The heat low in her belly responded before her mind could process it, and she hated herself for it. A part of her... a very small part, actually, envisioned a scenario where she went back in there. Where she dropped to her knees in front of Trevor and told him she was taking the Skyline account by any means necessary. Not because Trevor deserved anything from her. He was scum. But because some dark corner of her mind, the corner she thought Gold Dress Wendy controlled, told her how easy it would be. That she's already crossed so many lines. What was one more?

She bit her lip, her nipples hardening as she thought about the smug look on his face, the way he would taunt her while she took him in her throat.

No. She splashed more water on her face, banishing the thought. She wouldn't do that, of course. Trevor was just another version of Richard Clemens. Another man who looked at her and saw nothing but a body to be used. Tits and ass in exchange for an opportunity. Trevor was offering nothing but his bloated ego and the same account she could take by force.

She wasn't that scared eighteen-year-old anymore, grateful for scraps. She was Wendy fucking Taylor, and she didn't negotiate from her knees... unless that's what she chose to do.

She stared at herself in the mirror, tugging at the neckline of her dress in hopes it would cover some of her cleavage.

What would Michael do?

The question came to her without conscious thought. He was an expert at getting what he wanted, at shutting people down when they tried to make some grand challenge. She took a breath, reapplying some of her mascara that had smeared off. Then it hit her.

Michael would find leverage. He would dig for evidence, or dirt, or anything he needed to back someone like Trevor into a corner. Wendy had gone about this all wrong. She thought she could charm her way into Trevor giving up his biggest account. Michael wasn't a charmer. He was a bulldozer.

She straightened, checking her mascara one final time in the mirror. Somewhere in those Skyline files was a weakness. A discrepancy. Something Trevor didn't want anyone to see. And when she found it, she'd make him beg to hand over that account. She smiled at her reflection. *I see you now too, Trevor.*

*

Wendy's jaw was still tight from her encounter with Trevor as she stormed back to her office, her heels clicking against the tile. Despite having a plan to bring that smug asshole down a peg, she was still fuming about his allegations. Like Wendy had somehow taken a shortcut to get where she was.

I see you now.

Her fingers curled into fists. He only saw what he wanted, just like every other man before him who doubted her. Well, if he wanted to see her, she was more than capable of making that happen.

As she rounded the corner, she spotted Jenny diligently working on something from her computer in the bullpen.

"Jenny." Wendy's voice came out sharper than intended, and the younger woman's head snapped up. "Are you free? I have my first assignment for you."

Jenny's eyes widened. "Absolutely."

"Good." Wendy gestured toward her office and the young associate quickly gathered her notebook and pen, rushing to fall into step with Wendy. "I need you to pull every piece of data you can find on the Skyline Chili account. Client communications, quarterly reports, revenue projections, everything."

"Skyline? But that's Trevor's—"

"I know whose account it is." Wendy cut her off, relieved to see Jon wasn't in the office waiting for her. "Can you do it or not?"

Jenny straightened, the eagerness that Wendy once hated now almost endearing. "I can do it. What am I looking for?"

Wendy paused at her desk, considering how much to reveal. She didn't trust Jenny, not yet anyway.

"I'm not sure," she said finally. "But I think you'll know when you find it." Jenny's eyes lit up like she understood the subtext perfectly. Wendy hoped that was true, but just to be sure, she added. "And Jenny? This stays between us. No one else needs to know what we're working on. Not yet."

"Of course." Jenny was already scribbling notes, that hungry look in her eyes that Wendy recognized all too well. The need to prove herself. To be seen as more.

"Get me everything you can by lunch," Wendy said, settling into her chair.

*

When Jon arrived at The Guild House on High Street ten minutes early, he expected to beat Michael there. As he neared the host stand to announce his arrival, he was stunned to hear Michael calling out to him from a back corner table.

He walked past the full bar, scanning the impressive display along the mirrored wall as he ran through his talking points in his head. The tightness in his chest intensified as he made the slow walk past the tables covered in expensive white tablecloths and silverware. He'd planned to get here first, to run over the data for his last six months before Michael arrived.

"There he is! I was wondering when you were going to show up." Michael stood as he approached, extending his hand. His grip was firm, almost crushing. "Hope you don't mind, I got started a little early while I waited." Michael gave him a wink, nodding at the empty glass of scotch. He raised his hand to flag down the waiter. "Let me get you one."

"Oh, um... no thanks. It's a little early still."

Michael's smile faltered, his eyes growing dark as he sat back down, his bulk pushing into the table. "My father once told me when a man offers you a drink, especially your boss, it's rude not to accept."

The silence seemed to stretch forever as Jon stumbled over something to say. He hadn't even sat down yet and he was already blowing it, and all over something as dumb as drinks. He knew

Michael could be juvenile, but surely he wouldn't hold that against him once he saw the numbers.

"I didn't mean..."

Michael's smile reappeared and he waved his hand in front of Jon. "Eh, what the hell did he know. The man drank himself to death." He laughed, his belly shaking. "Sit, sit. I'm just busting your balls. Get whatever you want."

Jon settled into his seat, relief washing over him. The waiter appeared instantly and Jon ordered water with lemon. When Michael ordered his second scotch Jon worried that his professionalism might somehow cost him more than it should.

"So," Michael said, his gaze as intimidating as ever, despite the alcohol. "Tell me, why do you think you're the best man for the job? When we spoke yesterday, you seemed very sure of yourself."

"Well, it's like I was saying yesterday. I think the data will show—"

Michael shook his head and chuckled under his breath. "Always with the numbers." The waiter returned, placing drinks on the table.

"Did you have time to look over the menu? Can I get you started with any appetizers?"

Jon grabbed the menu off the corner of the table and was about to ask the waiter to give them a minute.

"I'll take the lamb burger, with a side of fries and charred carrots. He'll have the skirt steak with fries. We're trying to put some meat on those bones."

Both Michael and the waiter laughed at the rib aimed at Jon as he sat there red-faced. He was hoping to just order a salad, but after the alcohol debacle, he figured it was best to keep his mouth shut and eat the steak. He returned the menu to the waiter with a smile. He didn't understand how yesterday's meeting with Michael could go so well, and this one felt like such a failure.

"You know what the best years of my life were, Jon?" Michael took a sip of his scotch as Jon sat in silence, unsure how to answer the rhetorical question. "When I was training young talent. Seeing the passion in their eyes, the way the industry started to click for them. It's what made me such a great leader."

Jon nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek. Great leader was certainly a stretch, but Jon couldn't deny that, despite Michael's directness, he did seem to be climbing the corporate ladder.

"There was this kid, it must've been fifteen years ago now. Came in as an associate, bright but raw. Couldn't read a room to save his life." Michael's scowl faded, replaced by a warmth Jon hadn't seen before. "Everyone else wrote him off. But I saw something. Took him under my wing. Taught him how to listen, how to watch for the subtle cues clients give you."

"What happened to him?"

"VP at some fancy bank now. Makes three times what I do." Michael laughed. "And you know what? That feels better than any deal I've ever made. Because I *built* that."

Jon straightened slightly. If mentorship was this important to Michael, maybe that's what he needed to emphasize. He'd brought data showing his project completion rates, his efficiency metrics, and his cost savings. But maybe Michael wanted to see something else.

"The thing is, I've been so focused on Fireball, I've neglected building the next generation." Michael leaned forward. "And that's a problem, because guys like you and me? We don't just manage projects. We create legacies. That's why I've taken such a liking to Wendy. She makes me feel young again."

Jon didn't even register the last part. He was too focused on the acknowledgment. *Guys like you and me.*

"As director, you'd be expected to grow the next batch of superstars. Is that something you're comfortable doing? Building new talent?" Michael picked up his scotch and let the liquid slosh around in the glass as he stared at Jon.

Jon's throat tightened. He'd prepared a whole presentation about his quarterly metrics, but none of that mattered to Michael. "I've always believed in letting the work speak for itself."

"Exactly. But how do we scale that? How do we take what you do naturally and teach it to the next generation?" Michael paused. "Because the analytics, the technical skills, the way you can get a beat on a situation in seconds just by looking at the numbers, that's something nobody else has."

Jon's pulse was racing. He didn't know if this meeting was going well or incredibly poorly. One second Michael was berating him for not ordering a drink, then he was praising his technical abilities. He couldn't make sense of any of it.

The waiter appeared with their food. The steak placed in front of Jon looked like it was big enough to feed two, and Jon's stomach immediately started to twist in pain.

"Let me tell you about my real turning point," Michael said. "I found a junior account manager who was struggling. Nobody else wanted to bother with her, they all said she asked too many questions, second-guessed herself. But I saw something. Spent my lunch hours teaching her." He smiled at the memory. "Six months later, she was running circles around people who'd been there twice as long. That's how you build a department."

Jon sensed the conversation moving toward something specific. "I've actually been thinking about that. I brought some data that shows—"

"The analytics are great, Jon. Your numbers are always solid." Michael's tone was gentle but dismissive. "But let me ask you something. When you look at our junior staff, what do you see?"

The question caught Jon off guard. "They um... they're solid. They just need some direction, but there's potential there."

"Exactly. And that's the gap." Michael paused, taking a bite of his food and savoring the taste. If Jon thought his burger was enough for two, Michael had enough food in front of him to feed a small army. "We've got creative talent, Wendy's proof of that," he said with his mouth full. "She's a creative genius. But we're weak on analytical infrastructure. We need people who can teach the discipline, the methodology." He paused. "People like you."

Jon's chest expanded, an idea starting to form in his head.

"I've noticed some of the newer associates struggling with the analytical side," Jon offered. "They're enthusiastic, but they don't have the foundation."

"Yes! That's exactly it." He grabbed a handful of fries, and shoved them into his mouth. "What you *can* teach is the framework. How to turn gut feelings into actionable data."

"Maybe I can start working with some of the junior associates," Jon said, finding his momentum now. "Build out their analytical capabilities. Maybe develop a formal training program."

Michael's smile was slow, satisfied. "That's a great idea. I can't believe I didn't think of it myself." He finished his drink. "Got anyone in mind?"

Jon thought for a minute, running through the catalog of associates in his head. Most of them were still pretty green, and just kept their head down. All but one.

"What about Jenny? You must remember her from the promotion ceremony. She seems bright, eager to learn."

Michael chewed on a carrot as he pretended to try to remember who Jenny was. "Brown hair, she took a picture with us or something, right?"

"That's her, Jon said with a little too much enthusiasm. "I think she has a ton of potential."

Michael smiled. "I'm sure she does. You know, I said almost the exact same thing about Wendy when she first started. Bright. Eager to learn. So much potential." His eyes met Jon's. "And look how well that turned out."

Jon felt something cold slide down his spine, but the waiter chose that time to deliver the check, as Michael pushed the last of his burger into his mouth. His work here was done.

"I'm sure whoever you decide to take under your wing will be great." He smiled, patting his lips with his napkin. "You're very... trusting. That's a good quality in a teacher."

The rest of the lunch continued with minimal conversation. Jon was already planning ways to help Jenny and make sure she understood how important the data was in their line of work. Despite the rocky start, the lunch had been a huge success. It sounded like Michael could see all the good Jon could do in the director position, all he had to do was teach Jenny the right way to do things and it would be all but guaranteed.

He pulled out his phone and began to text Wendy the good news, then paused. He thought about what Dr. Carson had said, about the way Wendy had acted. He'd tell her tonight. Once she had calmed down and had time to realize he was right, and this was best for both of them.

*

Wendy's vision was beginning to blur as she scrolled through another quarter of Skyline's marketing reports. She'd been at this for two hours now, cross-referencing Trevor's submissions with client correspondence, looking for a complaint, missed deadlines, anything she could use as leverage.

Jon stood from his computer and slipped his computer bag over his arm. "I have an appointment with Dr. Carson and then lunch with Michael," he said, barely looking in Wendy's direction. He checked his watch. Just after nine. Plenty of time to get there without rushing.

Her chest tightened with guilt. She hated leaving things unresolved. She wished he could understand why she felt so unappreciated, why every time he brought up trying to protect her, it just angered her more. Perhaps Dr. Carson could get through to him, and make him understand how inconsiderate he was being. If that didn't work, she would transform the Skyline account right after she pried it from Trevor's disgusting grip. Maybe then Jon would see her success wasn't just a fluke.

"Be careful," she said, before refocusing on the computer and letting Jon leave.

She'd make this right with Jon. Once he saw her as an equal, once he understood what she was capable of, everything would fall into place.

The words on screen began to jumble, and Wendy closed her eyes, rubbing them with the heels of her hand. A soft knock on the door saved her from having to look at the flashing cursor any longer.

"Come in."

Jenny hurried in, her laptop tucked under her arm as she hurriedly pushed the door closed behind her.

"Okay," she said, already pulling up spreadsheets on her laptop. "I went through the data the best I could without knowing exactly what I was looking for. The quarterly reports and initial performance are just what we'd expect, a ten percent growth in marketing spend the first year, solid client engagement, all the standard metrics."

Wendy leaned back in her chair, frustration building. "So you found nothing then? This was a complete waste of time?"

"Well—" A smile formed on Jenny's lips. "I thought so too at first. But then I pulled the raw CRM data." She opened another window, placing it side-by-side with Trevor's submitted reports. "And... this doesn't make sense."

Wendy's breath caught as she leaned forward, scanning both screens. The numbers didn't match.

"His quarterly reports show consistent ten percent growth," Jenny said, pointing to Trevor's submissions. "But the actual client data, the real engagement metrics, the raw spend numbers..." She highlighted the discrepancies. "Six-point-eight percent in Q3. Five-point-two in Q4."

"Pull up the last four quarters," Wendy said, her heart hammering against her ribs.

One by one, the discrepancies appeared. Each report Trevor had submitted painted a picture of steady growth. But the raw data told a different story. January: 12% growth. February: 4%. March: 11%. April: 3%.

"He's averaging them out," Wendy whispered. "Making it look consistent when he's actually hemorrhaging engagement."

Jenny's eyes went wide. "... I don't get it. If the final number is the same, why lie?"

Wendy sat up a little taller, looking down at the young associate, at least ten years her junior. She had so much to learn about this world, so much that Wendy could teach her. But would she be loyal? That was a question Wendy couldn't answer, not yet. So, she kept her answer simple.

"The final numbers don't tell the whole story," Wendy said carefully. "Leadership wants to see consistency. Predictability. Trevor's been smoothing out the chaos to hide the fact that he's losing control of the account."

She met Jenny's eyes. "And the last two quarters? They're worse than anyone knows. Skyline's probably already talking to competitors."

"So what do we do now?"

"Nothing. I'll handle it from here," Wendy said, rising from her chair.

"But I thought—"

"This was excellent work, Jenny. Really excellent." Wendy's hand slid up to Jenny's shoulder, giving it a squeeze as warmth spread through her chest. "You have a sharp eye for detail."

The younger woman's face flushed slightly under the touch, her smile widening. "I'm just glad I could help. You make all of this look so easy. It's like you know exactly what to do."

Wendy's entire body was aflame. Why could someone as green as Jenny see what Jon couldn't?

"I had a good mentor. Hopefully I can give you that same level of guidance."

As Jenny left, Wendy stared at the split screens, Trevor's lies laid bare in black and white. Her fingers found her wedding ring, spinning it once, twice, three times, four.

Trevor wanted to see her? He was about to get a much closer look than he'd bargained for.

*

Wendy's pulse raced as she made her way back to Trevor's office. She could still hear his smugness in her head, could still feel the way he looked her over like she was some piece of meat. When she got to his office, the door was open, his feet still up on his desk like he didn't have a care in the world. She took a deep breath and strolled inside, not bothering to knock. This would be the day he learned Wendy wasn't someone you crossed.

He looked up from his phone, the same smug smile that etched into her memory now spread across his face as she entered. It was clear to her now that he was trying to project Michael's brand of confidence, but he couldn't pull it off. His tie was loosened, the top button of his shirt undone. But instead of projecting arrogance, it reeked of desperation and mediocrity.

"Well, well." He set his phone down slowly, leaning back in his chair. "Back so soon? I was starting to think you couldn't handle the big leagues."

Wendy lips curved seductively, as she made a show of closing the door behind her. The soft click made her throat go dry with anticipation.

"The way you left was very disrespectful." He licked his lips, his gaze pinned on her chest.

"You're going to need to do a little extra for that." He pushed out from behind his chair, patting his lap for Wendy to come sit.

The power flowing through her veins as she crossed the room was stronger than the hardest of drugs. She rubbed her thighs together as she walked, her hips swaying in a seductive dance.

Heat bloomed in Wendy's core—not desire, but something darker. Power. She could feel it thrumming through her veins as she crossed the room, her hips swaying with deliberate purpose. Trevor's smile widened, his tongue darting across his lips.

She stepped between his legs, her chest at eye level with him. She was close enough now that she could smell the cheap cologne he was wearing. It was all she could do not to laugh as she leaned forward and watched his eyes nearly pop from his head.

"I've been thinking about what you said all morning." She leaned forward, pressing her palms flat against the wall behind him. The position pushed her breasts together, and she was sure she saw drool hanging from his lip. "You're absolutely right. I shouldn't have come in here and acted the way I did earlier."

"Damn right." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "I knew you'd see reason."

"The thing is..." she ran her fingers through his hair. "I kept asking myself, what would it take? What would I have to do to get what I want from you? I mean, I'm a married woman after all." She batted her eyelashes and licked her lips, moving her face closer to his.

Trevor's breathing had gone shallow. "I think we both know the answer to that."

Wendy moved to stand directly in front of him, between his knees. Her hand lifted to his tie, fingers toying with the loosened knot. Trevor's pupils dilated, his hands moving to her hips.

The sheer forbidden nature of his hands on her made her gasp. Her hand slid across his chest, feeling his heart hammering beneath her palm. "Let's talk terms, shall we?"

"I'm listening." Trevor's hands slid higher on her hips, thumbs brushing the curve of her waist.

She felt him hardening against her thigh as she pressed closer. The power of it made her dizzy, made heat pool low in her belly.

"Jesus, Wendy. Had I known this was all it took to get you between my legs, I would have done it years ago."

She stepped back abruptly, leaving Trevor straining forward, confusion flickering across his face. "If you weren't such an asshole..." Wendy moved to the other side of his desk, crossing her legs slowly as she opened her laptop.

"What—"

"We should probably talk about Skyline," Wendy said, as casually as if they were discussing the weather. "I've been looking at the numbers. Impressive, really."

Trevor blinked, trying to process the shift. His hands moved to adjust himself, and Wendy smiled. "I... what?"

"Your numbers." She tapped the top of the screen. "For the Skyline account. They're very interesting."

The hunger in Trevor's eyes began to cool, as he tried to make sense of what was happening. "I thought you wanted to talk terms—"

"Oh, I do." Wendy pressed a couple of keys and slid her laptop across the table where he could see it. "So here are my terms. You give me Skyline, and no one learns that you've been lying in your reports."

"What the hell are you—"

Wendy's smile was sweet, almost sincere. "Your quarterly reports show beautiful, consistent growth. Ten percent, like clockwork. But the raw data?" She leaned forward. "January, twelve percent. February, four percent. March, eleven. April, three."

Trevor's face went pale. "Those numbers are out of context—"

"Oh that's good. Because when I run the actual analysis, it shows you've been averaging out the chaos to hide the fact that you're losing control of our flagship account. You've been cooking the books, Trevor."

Trevor was shaking now, his shoulders slumped, unable to hide his concern. "What do you want?"

"I told you. I want Skyline. You can send Michael an email right now. Tell him you're overextended and you'd like me to take over Skyline."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Frame it as you being a team player. He'll respect that." Wendy crossed her arms. "Or don't, and I can send Michael my analysis, and you explain why you've been committing fraud."

"This is extortion."

"No. This is me playing the game the same way you tried to. Only I'm better at it." She gestured to his computer. "Send it, Trevor. I'll wait."

It was hard to keep the smile from her face as she watched Trevor type out the email. Her entire body tingled, goosebumps covering her body with excitement.

After the final keystroke, Trevor pushed away from his computer. "Done," he said, flatly.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Trevor." Wendy closed her laptop and stood.

"When did you become such a cutthroat bitch?"

The words should have stung. Instead, they washed over her like validation.

"Funny how when you thought you held all the power, you didn't see it that way."

She walked out, letting the door close softly behind her. Her entire body was alive as she rushed toward Michael's office to tell him the news.

*

Wendy's steps seemed to match her breathing, choppy and uneven, as she rushed down the hallways toward Michael's office. Every brush of her dress against her skin filled her body with an electric current that pooled the heat of her body around it. She couldn't wait to see Michael's face when she told him exactly how she got Trevor to give her the Skyline account. How she'd used his own arrogance against him.

Disappointment washed over her as she got to his office only to see the door shut and the lights off behind the frosted glass. She checked her phone. His lunch with Jon had ended hours ago. Jon had already left for the day, something about preparing for what he and Michael had discussed. She was sure she'd hear all about it when she got home.

She realized she was still standing in front of his office, frozen, her hand gripping the locked handle as if she were unable to move. She glanced next door to Brian's office. He was gone for the day as well, and she wondered if anyone other than her did any actual work around here. As she began walking back toward her office, an open office door caught her eye. The director's office.

The disappointment she'd felt washed away, replaced by a flutter of anticipation, or righteousness. She glanced over her shoulder to ensure no one was watching, then slipped inside.

The space was just as she'd remembered it from the weeks of meeting Michael in here. She ran her finger over the mahogany desk, silently cursing the cleaning crew who had allowed it to collect dust. The massive leather chair behind the desk welcomed her, like a siren at sea.

The leather wrapped around her as she sank into it, pulling her deeper. She let out a long, slow sigh. After everything she'd accomplished with the Fireball campaign, after what she was about to accomplish with Skyline, there was no longer any doubt. This was her rightful place. She deserved this seat. Michael knew it. Soon Trevor would be forced to acknowledge it. And eventually, Jon would have to face the truth too.

Her chest tightened at the thought of him.

He'd dismissed her. Reduced all of her success to nothing but luck. Her jaw clenched. They needed to have a conversation. A real one about dreams and aspirations. She couldn't let her own husband be the reason she failed.

She took another deep breath and closed her eyes. Behind her lids, she saw Trevor's face when she'd stepped back into his office. The confusion, then the dawning horror as he realized he'd been played. The way his hands had trembled as he typed that email, surrendering his biggest account with every keystroke.

Heat bloomed low in her belly, causing her to flex her thighs. She glanced at the unlocked door.

But she couldn't help herself. She could still feel how excited he'd been when she pressed against him. When he thought he was going to get exactly what he wanted. He was eating out of the palm of her hand.

I see you now.

Her hand drifted to her lap without conscious thought. Her thighs pressed together as she remembered the look in his eyes. The desperation. The pathetic eagerness, the certainty that he'd won.

Her fingers slipped beneath the hem of her dress, trailing up her inner thigh and leaving goosebumps in their wake.

Where the hell was Michael? She needed to tell him how masterfully she'd exploited Trevor's weakness. How completely she'd blindsided him with those numbers when he'd been too busy staring at her chest to see the trap closing around him.

"Ahhh," Her middle finger pressed against the front of her panties, and found them soaked.

She'd won. Completely and utterly. Trevor was never going to challenge her again.

Her breathing grew heavier as her right hand gripped the cool fabric of the armrest, her dress now bunched around her hips. She should stop. Should go home to Jon and tell him about her victory, and let him see that she was capable of so much more than he gave her credit for.

But her body was still buzzing from the lingering adrenaline of the confrontation.

Just for a second. Just to take the edge off.

She pulled the wet fabric of her underwear to the side, her finger delicately tracing her slick folds.

"Mmmm, God."

She writhed in the chair. She could still feel the heat of Trevor's manhood pressed against his thigh. She could still see the cocky smile on his face, could still feel his grubby hands sliding over her hips.

Was this who she was now? Had she allowed Gold Dress Wendy to take over so much that she got off on manipulating men like Trevor?

It wasn't about Trevor specifically. It was about the power. The rush of being underestimated and then crushing someone's assumptions. Of being in complete control of a situation, of making a man see her as nothing but tits and ass, then proving she was so much more, while simultaneously proving she didn't need to be.

Her finger circled faster. She tried to will herself to think of Jon. To remember his hands on her body, his mouth on her neck, the way he used to look at her like she was capable of anything. Instead, she saw Trevor's face when he'd realized she'd played him. When the arousal had drained from his expression and been replaced by fear.

Her phone buzzed on the desk, making her jolt up and break her spiral.

Wendy jerked her hand away, face flushing as she grabbed for it. Michael's name lit up the screen, and her heart lurched.

She stared at it for a beat, trying to steady her breathing before answering. Her finger was still slick with her juices, and glistened in the fluorescent light as she hit answer. "Hey."

"I just got an interesting email from Trevor." Michael's voice was warm, approving, and it sent searing heat straight to her core. "I knew you could do it."

Pride swelled in her chest, mixing with the arousal still humming through her system. This was what she needed. What she'd been craving all day. Someone who understood what she'd accomplished. Who saw her capabilities instead of her limitations.

"Thank you. I came to the office to find you, but you were already gone."

There was a pause, and for a second, Wendy thought maybe he'd lost connection. "And why did you come looking for me?"

The question caught her off guard and her grip on the armrest tightened. "I... what?"

"The question is simple, Wendy. You knew Trevor sent the email, so why did you come to look for me?"

Because Jon wouldn't understand. Because he would find some way to diminish what she'd done, to explain why it wasn't as impressive as she thought. Because Ava was gone. Because she was alone in this except for Michael, and she needed someone to tell her she was doing what was needed, necessary. That she wasn't losing her mind, and this was all part of the game everyone else was playing.

Because Michael was the only person who *got* her.

She chewed at her bottom lip. "I just wanted to tell you firsthand. I thought you'd want to know the details."

Michael chuckled, and even through the phone, the sound made her nipples harden. She hated herself for it.

"You mean you wanted to celebrate." It wasn't a question.

"No. I—"

"Where are you right now?"

Something in his tone made her pulse quicken. "I'm... in the office. The director's office."

"That's a good girl." Something about the way he said it made her thighs clench. The ding of his car in the background made it sound like Michael had arrived wherever he was going. Wendy wondered if maybe he'd come back to the office. If he was asking where she was so he could join her. She felt her juices slide down the inside of her thigh.

"And what exactly were you doing in that office before I called?"

Her breath caught. The way he'd said it, like he already knew. Like he could see her even through the phone. She actually looked around the small, empty space just to ensure he wasn't standing there in the shadows watching her.

"I already told you. I wanted to tell you about Trevor—"

"That's not what I asked." His voice dropped lower. "What were you doing when your phone rang?"

The silence stretched between them. Wendy's fingers were white from gripping the armrest, her body hyper-aware of every sensation. The cool leather beneath her thighs. The fading afternoon sun warm through the window. The persistent ache between her legs that Trevor's humiliation had sparked and that she couldn't quite extinguish.

Lie. Just lie.

"I was..." She couldn't say it.

Her face burned with embarrassment. How could he possibly know? Had he seen her somehow? Was there a camera in this office she didn't know about?

"Weren't you?" His voice was patient, certain.

"Yes." The admission came easier than it should have. It wasn't really a bit deal, was it? It was just endorphins. Adrenaline. Stress relief.

"Is that why you came looking for me? Because you knew that I'm the only one who can give you what you need now?"

Humiliation washed over her, and she shook her head to try to convince herself he was wrong, her free hand already making its way back between her legs. "Don't be ridiculous," she said without any real conviction. "I just wanted you to know—"

"To know just how capable you are? To know that you are a far better account manager than Trevor or anyone else in this company?"

Her breathing grew ragged as she applied steady pressure to her bare pussy. The rational part of her brain told her this was a mistake. That she had been too transparent and walked right into Michael's trap. But, she wasn't listening to that part of her brain right now.

She needed this. Deserved this validation after everything she'd accomplished today. And it wasn't really cheating if they weren't touching. Phone sex was just... mutual masturbation. People in long-distance relationships did this all the time. It didn't mean anything. It was just a release valve for the stress and tension of the day.

"Yesssss," she whispered giving herself permission.

"That's your chair, Wendy. We both know you're the only one who deserves it. We both know you're the baddest bitch this world has ever seen."

"Ohhh fuck, Michael." Her middle finger dipped into the inferno between her folds, drawing her hips off the leather.

"You still think about that night, don't you? At the hotel?"

"Uhh," she whined, because despite herself, her mind was back there. The weight of Michael on her. The stretch. The way he'd made her feel things Jon never had.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes even as pleasure built in her core.

"You're playing with yourself right now, thinking about it. Thinking about how good my dick felt."

The heat coming from her core was liquid fire. She pulled her finger from her depths, circling her clit with it as she tried to think of a witty comeback.

"I'm thinking about how you said this seat would be mine in a month."

"That was right before you took my cock so deep that you nearly gagged." The unmistakable sound of a zipper echoed through the phone, and despite everything, Wendy's mouth watered. "You weren't able to get the entire thing in your mouth then... But now."

"Mmmm." Her finger dipped back into her sex, followed quickly by a second. She thought briefly about the office door. She hadn't bothered to lock it. Anyone could walk in now and see her—legs spread, dress bunched around her waist, fingers buried inside herself while talking to Michael on the phone. The thought made her grip tighten around her fingers, and she ran her tongue across her teeth.

"But that wasn't your favorite part of the night was it?"

"Michael, this isn't..." Her thumb brushed across the front of her clit, sending a thousand jolts of pure bliss through her body and causing her to forget her protest.

"Tell me what your favorite part was, Wendy."

Her breathing grew more erratic as her thumb danced across her bud, her fingers dripping with her juices. "I... fuck, Michael."

Her phone buzzed against her ear as she stifled another moan.

"Look at the message I just sent. Maybe it will help jog your memory."

Wendy's hand shook as she put her phone on speaker, lowering the volume and placing it on the desk. The message Michael had sent was a picture. She held her breath as she tapped it.

Michael's cock filled the screen.

Her stomach lurched. She should be repulsed. She should delete it. She should block his number and run straight to HR and confess everything to Jon and beg for forgiveness.

Instead, she stared.

She could see every vein. The tip already glistening with pre-cum. Even his bear paw of a hand, the thing looked massive. His hairy knuckles gripped the base, as his untamed pubic hair curled around the edges.

It was disgusting, but her body didn't care. It remembered how that cock made her feel things she didn't know she was capable of feeling. Had given her pleasure she didn't know existed.

Her legs twitched, her fingers never slowing their assault. "Jesus, Michael. You can't send pictures like that. If Jon sees it—"

"I don't care about your cuck husband, Wendy, and neither should you.

"Don't." Her fingers slowed, anger flaring. "Don't call him that."

"Why not?" Michael's voice carried that maddeningly reasonable tone. "Because it's not true? Or because you don't want to admit it is?"

"He's my husband." But even as she said it, her hand moved again, betraying her words. She didn't want to be having the conversation right now. Her body was on fire and all she wanted to think about was the climax she was chasing. Arguing about Jon wasn't going to help.

"He undermines you at every turn. He doesn't think you can handle that chair. He doesn't think you deserve it."

She chewed on her bottom lip, wanting to tell Michael he was wrong. The anger began to swell, and Wendy moved her fingers faster to drown it out, her hips rotating to spur her on, but Michael was relentless.

"He thinks he's better than you, Wendy."

"Stop." The words came out weak and breathless. Her hips moved faster, flooding Wendy's brain with endorphins.

"But I know the truth, Wendy. He's scared of you. He's scared because he knows you're a better account manager than him. He knows you deserve the director's chair more than him."

"Michael..."

"Jack Peterson respects the hell out of you. Trevor is terrified of you. Hell, just this morning the first thing Brian asked me was how you were holding up with the work load and if you were happy. He knows how valuable you are, Wendy. He needs you."

The anger melted away, and Wendy's mouth hung open in a silent scream, her juices coating her fingers as his praise washed over her.

"Oh fuck. Mhmmhmmmm," Wendy's tongue slipped from her mouth, her face blushed. Her breasts rose and fell with her shallow breaths. The idea that so many powerful people were now talking about her, making sure her needs were met, made her knees buckle.

"I need you, Wendy."

"Oh fuck. Ohhhh, God."

"Just like you need me. Don't you?"

Wendy rocked her hips, one hand expertly working her clit while the other stuffed inside the neckline of her dress to cup her breast. He was right, wasn't he? She did need him. It was Michael who had helped her get here. Michael who had taught her to even the playing field.

"Yesss," she whispered, feeling her orgasm begin to build. She needed this release. Needed someone to validate everything she'd accomplished today. That wasn't wrong. That was just human.

"Say it. Say you need me."

"I... oh fuck. I need you, Michael."

Michael's breathing became labored on the other end of the phone. "Just like you need my big dick, don't you?"

"I... Ohhh..." Her eyes flickered open, her gaze locking with the impressive member on her screen. She wanted to look away. Wanted to be disgusted. Wanted to feel anything other than this desperate, aching need.

"Yesssss. Yes, I need it." She finally said, unable to deny her impending explosion.

"Good girl." The condescension in his voice should have angered her. Instead, it made her clench around her own fingers. "Tell me how it felt when I fucked you that night."

Wendy was thrashing on the chair now, if someone were to walk in they would think she was possessed. "So good. It felt so fucking good."

"Better than your pathetic husband can give you?"

"Mmmph." She tried not to answer. Tried to hold onto some shred of loyalty. She twisted her nipple so bad it hurt, in hopes that the pain would override the truth sitting on the tip of her tongue. But her body answered anyway. Her hips bucked faster. Her fingers went deeper. And Jon faded into irrelevance against the memory of Michael's cock inside her.

"Say it, Wendy. Tell me the truth."

"I..." She tried desperately to hold back, but she was too far gone. Past the point of rationalization or justification. This was who she was now. This was what she'd become.

"Now!"

"Yes." The words broke free like a dam. "Fuck, yes. It was so much better. I'm going to cum, Michael. Mmmm fuck."

"That's right. You're going to cum thinking about the only man who's ever truly satisfied you, aren't you? Thinking about how full you felt. Stare at it. Stare at the cock of a real man as you cum."

Wendy's mouth was dry, her eyes wide as she stared at the disgusting image on screen. Tears streaked down her face, but her fingers didn't slow. Another moan escaped her lips, drowned out by the obscene slurping sound of her sex trying to pull her fingers deeper.

"You want it again don't you? You need me to fuck you the way you deserve to be fucked."

"Mhmmmfucck yes." She didn't know if she was agreeing or just surrendering to the inevitable. All she knew was her orgasm was right there, just out of reach, and she would say anything to reach it.

"Then cum with me, Wendy," Michael grunted, signaling his own release. "Because the next time I fuck you, you're going to feel every inch of my raw dick inside you."

"No—" The word started as refusal but broke into a moan. "Michael, you can't—"

"I can. And you'll let me."

"Oooohhh fuuuuck," Wendy saw stars as her thighs clutched around her hand and her protest died in her throat. Her back arched off the chair as her entire body shuddered, her climax ripping through her. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her as she surrendered completely to the release she'd been chasing all day.

For several long moments, she couldn't move. Couldn't think. Could only sit there in the director's chair, her chair, with her dress bunched around her waist and her fingers still buried inside herself, feeling the aftershocks roll through her traitorous body.

Gradually, reality seeped back in.

She straightened up with shaking hands, her body still tingling but her mind finally, blessedly clear. The post-orgasm clarity was brutal. She took the phone off speaker and held it back to her ear, listening to Michael's ragged breathing. The silence stretched between them, different now. Heavier.

"Michael, we can't actually..." Her voice cracked. She swallowed hard and tried again. "You need a condom. What you said—that was just talk. You can't—"

He made a sound that might have been a laugh. "We'll talk tomorrow, Wendy."

"No, I'm serious." Panic crept into her voice. This had been just... stress relief. Mutual masturbation between two consenting adults. It didn't mean anything beyond that. "All that was just talk. In the moment. You can't actually expect—"

"Goodnight." The finality in his tone made her stomach drop. She could hear the smile in his voice as the call ended.

She stared at the image on her screen, her thumb hovering over the delete button. The rational part of her brain screamed to erase it. To erase all of this. To go home and confess everything to Jon and figure out how to save her marriage.

Instead, that steady pulse began humming between her legs again.

She chewed on her bottom lip, still subconsciously staring at the image on her screen. He didn't actually think she would let him fuck her without protection. This was just Michael being Michael. It didn't matter. It wouldn't come to that. She had gotten what she needed from him. Tomorrow she wouldn't be wound so tight. She'd be better prepared to deflect his... distractions.

She deleted the image, then checked her recently deleted folder and removed it permanently. Her hands were shaking as she straightened her dress. But the image was burned into her memory. Deleting it changed nothing.

As she rounded the corner, Trevor was just returning to his office. Their eyes met. His face flushed red, and he looked away first, disappearing behind his door with a slam. A cruel smile formed on her lips. The hum between her legs intensified. She pressed her thighs together as she walked, still feeling the lingering aftershocks.

The old Wendy would have been ashamed, probably would have gone to Trevor's office and apologized. But she hadn't done anything wrong. She realized that now. Trevor was the one who treated her like a piece of meat. He was the one who was falsifying his reports. All she did was call him on it, just like any good director would have done. Just like Michael would have done.

Her hand found her ring as she approached the elevator, spinning it once, twice, three times, four. She needed to talk to Jon. She owed him an apology for being so short with him. Her mind immediately went to Michael, wondering how he would handle the conversation. Michael wouldn't apologize. He would wait until Jon apologized first. But Wendy wasn't sure their marriage could survive that wait.

From the shadows of the parking garage, they watched Wendy walk to her car. Head high. Heels clicking against the concrete. Like she owned the world.

Their hands shook as they lifted the phone. Fine time to quit vaping.

"It's done," they said when the line connected. "She took the bait."

The voice that answered was cold. Mechanical. Stripped of anything resembling warmth. But who could blame them, after everything? "I knew she would. You're sure she doesn't suspect anything?"

"I'm sure. She's too focused on her own success to notice anything else."

"I hope you're right." A long sigh followed. "Phase two starts soon. I'll be in touch."

The call ended without a goodbye.

Below, Wendy's headlights swept across the concrete as she pulled away, completely unaware of the eyes tracking her exit. She had no idea what was coming. She had no idea about a lot of things.

Executive Privilege Ch. 12

Jon stood at the stove in his pajama pants and faded Ohio State t-shirt, watching scrambled eggs turn from liquid to solid in the cast iron pan. It was still dark outside, the first light just starting to creep over the horizon. He stared out the kitchen window, spatula frozen in his hand. Last night had been incredible. Wendy had come home just after he did and practically launched herself at him. They'd barely made it to the bedroom before they were both completely naked.

He slid the eggs onto a plate, the scrape of metal against cast iron too loud in the silent kitchen. Maybe Dr. Carson was right. Maybe he was catastrophizing.

"Morning, stud." Wendy's voice came from behind him as her bare feet padded across the tile. Jon turned to greet her, a rush of air leaving his lungs.

She was wearing his flannel button down. The top buttons hung open, giving him an almost unobstructed view of her cleavage. The hem skimmed the tops of her thighs, leaving her long legs exposed as she reached past him to take the plate of eggs.

"Enjoying the view?" She teased, bending to take her seat at the table, giving him a quick glimpse of her heart-shaped ass, framed by black boyshorts, before settling into the chair.

Jon sat down across from her, handing her a fresh cup of coffee.

"Thanks." She wrapped both hands around it, took a slow sip, and let her eyes close as a smile curled across her face. "Mm, that's good." She scooped up a bite of eggs. "Is this reciprocation for last night? Because I approve."

They laughed, and for a few minutes the tension of the last few weeks finally lifted. It felt simple again: two people sharing an early breakfast after an incredible night. No promotions, no rumors, no thoughts of an affair. Just them.

"Michael and I have to drive to Cincinnati this morning," she said as she reached for her coffee. "Meeting with the Skyline executives. Probably won't be back until late."

There it was. The facade had shattered and the tightness in Jon's chest grew. "Skyline? I thought that was Trevor's account?"

"Trevor handed it off yesterday." A proud smile pulled at her lips. "I thought about what you said. If I want to be a director then I need to prove Fireball wasn't a fluke."

Jon's fork slipped from his fingers. "That's not what I meant." He ran his hand through his hair. "Wendy you just got promoted. Don't you think you—"

"I'm not backing down from this, Jon. I deserve it."

"You've been an account manager for six weeks." He heard his voice rising and tried to pull it back. Tried to sound reasonable. "Six weeks. Trevor's had Skyline for years. That's not the kind of thing people hand off willingly. The statistical likelihood of a successful account transition in your first ninety days is—"

"I don't care about your statistics, Jon."

"Maybe you should. Maybe if you looked at the actual data instead of just—" He stopped himself, but not fast enough. The words were already out there, and so was the fire in her eyes.

"Instead of what?"

He couldn't say it. Couldn't say: *instead of listening to Michael over me*. But it was there in the silence, and they both knew it.

Wendy's right hand moved to her ring, spinning it, four quick spins. Jon noticed but couldn't decode what it meant. Stress? Anger? Guilt?

"I thought we talked about this and decided you weren't ready for the director position yet." He tried to sound like he was being the rational one. "That you'd give it some time, focus on—"

"No." Wendy set her coffee down hard enough that it sloshed. "You talked. You told me all the reasons you don't think I'm ready. Like I'm not capable of making my own career decisions."

"That's not... I was protecting you."

"I don't need your protection, Jon. I need your support."

Dr. Carson's words echoed in the back of his head. *Are you jealous of your wife's success?*

"You're being impulsive." His jaw tightened. "When will you be home?"

"I don't know yet. Why does it matter?" But her hand spun the ring again. Four perfect rotations.

"Why would Trevor give up his account? What did Michael say to make him give up his flagship?"

Wendy's face went pale, then flushed red. She stood so abruptly her chair scraped across the tile. "You don't think I'm capable of getting the account myself?"

"That's not what I—"

"I need to get ready."

She had already put her dishes in the sink and was heading for the shower. Jon stared at the unfinished mug of coffee, steam still curling into the early morning light. Him trying to protect her was him being supportive. Why couldn't she see that?

Are you jealous of your wife's success?

The words played on a loop in his head, no matter how much he didn't want to hear them. He wasn't jealous. He was concerned. There was a difference. Wendy had been an account manager for just over a month, and now she was competing for a director role against people, against him, who had years more experience. Not every account was going to be as easy to manage as Fireball. Maybe she'd learn that with Skyline. Maybe that would be the account that made her see he'd been right all along.

Jon pushed back from the table and walked to the desk drawer, his hands unsteady as he pulled out the thought journal Dr. Carson had suggested.

Today's entry should be straightforward.

Tuesday, 5:51 AM. Wendy is going to Cincinnati with Michael for Skyline meeting. Late return expected.

He chewed on his lip as he stared at the Interpretations column. What did he think it meant?

That she was spending another full day with Michael. That she was actively contradicting his advice. That she was spending more time with her boss than her own husband. That Trevor giving up Skyline made no sense.

The pen shook in his hand as he tried to write the words. Thinking them was one thing, actually writing them was something different.

He forced himself to write in Alternative Explanations instead: *New client meetings require face time, especially large ones. Skyline execs based in Cincinnati. Michael is VP, it's logical for him to attend and properly hand the account over to Wendy.*

The knot in his stomach began to loosen, but only slightly. Seeing the alternative explanations on paper made sense. A lot more sense than the interpretations he was convincing himself of. But the anxiety didn't completely wash away. Something still felt off.

He closed the notebook and shoved it back in the drawer. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Dr. Carson was right and this was just Olivia trauma resurfacing. Maybe Wendy was exactly what she appeared to be—his ambitious, brilliant wife working her ass off to prove herself.

Michael pulled up to the curb of The Buckeye building exactly at 7. He'd insisted to Wendy that he would pick her up at home, but the idea of Michael knowing where she lived made her teeth chatter.

As she opened the door of the black Mercedes GLS she was taken aback to see how clean the interior was. The seats were black leather, with red trimming around the dash. The interior smelled minty, the AC blasting despite it still being cool outside.

"Loving the new look." Michael's eyes traveled down her body before she'd even settled in her seat.

Wendy glanced down at the emerald silk blouse she'd chosen. The neckline dipped low enough that her cleavage was on display, and the black pencil skirt she paired it with ended a few inches above her knee. Not Gold Dress Wendy. But not the Wendy who hid from the power of her body either.

"Glad to see it meets your approval." Her gaze flickered between his legs briefly, but the smirk he wore when she looked up said that he'd noticed and she mentally kicked herself as she slammed the door shut. "Now, let's focus on the meeting this afternoon."

The large SUV glided forward, nearly silent. "I'm just saying, it's working for you. Though I should warn you, the Corsetti brothers aren't Jack Peterson. They won't get tripped up by a nice set of tits and some legs."

The casual vulgarity barely even registered for Wendy now. She bent over, grabbing the folder of information from her laptop bag. From the corner of her eye, she caught Michael staring at the way her breasts spilled out. "Then it's a good thing I brought actual strategy with me. Eyes on the road, big boy."

"That's my girl." Michael laughed, placing his hand on her thigh.

"I'm not your girl." She swatted his hand away.

"No? I seem to remember you singing a much different tune last night. You know, right before you told me you were going to—"

"Stop." Her face flushed hot. She shifted in her seat, crossing her legs. The memory flooded back despite herself. The picture he'd sent her. If she closed her eyes she could still see every detail. Every... She looked out the window, wanting to focus on anything else, knowing that Michael was staring at her.

She looked down at her notes, forcing herself to focus on the typed pages. The Corsetti brothers were the owners of Skyline Chili. She'd spent hours yesterday putting together a strategy that would make Trevor's look like amateur hour.

"So what do you know about Tony and Marco?" Michael asked, merging onto I-71 North.

Wendy took a breath, thankful for the reprieve. "Brothers. Tony's the older one, handles operations and distribution. Marco runs marketing and brand development. They inherited the business from their father fifteen years ago. Started with three locations, now they're at over two hundred and fifty across the Midwest."

"Good. What else?" He slammed his paw of a hand onto the horn, nearly causing Wendy to jump from her seat as he swerved around the slower car in front of him. Wendy glanced out her window noticing the startled look on the older woman's face, but it didn't seem to deter Michael from flipping her the bird as he sped past.

"Marco is um... the numbers guy. He'll want to see projections, proof that bringing me on will improve their bottom line." She tried to focus on her notes and not the way Michael was weaving in and out of traffic. "Tony is the people person. He'll be the hardest to get on board. He's all about relationships. He'll see Trevor's replacement as a personal jab."

"You're missing a key piece." Michael glanced at her, forgetting about the traffic in front of him. "They're both misogynistic assholes. You're going to have to be on your A game to get them on board."

Wendy's head snapped up. "What? Why would you wait until now to tell me that?"

"Don't worry." He laughed, despite her anger. "I know how persuasive you can be."

"I'm serious, Michael. What the hell?"

"Hey." His voice softened. He kept both hands on the wheel now, his eyes on the road. "I believe in you, Wendy. You're the best account manager I've ever seen. Better than Trevor, better than Jon, better than anyone we've had in the last decade."

"That's not—"

"Listen to me." He cut her off, but the edge had left his tone. He was being sincere and Wendy couldn't help but wonder if anyone else in the company had gotten to see this side of him. "Tony and Marco are old-school. They're going to test you. They're going to make comments. They're going to think they know more than you simply because you're a woman." He paused. "But you're going to walk in there prepared. You're going to have answers they didn't know they needed. And by the time we leave, they're going to see exactly what I see."

"Which is?"

This time he did look at her, but kept his gaze glued to hers. "Someone who is going to revolutionize their entire brand. Trust me on this."

He placed his hand on her thigh again, the heat of it seeping straight to her core, before she eventually shoved it away.

Wendy's fingers found her ring. She wanted to stay angry, wanted to hold onto the flash of panic his words had triggered. But Michael's belief in her was a tangible thing, and it soothed the fear the way Jon's concern never could.

"Walk me through your pitch," Michael said. "What's your opening?"

Wendy sat up straighter, grateful to have something to focus on besides the phantom pressure of his fingers. "I start with acknowledging their legacy. Skyline isn't just chili. It's a cultural touchstone. It's family dinners and high school football games and Sunday traditions. That's valuable. That's what makes the brand special."

"Good. Then what?"

"Then I show them the problem. Their demographic is aging. The eighteen-to-thirty-four market barely knows they exist outside of Cincinnati. They're not competing with other chili chains anymore. They're competing with Chipotle and Panera and every other fast-casual concept that's captured the next generation."

Michael nodded. "And your solution?"

"The same as Fireball. We don't abandon tradition. We contextualize it." She was warming up now, her hands moving as she spoke. "We position Skyline as comfort food for a generation that's drowning in anxiety. We lean into the nostalgia but make it accessible. Social media campaigns featuring real families, real stories. A loyalty app that gamifies the experience."

Michael arched his eyebrow. "What about the brewery idea? I thought we were going to tell them they should partner with them?"

"No. I'm going to lead with Fireball." Wendy tapped the folder.

Traffic had thinned out and he turned to face her. "Fireball? I don't get it."

Of course he didn't. Wendy's body buzzed with energy. She smiled at him like she was the mentor. "Since I took the Fireball account, sales are up thirty-two percent. They had the biggest two weeks in their company history after the Memphis campaign." Her smile grew larger as she watched Michael fail to connect the dots. "They want to discount me because I'm a woman, I'm going to show them exactly the kind of results I can deliver, not just ideas."

"Ha!" Michael clapped his hands together, the sound reverberating off the glass. "There she is. That's the fire I'm talking about. That's fucking brilliant."

Wendy's breath caught. The problem was that Michael's praise affected her more than she cared to admit. When he wasn't being a creep, he had a way of making her feel like the most powerful person in the world.

The highway stretched ahead, Cincinnati's skyline growing larger on the horizon. Wendy became acutely aware of the confined space. The leather seat beneath her thighs. The way the morning sun heated the passenger window against her arm. She glanced at Michael's hand on the wheel,

half-expecting him to reach for her thigh again. She shifted, recrossing her legs, and told herself it was just the car's warmth making her skin prickle.

"Tell me about Tony," she said, forcing her attention back to the meeting. "What's his hot button?"

"Legacy. Family name. He takes it personally when people assume Skyline is just some regional chain. He wants to be taken seriously as a businessman. Something you should be able to relate with."

Wendy nodded, making a note in her folder. She could work with that. She understood the particular sting of being dismissed before you'd even opened your mouth.

"So I validate that," she said. "I respect the successful regional empire they built, and show them how we can grow the brand outside of the region."

"Exactly." Michael looked like a driving instructor. His hands at ten and two like he was suddenly the perfect gentleman. It was exactly what she wanted, she just needed to remind her body.

"You're going to walk in there and they're going to see a sharp, prepared professional who's done her homework. Not some blonde account manager who's in over her head."

"And what if that doesn't work? What if they refuse to work with a woman?"

Wendy uncrossed her legs. Let her knee fall toward the center console. Toward him. She watched herself do it like she was observing a stranger. The small surrender. The invitation she could still pretend was accidental.

"Then I step in." Her body tensed. "Not because you need me, but because sometimes with guys like this it turns into a dick measuring contest." He glanced at her with that familiar smirk. "And we both know who has the bigger dick."

Wendy rolled her eyes. "You're disgusting."

"And yet here you are."

She didn't have a response to that. Just turned back to her notes, ignoring the way her pulse had quickened at his words. It didn't mean anything. It was just adrenaline about the meeting. Just nerves.

"You know what Trevor was planning to pitch them?" Michael's tone shifted back to business.

"'Skyline: A Cincinnati Tradition.' I think he said something about showing a family eating around a dinner table."

"That's terrible."

"That's lazy." His gaze caught hers. "They need someone who understands that tradition doesn't mean stagnation. Someone who can honor what they've built while showing them where they could go."

The highway signs counted down the miles to Cincinnati. Twenty-five minutes. Twenty.

Wendy reviewed her notes one more time, running through objections and counter-arguments. She was ready for this. She had to be.

"You ready?" Michael asked as the Cincinnati skyline filled the windshield.

Wendy closed her folder. "I'm ready."

Jon set his lunch down on his desk and pulled up his schedule. The Reinhart account needed to be wrapped this week. He had promised them ideas for a new campaign that would boost foot traffic, but with everything happening with Wendy lately he had fallen behind. Now she was getting even more face time with Michael, taking on another major client and trying to prove she was ready for the director role. Jon needed to show he was just as capable.

He found Jenny at her desk laughing with one of the junior associates. Michael wanted a director who could mentor, someone who could shape the next wave of talent. Jon could do that, and working with Jenny would help him catch up on his accounts at the same time. It was an efficiency win for him and a professional lift for her.

"Jenny, you got a minute?"

Her head snapped forward, brown eyes widening. "Of course. What's up?"

"I'm working on a local bakery account. Reinhart's, over in German Village. Could use an extra set of eyes if you have bandwidth." He remembered the first time Marcus had said those exact words to him. How nervous he was to make a mistake.

"Really?" She was already closing her laptop, grabbing her notebook. "Yes, absolutely. I'd love to help."

Jon led her back to his office, holding the door as she slipped past. She glanced once at Wendy's empty desk before taking the chair across from Jon. As she did, he couldn't help but notice the similarities in the way the two of them dressed. Her pink top hung low like Wendy's and he could see the top of her breasts. It didn't look quite as provocative as Wendy's, but that was because her chest was smaller. The dress Jenny wore was also about the same length as Wendy's, but seemed less attention grabbing.

Was this just how professional women dressed now and Jon had missed it? Maybe Dr. Carson was right. He was putting too much stock in alternate truths. Wendy may have been dressing different, but it wasn't any different from her colleagues.

For the first time in months, it was a little easier for Jon to breathe.

"Where's Wendy? Did she already get promoted and I missed the announcement?"

"What?" Jon's hand shook as he moved his mouse. "No. She's traveling to Cincinnati today. With Michael. Meeting with Skyline executives. There are a few other people in contention for the position."

"Oh." Jenny smiled. "That makes sense. I just thought maybe since her desk was empty..." She trailed off, opening her notebook. "Sorry. So, the Reinhart account?"

"Right." Jon forced himself to focus, pulling up the Reinhart's file on his monitor. He angled the screen so she could see. "Reinhart's has been a neighborhood staple for forty years. Family-owned, third generation. They're getting crushed by commercial chains and trendy artisan places. Revenue's down eighteen percent year over year."

Jenny leaned forward, her eyes scrolling the screen. "Okay. So... what's the vibe of the bakery? Like, when you walk in, what do you feel?"

"The vibe?"

"Yeah. Is it warm and grandma's-kitchen cozy? Is it cool and modern? Does it feel stuck in the past?" She sat up straighter, eager to demonstrate what she'd learned. "I was helping Wendy yesterday with the Skyline account—"

"You were helping Wendy with Skyline?" Jon almost jumped from his chair. Wendy made it sound like it was more casual than that. What did she need Jenny's help with?

Jenny continued before he could put more thought behind it. "Yeah and she said perception is the most important thing for a business. If we don't understand how customers experience the space, we can't market it effectively."

Jon's face went pale. It was one thing for Wendy to think the creative part of the process was the most important, but it was a complete other for her to teach it to someone else like it was fact. "You probably just misheard her."

"I don't think so?"

"To be an effective account manager you should always look at the sales and the demographics first. Your first view of a company should be based on facts not perception. You can't misinterpret numbers like you can... vibes."

"Right, but—" Jenny bit her lip. "How do we know what will appeal to the twenty-five to forty crowd if we don't know what the bakery's identity is?"

"The data will tell us that." It took everything in him not to raise his voice. It wasn't Jenny's fault she was asking all of the wrong questions. "That's actually where most account managers go wrong." Jon pulled up a second spreadsheet. "They start with gut feelings and work backward to justify them. What we do instead is let the data tell us where the opportunities are. Then we build the story around what we find."

He highlighted a column of figures. "Look at this. Morning traffic is strong. Lots of regulars, mostly fifty-five and older. But afternoon and evening drop off a cliff. Meanwhile, there's a brewery two blocks away that's packed every night with twenty-five to forty-year-olds. Same neighborhood. Same foot traffic. Completely different customer base."

"So the opportunity is capturing the after-work crowd?"

"Maybe. But we don't assume that yet." Jon clicked to another tab. "First we look at their product mix. Seventy percent of revenue comes from traditional items like coffee cakes, cinnamon rolls, things your grandmother would buy. Only twelve percent from items that would appeal to a younger demographic. So before we tell them to chase the brewery crowd, we need to know: can they actually serve that market? Do they have the production capacity? The menu flexibility?"

Jenny's eyes lit up the way his used to when Marcus would make a point. She was starting to make the connection. He watched as she made a few notes, flipped backward a few pages and scribbled some stuff out, then started writing again.

"The numbers are the foundation," Jon continued, trying to keep his emotions in check. "Everything else, the story, the brand identity, the emotional appeal, that all comes after we understand what the data is telling us. Think of it like a pyramid. The data is the foundation."

"That makes sense, but..." Jenny hesitated. "With the success of the Fireball campaign. Maybe Wendy has found something. Like her approach is—"

"Fireball was the exception not the rule," Jon snapped, before he could catch himself.

Jenny's eyes went wide and she seemed to sink into her chair.

"Sorry," Jon whispered. "I just... Fireball has been a great campaign and we can learn from it. But it's too soon to say that we should be basing all of our future campaigns from it."

"You're right. I hadn't considered that. It also probably helps that Wendy and Michael spent so much time collaborating on it. It seems like every day they're in another closed door meeting."

Jon's mouth went dry. "Yeah it's um... collaboration is important."

"Totally. I'm sure you can relate. You said before that Marcus was your mentor? I guess you're used to that sort of one-on-one training. I just hadn't experienced it yet."

The AC kicked on. The cool air blowing gently on Jon's head. Why did it suddenly feel so stuffy in here? He tried to ignore the sense of dread washing over him. The truth was, Marcus's mentorship always involved other people. Group sessions where people could ask questions. Very rarely did they have closed door sessions, and they never ran as late as Wendy's. He thought he was just over-reacting seeing things that weren't really there. But, if Jenny was seeing them too...

"I um... I have a call I have to take."

"Oh, right." She made a few more notes. "What was it you wanted me to help with for the account?"

Jon forced himself back to the present. "Right. I need you to pull demographic data for a five-mile radius around the bakery. Age brackets, household income, spending patterns on food and beverage. Also pull comps. Pull up similar businesses in similar markets, their performance metrics."

"Got it." Jenny was writing rapidly. "What am I looking for?"

"Gap analysis. The data will tell us where they are underperforming relative to market potential. What segments have the most growth opportunity with the least competition. Once we have that we'll know how to structure our campaign."

"Perfect." She stood, smiling the way Jon used to after a meeting with Marcus. "Thanks again for including me on this, Jon. I really want to learn how to do this the right way."

After she left, Jon sat staring at his desk. His thoughts colliding with one another as he struggled to keep his mind from racing.

Jenny didn't have an agenda. She was just a junior associate making casual observations about the people around her. She'd noticed the same patterns Jon had been noticing. The closed-door meetings. The constant collaboration. She'd even assumed Wendy's empty desk meant a

promotion had already happened. Dr. Carson could tell him he was being paranoid, but the data didn't lie. He wasn't the only one that saw something, others were seeing it too.

He pulled out his thought journal for Dr. Carson and started writing.

The conference room here felt different than the one in New Orleans. The room was bigger, windows wrapped around it making downtown Cincinnati come to life. The table in the middle of the room was massive, easily twice as large as the one at Fireball, but it was practically empty, like it was all for show.

The Corsetti brothers sat on the opposite side of a conference table that could have seated twenty. Tony, the older one, had positioned himself dead center, his thick arms crossed over a gut that strained against his button-down. Marco flanked him to the right, younger by maybe five years, with slicked-back hair and a Rolex that seemed like it was crusted with diamonds the way it sparkled every time he checked his phone.

The hostility was thick the moment Wendy walked into the room. Their questions were aimed at Michael, they shook his hand and only offered Wendy a curt nod. Neither Michael nor Wendy were offered coffee, despite the carafe that sat behind the brothers, steam still rising from the spout.

"Look." Tony's voice was soft. He was the more pleasant of the two, but that was a low bar. "We trusted Trevor. He handled our account for years. We want him back on the account. He understood the vision. What we're trying to build here."

"I understand that relationship was valuable." She glanced at Michael who seemed to have an eternal scowl on his face. "I'm not here to replace what Trevor built. I'm here to build on that foundation and take Skyline to the next level."

Marco snorted without looking up from his phone. "The next level. Michael what is this DEI crap. I thought you were above this."

Michael opened his mouth, but Wendy plowed ahead. Her irritation growing by the second. This was different than anything she'd encountered before. They weren't dismissing her because she was hot or accusing her of sleeping her way to the top. They were just being downright disrespectful.

"As I was saying." She clicked to her first slide. The Fireball numbers filled the screen behind her. "In the short time since I took over the Fireball account, we've seen a thirty-two percent increase in sales. It's been one of the most successful launches in the history of the company and—"

"Fireball?" Tony leaned back in his chair. "No offense, sweetie, but the Fireball market isn't the same as ours." He paused, taking in Wendy's appearance for what seemed like the first time. "But I can appreciate how that clientele may appreciate a... professional such as yourself."

Heat crept up Wendy's neck, her face flushing. She spun her ring quickly as she regained her composure. "The methodology translates. We identified an aging demographic, repositioned the brand to capture younger consumers without alienating the existing base, and delivered measurable results within the first quarter."

"Sweetheart." Marco finally set his phone down. "We've been in this business since before you were born. You want to tell us about demographics?"

The air was thick, and for a moment Wendy wondered if it was all worth it. She could give Trevor the Skyline account back, find another client who wasn't so difficult to work with and grow their brand all the same. But she wasn't one to back down from a challenge, and the more they called her demeaning names, the more she wanted to prove them wrong.

"Your eighteen-to-thirty-four market penetration has declined fourteen percent with the strategy you and Trevor came up with. Meanwhile, your core demographic is aging out."

Marco sat up in his chair and set his phone to the side.

"There's an opportunity here and a pretty straightforward one at that." She clicked to the next slide. "We pair some of your older more successful local celebrities with younger ones. Tony, you're a music guy right?"

"I am."

"Think of this as your Ozzy Osbourne working with Post Malone moment. The younger generation will eat it up."

Tony exchanged a glance with Marco. For a moment, Wendy thought she'd broken through.

"This your idea Michael? What, did you think if you had a pretty face deliver the pitch we wouldn't notice it was your handiwork?"

Wendy's stomach dropped. "Actually, I led the creative strategy on this. It's similar to an idea I had with the Fireball—"

"Sure, sure." Tony smiled, but it was directed at Michael. Like they shared some kind of secret.

"Wendy developed that strategy independently." Michael's voice was calm. "She identified the opportunity and initiated the outreach."

"Right." Tony's gaze drifted back to Wendy's neckline. "Well, it's very... polished."

She pressed on, refusing to let the dismissal derail her. "The loyalty app concept will also help with the younger crowd. We gamify the Skyline experience, reward repeat visits, create shareable moments for social media. Your competitors are already doing this. Chipotle's app has twelve million active users. Panera's loyalty program drives thirty percent of their revenue."

"We're not Chipotle." Marco almost sounded offended. "We're not trying to be some corporate chain."

"I understand that. I just thought if you could expand then—"

"Tell you what." Marco leaned forward. "Why don't you let Michael walk us through the financials. I could use a water if you wouldn't mind."

"A water?"

"Yeah. If you don't mind it's right out that door. Turn right, you can't miss it. Michael, you want anything?"

"I think we're done here," Michael said, slamming the laptop shut.

Wendy turned to see Michael on his feet, laptop already tucked under his arm. His face had gone hard in a way she'd never seen before.

"Excuse me?" Tony's smile faltered. "We're in the middle of a meeting."

"No, we're not." Michael moved toward the door. "We're in the middle of you two wasting our time. Wendy, pack up. We're leaving."

"Now wait just a minute," Marco rose from his chair. "If you walk out that door then there's no coming back. We will cancel our contract and find a company who actually respects us."

"Respects you?" Michael laughed, holding his stomach like he was Santa Claus himself. "It's obvious to me you're not looking for respect you're looking for a yes man. Wendy here is innovative. She's trying to make you money. She came here with a solid plan and vision, one that has already proven itself with one of the biggest brands in the spirits industry, and you two are too blind or too stupid to see what's right in front of you."

The conference room was silent. The brothers stared at Michael like he had just murdered their family right in front of them. Wendy's heart was in her throat. She'd never seen a situation as tense as this. *We just lost skyline*. This would obviously cost her the promotion. Would Brian fire them both as well? Had Michael just willingly thrown away his career because a client disrespected her?

After several tense minutes, Tony finally smiled. "It's rare to find this type of honesty anymore." His gaze moved between Wendy and Michael. "And even rarer to find the type of loyalty the two of you have for one another."

Marco was nodding along with his brother, his entire demeanor shifting. "Wendy, we owe you an apology. If we would have been treated the way we treated you we wouldn't be where we are today. We look forward to moving forward with you."

Tears welled in Wendy's eyes. She wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry, so she simply nodded.

"I'm glad we understand one another," Michael said, a look of satisfaction on his face. "Wendy, mind waiting outside for just a second. There are a couple of other things I'd like to discuss with Marco and Tony before we leave. It shouldn't take long."

The hallway was quiet. Wendy leaned against the wall, her laptop bag clutched to her chest, replaying what had just happened.

They'd apologized. Actually apologized. And it was because of Michael.

The buzz between her legs from earlier now radiated through her body, a warmth she couldn't ignore. She shifted her weight, pressing her back harder against the wall.

She could still hear his voice cutting through the room. *She's innovative. She's trying to make you money*. The way he'd slammed that laptop shut, ready to walk away from one of Buckeye's biggest clients rather than let them disrespect her. Her nipples ached against her blouse, and for the briefest moment she wondered if she could get away with touching herself in the hallway. An absurd thing to think, and she dismissed it immediately.

Instead she thought about Jon and how he would have acted in that situation. He would have listened to the brothers. He would have sent her into the hallway because the numbers wouldn't support upsetting one of the company's biggest clients. But Michael didn't hesitate.

We both know who has the bigger dick.

The memory of his words from the car ride made her breath catch.

The victory should have felt bigger. The brothers had backed down, acknowledged her value, agreed to move forward with her strategy. She'd won. Yet, she could still feel Marco's eyes dismissing her. Still hear Tony calling her sweetie like she was a child playing dress-up in her mother's clothes.

Michael's muffled voice carried through the door. They were laughing now. Whatever tension they had earlier, Michael was able to smooth over. She still wasn't entirely sure how he'd done it, or why it had such a profound effect on her.

The door opened before she could analyze it anymore. Michael emerged and she found herself grinning like a stupid groupie. He smiled at her and she resisted the urge to run into his arms. He'd won... and he'd done it for her.

"All set," he said. "They're going to be very cooperative going forward."

Wendy pushed off the wall, smoothing her skirt. "Thank you. For what you did in there."

"I meant every word." His hand found the small of her back as they walked toward the elevator. "You deserved better than that."

She leaned into his touch, already thinking about the long drive ahead and how she was going to spend it.

The air was electric as Michael merged onto I-71 North and headed back toward Columbus. Wendy glanced at him from the corner of her eye, her pulse continuing to skyrocket. He'd defended her. Risked the account, his entire career, for her.

When she closed her eyes all she could see was Michael's face when he slammed the laptop shut. The bass in his voice as he called the brothers blind and stupid.

"You're awful quiet."

"Just... thinking." Wendy's fingers dug into the fabric of her skirt.

"About what?"

She wasn't sure how to answer. She should be thinking about the next steps for the Skyline account. It was important she got that right now that the Corsettis were giving her a chance. She should be thinking about Jon. About how she'd tried so hard to keep things at home right while she balanced this tightrope with Michael.

But Jon felt impossibly far away right now, and no matter how hard she tried, the strain between them only deepened. He didn't see her as an equal. He saw her as someone to protect, when in truth it had always been the other way around. She protected him from himself. From his rigidity. From his need to make everything clean and binary, to force meaning where ambiguity was necessary. He wouldn't make a good director. He wasn't flexible enough.

And she was protecting him from something else, too. From the humiliation of having a wife who—she worried her lip, reached for the AC, turned it higher—had her underwear soaked through as she sped down the highway, thinking about another man.

What kind of woman had she become?

She knew the answer. Had known it for weeks now, maybe longer. This wasn't about old Wendy or Gold Dress Wendy. Even that version of herself was long gone, just a dot on the horizon. She wasn't the naive employee who thought hard work would get recognized. She wasn't some loyal wife rationalizing that what she was about to do was for the right reasons.

This version of herself was the worst yet, the most powerful. Her nipples strained against her blouse, her arousal slick against her inner thigh. This version understood the game completely. She knew that power wasn't given, it was taken. She'd taken it from Trevor. The Corsetti Brothers almost took it from her, but Michael wouldn't let them have it.

She thought about the conference room. Marco's dismissive smirk. Tony's eyes crawling over her chest while he called her sweetie. The casual cruelty of being asked to fetch water like she was an intern, not the woman who'd just presented a strategy that could save their dying brand.

And through it all, Michael was there, a tether to the shore. He fought for her with the same passion and conviction that Wendy fought for the account. He saw her hunger, her ambition and encouraged it. He didn't shut her down the moment she began to shine. Sure, he also wanted to fuck her. She wasn't stupid. She knew that his defense of her wasn't purely altruistic, that somewhere in his calculations was the knowledge that protecting her would make her grateful, would bind her closer, would make moments like this one more likely.

There wasn't any reason to try to convince herself that wasn't true. The same could be said about any marriage really, and after all aren't all partnerships like this just a form of marriage? As long as Michael was loyal to her, and he'd just proven he was, then this partnership benefited both of them.

Her fingers found his thigh. His gasp made her heart pound faster. He flexed beneath her touch and his manhood began to grow.

Michael's eyes flicked to her hand, then back to the road. His lips curled slightly, but he didn't speak. He didn't need to ask what she was doing. He was in complete control. He always was.

"They were assholes," he said, as her hand traveled his length. "They deserved what they got."

"Since when has that bothered you?" Wendy laughed, suddenly very at ease. "You're an asshole."

"Not to you." His hand left the steering wheel, covering hers. "Never more than I know you can take."

The words were like gasoline to the fire burning just under her skin. She wanted to argue. To point out the IOU, the bets, the hotel room, all of it. But he was right. Every time she thought she'd reached her limit, she discovered the limit was further than she'd believed. And every time she crossed it, she felt more powerful, not less.

"Jon would have caved and told me to go get the water like they asked." She wasn't sure why she said it. Maybe she needed to hear it out loud. "He would have said that the risk of losing them outweighed the reward."

"Jon's an idiot."

"Don't call him that." She was stroking him through his pants now. "He's just... risk-averse."

"Risk-averse." Michael shook his head. "That's a nice way of saying he's a coward. Just a little beta cuck."

Wendy's cheeks burned. "Stop," her voice was soft. "I don't want to talk about Jon."

"What do you want to talk about?"

Instead of answering, she removed her hand from the front of his pants and grabbed his wrist, pulling it between her legs, letting him feel just how wet she was.

"What you said this morning." Her voice had dropped, more seductive. "About the dick-measuring contest."

"What about it?"

"You were right." She pulled her panties to the side, sighing as Michael's palm made contact with her bare slit. "Your dick was bigger."

"Ahhh." She released his wrist just as his fat finger pushed between her folds. Her hand found his zipper and she quickly dragged it down. As soon as his cock sprung free she wrapped her fingers around it. He was only half-hard, but even so, the weight of him in her hand made her breath catch. Even like this, he was already bigger than Jon fully erect. The thought came unbidden, and she hated herself for it. Hated that she couldn't stop comparing. Hated that the comparison always came out the same way.

"So much fucking bigger." She was already shifting in the seat, bending over in his lap and causing his finger to slip from inside her. She turned her body completely, sitting on her legs, her back to the passenger side window as her hair fell across his thighs and she freed him fully from his boxers. The first touch of her tongue made him grow harder against her lips and she let out an unconscious moan.

She traced the underside from base to tip. Each ridge, each vein sent a fresh wave of heat through her core. Michael's fingers tangled in her hair. He didn't apply any pressure, he didn't need to. She knew his cues, and she opened her mouth and sank it into his lap.

Her tongue bathed the underside of his shaft, as Michael hit the back of her throat, gagging her before she pulled back slightly. Her jaw ached as his thickness filled her mouth. She could hear cars passing them on either side as they continued down I-71. Somehow that degradation only made her want it more.

"Fuck, you've gotten good at that." Michael lifted his hips, pressing deeper, the car accelerating as he fed himself into Wendy's mouth. She braced her hands against his thighs, scrambling to find a rhythm as the sound of her choking began to overwhelm the radio.

"You know what I kept thinking about during that meeting?" Michael's hand slid across her back, his fingers gripping the hem of her skirt as it began to slide up her legs. "When those two were berating you instead of giving you a chance?"

She couldn't answer with her mouth full. Just moaned around his shaft.

"I was thinking about how they'd never know what this mouth can do." He dragged her skirt up higher, his fingers spreading out across her bare ass. "How they will never get to see what you're really like. But for me..."

He thrust upward, hitting the back of her throat. Wendy gagged, eyes watering, but didn't pull away.

"For me, you'll do anything. Won't you?"

The words had their desired effect on her. Even the cool blast of the AC against her bare skin did nothing to extinguish the inferno between her legs.

The blast of an appreciative air horn shattered the moment as a semi-truck roared past in the right lane, slowing just long enough to catch the heart-shaped ass wiggling in front of the window.

Wendy pulled back with a gasp, resting her head in his lap as her hand continued to stroke him. "Michael, there are too many cars. Someone's going to see."

The SUV lurched to the right, wrenching a squeal from Wendy. He was already guiding her forward, his fingers wrapping in her hair. He was brutal now, using her mouth as the car drifted across lanes. Any thought of motion sickness vanished under the relentless pace he set, the world narrowing to pressure and breath and heat. Saliva and precum streaked her chin as he pushed more and more of his shaft into her throat.

When she finally came up for air, she was surprised to see they were parked at the far end of a rest stop. With the exception of a couple of cars on the far end of the parking lot they were alone. She looked to Michael, who just smirked before turning off the SUV completely.

"Where are—"

"Get in the backseat."

"Michael, I—"

His hand was already inside her underwear, two fingers sliding through her folds. Her protest quickly turning into a needy moan.

"You're soaked." He watched her eyes flutter closed, her hands fisting. "And you want me to make you cum."

"Yes." The word came out strained, breathy.

"Then get in the back, before I change my mind."

His fingers stilled on her clit and Wendy rotated her hips to maintain the contact. Her eyes opened, desperate to think of a witty response. When it was clear she had none, she lowered her head and climbed over the middle console.

Wendy felt like a teenager as she moved into the back of the SUV. It was roomier than she expected, and the windows were tinted giving her a strange sense of relief.

The backdoor opened and Michael slid into the seat next to her. She didn't even remember seeing him exit the vehicle, but she wasn't surprised he didn't try to climb in like she did. His

stomach pressed against her thigh as the back suddenly felt smaller. His hand was back on her leg, his teeth grazing her neck before she had time to process her situation.

"Michael, wait—"

"No more waiting." His fingers slithered up her leg, pressing her underwear into the front of her sex. "I've wanted to do this since the second you got into the car this morning."

She gasped as his thumb pressed against her clit.

"Take them off, or I'm going to rip them off."

Wendy's heart hammered in her chest. How was he able to turn her on so badly? She took stock of his face, cataloging every repulsive detail despite knowing it wouldn't matter. His pores were visible this close, enlarged around his nose where broken capillaries webbed across the skin. The five o'clock shadow came in patchy, darker in some places than others. His lips were thin and cracking, but his eyes...

His eyes were calm yet demanding. They held power and strength, all the things she hoped to one day convey.

He knew exactly what he looked like. Knew the gut that pressed against her, knew the jowls and the thinning hair and every physical flaw that should have disqualified him from this moment. And he didn't give a damn. Didn't apologize for taking up space, didn't hesitate before reaching for what he wanted, didn't question whether he deserved this. That certainty, that absolute refusal to be diminished by anyone for anything radiated from him and drew her like a magnet.

She pressed forward, one arm wrapping around his neck as she pulled him into a kiss. It tasted like mouthwash and stale mints, his tongue aggressive and demanding as it pushed past her lips. Her other hand fumbled between them, fingers hooking into the waistband of her panties and dragging them down her thighs with jerky, graceless movements. The lace caught on her heels and she had to kick one leg free, but she didn't care.

His hand found her bare ass, gripping hard enough to sting, and she gasped into his mouth.

"That's my girl," he growled against her lips.

"I'm not your—" She gasped as his thumb pressed against her clit. "Oh fuck."

Her hips bucked against his hand, her lips finding his again. She moaned into his mouth, fingers tangling in his thinning hair. His neck was slick with sweat under her palm.

He curled his fingers upward and her mouth fell open, the moan dying into a strangled sound. His free hand moved to her blouse, buttons popping free as he yanked the fabric aside along with her bra exposing her breasts.

"Fucking perfect." His mouth closed over her nipple, teeth scraping, and Wendy's back arched off the leather seat.

"Ahhhh." Her fingers tightened in his hair, pulling hard enough to draw a groan against her breast.

He pulled back, then shifted his attention to the other one, his mouth devouring her chest as he slid two fingers into her.

“Ohh fuck, Michael—” His name broke from her, ragged and desperate.

“Again. Say my name again.” He kissed his way up her throat, teeth closing over the soft skin of her neck as his fingers curled in a beckoning motion, sending her body into a frenzy.

“Ugggh, Michael. Michael.” Her cries grew louder, the windows of the SUV fogging over as she lost herself to it.

Her thighs trembled, she was getting close. His fingers slipped from inside her making her groan in protest. She hooked her legs around his back, desperate to find her digits again. As her hips bucked forward that's when she felt it.

His bare cock pressed against her folds. Heat pulsed from it as it slid through her wetness making her quiver. The head caught against her clit and made her shudder.

"Fuuuuck, Michael." She tried to will her hips to stop, but the friction was too perfect. She rolled them forward, her tongue gliding over his lips as he watched her writhe.

"Don't... ohhh fuck. Don't move." She was close now. The orgasm was building inside her threatening to tear out of her. Her nails dug into his nape as she worked her hips faster, using the friction of his cock to drive herself into a frenzy. This could work, as long as he didn't try anything stupid, she would cum.

Her forehead dropped against his, her breath coming in short, desperate pants as she ground against him again. And again. She could feel the thick head catching at her entrance with each roll of her hips, threatening to slip inside. As long as he didn't move, that wouldn't happen.

"Michael I'm gonna— You're going to make me—"

He pulled her backward slightly, breaking the contact and stilling her hips completely.

"No—" She tried to move but his grip was iron. "Michael, please, I'm so close—"

"You don't get to cum without me."

She bit her lip. "Do... do you have a condom?"

"No."

"Michael—"

His grip shifted, pulling her against his body once more. The head of his cock was pressed right against her entrance. Her eyes went wide, her mouth hung open, but she didn't pull away.

"That's not... I can't..." Her hips swiveled, another jolt of pleasure racing through her as the tip of his head spread her lips.

"You want this." His hands flexed on her hips, keeping her right there, balanced on the edge. "Say it."

"I—" Her voice broke as he pushed forward just slightly, barely an inch, but enough to make her vision blur. Enough to make her remember the stretch. "We can't— You don't have a—"

"We can." He pulled back, denying her, and she whimpered. "And we will. I told you the next time I fucked you it would be without a condom. You know this was going to happen when you got in the car today and you came anyway."

"That's not—" But her hips chased him, trying to sink down onto what he was withholding. Trying to take what he wouldn't give until she admitted the truth they both knew.

"Say you want me to fuck you."

Her nails dug into his shoulder. "Michael—"

"Say it, Wendy." He pressed forward again, just the tip, stretching her. "Tell me what you need."

Her head fell back, throat exposed, defeated. "I want you to fuck me."

"Louder."

"I want you to fuck me." Tears stung her eyes. "Please, Michael. Fuck me."

Without any resistance, Michael pushed his cock forward.

"Oooohhhh." Wendy's head fell back as he stretched her open, inch by inch. The fullness was overwhelming, nothing like the condom-dulled sensation from before. Every ridge, every vein dragged against her walls, the heat of him bare inside her.

He pulled back slowly, then thrust up hard.

The orgasm detonated. Her pussy clamped down on his shaft, vision blurring white as her body convulsed. She sank lower, taking him fully, impaled and shaking on his lap as wave after wave tore through her.

His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her ass. "Wait... wait a second," she whined, still trying to recover. "I just need to—"

"Everything you need is right here," he said triumphantly, as he pulled her body up so only the head was still inside of her before slowly pushing his entire length back into her.

"Oh, God. What are you doing to me?" Her entire body felt hyper-sensitive. Despite her orgasm, she still hummed with need. Each thrust made her gasp for more, her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders, ignoring the pool of sweat on his back.

The inside of the car was hot, but her body was on fire. Every thrust threatened to make her boil over. She could already feel another orgasm building from every inch of her body. It felt like it was everywhere at once, slowly simmering to the surface.

Wendy's movements grew faster as she stared into Michael's eyes, waiting to see what he would do next. He smirked at her, then snaked his hand up her bare back until it found the base of her neck. He licked his lips and leaned forward while pulling Wendy towards him.

Their lips met, and they hungrily devoured one another. His tongue filled her mouth, their bodies responding to each other. Michael pressed his hips against Wendy's as she rode his cock up and down, letting his full length travel inside her. When she would pull herself up to the top of his cock, he would grip her tighter and pull her back all the way down. She moaned into his mouth each time.

"You feel that?" He placed his palms on the seat, the leather creaking underneath them as he pushed himself deeper inside her. "You feel how deep I am?"

"Yes." The word was half-sob, half-moan. "Fuck, yes."

"You're so fucking tight. Jon can't make you feel like this, can he? He'll never hit you this deep."

"Don't—" She bit her lip hard enough to taste copper. Her walls sucked him deeper, responding to his taunts. "Don't talk about Jon."

She leaned forward, quickening her pace as she fed her tit into Michael's mouth. She told herself it was to shut him up, but the second his teeth came down on her nipple she felt another, much stronger, orgasm approaching.

"Why not?" His words vibrated against her breast, teeth scraping. "You said it yourself. He would have.." He thrust up hard, making her cry out. His breathing grew shallower as he fucked Wendy into submission. "Thrown you to the wolves back there."

"Uh fuck," Wendy increased her tempo as Michael's words rattled in her brain. Her orgasm started to take shape, it felt like a swaying wrecking ball trying to find its mark before everything came crashing down. "Just... just shut up and fuck."

His hand cracked down on her ass making her bounce harder. Michael was gasping for breath now. His face looked like a ripe tomato as he sucked in huge gasps of air. "It's the same reason he can't make you feel this good." He felt his own orgasm starting to build as he rushed to get the words out. "The same reason he can't make you cum the way I can."

"That's not—" But the protest died as another stinging slap landed against the flesh of her ass making her thighs shake.

"It is." His mouth moved to her other breast, sucking hard. "You begged me to fuck you. Said please even."

The shame in her gut only added to her arousal. She was riding him faster, chasing the orgasm that was building like a tsunami. Her left hand braced against the fog covered window, leaving her handprint in the condensation as she neared oblivion.

"Tell me the reason." Michael's cock pulsed inside her, his release imminent.

"Mmm fuck. I'm gonna..." Her pussy gripped him like a vice, the wet sloshing of her movements echoing through the car.

"Say it... say why Jon will never satisfy you."

She was going to die. Actually die from this. Her body was wound so tight she couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything except feel him stretching her, filling her, owning her.

"Ohhh fuck. Michael don't stop, baby. I'm almost—"

With one final grunt, he slammed into her his cock erupting into her unprotected pussy. "SAY IT!"

"Ohhhh." Her head fell back, her orgasm detonating in her like a bomb. "Your dick is bigger." Every muscle in her pussy tightened once more around his cock as the orgasm rocked through her body. "Oh fuck. Ohhh, God. So much fucking bigger." She was shouting now, past shame, past everything except the need to finish.

The orgasm washed over her in waves, a series of mini orgasms that seemed to pull him deeper as she screamed into the air.

"That's my girl." He smirked, pressing his lips to hers once more as the last blast filled her.

They stayed like that for a long moment, both of them trembling, his softening cock still inside her. Then reality crashed back.

"You... you should have pulled out."

"You seemed to enjoy it."

She wanted to scream at him. She should be furious and shoving him away. But her body was still buzzing, still humming with the aftershocks of the best orgasm of her life, and the anger wouldn't come. Just a hollow sort of defeat.

"Michael—"

"It's fine. I'll stop at a pharmacy on the way back." He shifted beneath her, and she winced as he slipped out. She could feel him leaking out of her, warm and obscene.

"It's not fine." But the words had no heat behind them. She was too wrung out, too sated to fight. "You can't... next time, you have to pull out."

His smile was slow and victorious. "Whatever you say."

She didn't have the energy to argue. Just climbed off his lap and curled up in the backseat, her skirt still bunched around her waist, her underwear abandoned somewhere on the floor. The leather was cool against her overheated skin.

"Get some rest." Michael was already climbing out of the car. She was so exhausted she didn't even notice him grab her panties and tuck them into his pocket. "I'll wake you when we get back to Columbus."

She closed her eyes, felt the engine rumble to life beneath her. The vibration against her oversensitive body almost felt good. She pushed the thought away and let exhaustion claim her.

Jon checked his phone. 6:28 PM. The office had emptied an hour ago, the fluorescent lights humming as only a handful of people remained. He told himself he wasn't waiting to catch Wendy doing anything. He just thought it would be nice to ride home together. They used to do that all the time, back when things were easier between them.

His last message to her was at 5:37, still unread.

Jon: Hey, how late do you think you'll be? Want to grab dinner when you get back?

He set the phone face-down on his desk and rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. This was the part he was bad at. Filling in the blanks when he didn't know the answer. So, what were the facts?

Fact: Wendy hadn't responded to his text.

Fact: She'd been gone since early this morning with Michael.

Fact: The Skyline account was in Cincinnati, just under a two hour drive. They'd get there. Have a meeting, probably grab lunch and head home. So why was it taking all day?

His chest tightened. He was doing it again. Building false narratives from nothing. It was just as likely that the meeting ran long. Or didn't get started until after lunch then they hit traffic. There

were a million perfectly reasonable reasons why it was taking longer than he'd expected. But he kept hearing Jenny's voice in the back of his head. Confirming he wasn't imagining all the time Wendy and Michael were spending together alone.

His mouth was suddenly dry. He grabbed his water bottle and shut down his computer. If Wendy hadn't responded back by the time he'd refilled his water then he would go home. They could talk about it when she got back.

The break room was dim. He wasn't sure anyone was left in the office. Most of the lights were off and even the glug of the water cooler felt loud as Jon refilled his bottle. He was being ridiculous. Wendy was probably already on her way back, maybe even pulling into the parking garage right now. They'd laugh about this later.

When he returned to his desk, movement in the corner of his vision made him freeze.

Trevor was at Wendy's desk, rifling through papers.

"Can I help you with something?"

Trevor jerked upright, papers scattering. "Jesus, Jon. You scared the hell out of me."

"What are you doing at Wendy's desk?"

"I was just—" Trevor smoothed his shirt, that cocky smirk faltering. "Looking for Wendy. Wanted to talk to her about Skyline."

Jon crossed his arms. "She's not here. She and Michael went to Cincinnati this morning for the account."

"Right. Of course." Trevor nodded, and made his way back around her desk. He started toward the door, then paused. His hand rested on the doorframe as he turned back. "You know what's interesting? I was on the Skyline account for two years. Only ever went out there twice. Wendy's been on it for less than twenty-four hours and she and Michael are already running off together."

The hairs on the back of Jon's neck stood up. "It's perfectly normal to visit a client in person when we switch account managers. Builds rapport, shows we're taking the transition seriously."

"Oh, absolutely." Trevor looked like he was sizing Jon up. "I'm sure that's all it is. Just seems weird is all. Those two have been practically attached at the hip lately." He emphasized the last word in a way that made Jon's jaw clench. "But I guess that's the price it takes to become Director, right?"

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing." Trevor held up his hands. "Just making an observation. I'll find Wendy tomorrow. Have a good night."

He left before Jon could respond, footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Jon stood there, Trevor's words circling in his head like vultures. Too similar to Jenny's to ignore. He tried telling himself Trevor was just being petty. He was upset that he lost Skyline to Wendy and was just slinging mud. It was transparent, manipulative, and Jon wasn't going to fall for it.

He grabbed his messenger bag and slung it over his shoulder. His phone buzzed.

Wendy: Sorry! I fell asleep in the car. The meeting ran a little long, but we should be back in twenty minutes. Want to take me to that Thai place you've been raving about?

Relief flooded through him, followed immediately by guilt. See? Perfectly reasonable explanation. He was being paranoid for nothing, letting Trevor's jealous insinuations and Jenny's observations get under his skin.

Jon: I'll head there now and get us on the list. Love you.

He hit send and locked his computer. As he walked toward the elevator, he tried to ignore the small voice in his head pointing out that she always complained she couldn't sleep in the car, could never get comfortable. That Cincinnati was barely two hours away, but she'd been gone for over ten hours.

He'd write it in his thought journal when he got home. Dr. Carson would help him make sense of all of it.

The phone rang twice before they answered. There were people in the background, dozens of fragmented conversations that couldn't be placed.

"What is it?" The usual greeting. They were never one for pleasantries.

"They spent the day in Cincinnati meeting with the Skyline team."

Silence on the other end. Just the murmur of distant conversations and what sounded like silverware clinking against plates.

"All day? That's... interesting. Did you plant it?"

A stab of panic. They weren't going to like the answer. "No. I didn't get a chance. Jon was always right there. She'll be named director soon. It will be easier when she has her own office."

Seconds seemed to tick by in slow motion as the person on the other end of the line decided what to do with this information. "We can't afford to mess this up."

"I know I just—"

"Right this way, your table is ready." A waiter's voice emerged over the others, thick with an accent.

"I need to go. Get it done." The line went dead.

Jon's mind continued to race as he turned onto High Street. Sala Thai was still ten minutes away, despite it only being a few more blocks up the street. Crowds of people seemed to be scattered all over Short North tonight as traffic continued to crawl.

He was finding it increasingly harder to dismiss all the signs that something was going on with Wendy and Michael, despite how much Dr. Carson demanded he only focus on the facts. The facts were that both Jenny and Trevor saw it too. The facts were that Wendy was still too green to be a director, yet both Trevor and Jenny thought it was inevitable.

The light turned red and Jon nearly plowed into the car in front of him. He slammed on his brakes, the seatbelt catching him before his head hit the steering wheel. He looked to the left, at the rows of people spilling out of restaurants, all laughing and having fun. He couldn't remember the last time he and Wendy looked like that, and his chest ached at the admission. He continued to scan the street, hoping that the brief bout of people-watching would help keep his mind off Wendy and Michael. Happy couples were sitting in restaurant windows laughing and sharing dinner. An older lady sat alone in what appeared to be a taco joint scrolling her phone while snacking on chips and salsa. One couple looked to be having an intense conversation inside what looked like an Italian restaurant, although they had no food in front of them. Another...

His breath caught and his head snapped back to the window of the Italian restaurant.

It wasn't just any couple sitting there. It was Marcus. He was in a corner booth, the lighting low enough it wasn't a surprise Jon missed it the first time. Across from him, Ava leaned forward, her face flushed, one hand slicing through the air as she spoke. Even through the glass and distance, Jon could see the intensity of whatever she was saying. Marcus reached across the table, trying to take her hand. She pulled back, shaking her head.

The conversation looked heated. Private. The kind of thing two people fired for an inappropriate relationship would be having if they were still—

A horn blared behind him.

Jon's head snapped forward. The light was green. The car he nearly rear-ended now almost a block ahead of him. He hit the gas, causing the car to lurch forward as he caught up with the car in front of him.

Why were Marcus and Ava having dinner together? And why did their conversation look so intense?

The narrative built itself in a matter of seconds. They'd been fired about a month ago. Jon didn't want to believe that Marcus would ever do such a thing, but Wendy had tried to tell him the night before. Jon was sure it was all just a big misunderstanding. Except... if that were true, if they were innocent, why would they be meeting? Why the secrecy in what looked like a more intimate restaurant?

The taillights from the car in front of him began to blur. He was feeling lightheaded. He didn't know what was real anymore. He wasn't sure he could trust his own instincts anymore. He'd been wrong about Olivia. Now it seemed he'd been wrong about Marcus. Was he making the same mistake with Wendy?

His phone buzzed in the cupholder.

Wendy: Almost there! I'm starving. Do they have Massaman curry? I can't wait to see you. I've missed you.

Jon forced himself to breathe. He pulled into an empty parking spot, throwing his head back and taking deep breaths. He'd never had a panic attack before, but he was pretty sure he was having one now. That or a heart attack.

He just needed to talk to Wendy. Let her know what he was feeling. They could work through it. She would help him make it make sense. This was all just going to be a giant misunderstanding.

He got out of the car and headed inside to put their name on the list. By the time Wendy arrived, he'd be smiling.

Executive Privilege Ch. 13

Wendy could hear the words Jon was saying, but she couldn't focus on what they actually meant. He'd mentioned Jenny and Trevor, and he was smiling so it couldn't have been bad. But her mind couldn't settle enough for her to be able to make sense of any of it.

She was so tired.

Not just physically, though the day had been long, the drive back from Cincinnati draining. She was mentally drained. Between the theatrics when meeting with the Corsetti Brothers mixed with what happened on the car ride home, she just didn't have the energy to focus.

Then there was her purse that hung on a hook just by her knees. She must have glanced at it fifteen times already, terrified that Jon would see the small CVS bag she buried in the bottom of it. She'd made Michael stop on the way home. She couldn't believe she'd been so reckless as to let him...

"Wendy?"

"Sorry." She blinked. "Just still thinking about the Skyline account." Jon studied her and her fingers instantly went to her ring. She was waiting for him to say he could smell the sex. She was able to clean up the best she could in the bathroom but it wasn't enough.

"The curry puffs are fine," she'd finally said, when she realized what he asked. "We can split them. I'm starving."

"So," Jon reached across the small table holding her hands. "How was the meeting?"

Wendy tensed and jerked her hands away causing yet another suspicious look to appear on Jon's face.

"Sorry, your hands were cold." She smiled weakly and took his hands again.

"It was good, actually." She allowed her shoulders to sag as the waiter took their order. "The Corsetti brothers were assholes, I could see why they got along so well with Trevor." When Jon didn't smile, she continued. "They tried to belittle me. Treated me more like an assistant than someone leading their project."

"I'm sorry, babe. That's terrible." He squeezed her hand. "They say at least 60 percent of men who act like that do it because they had a bad relationship with their mother."

Wendy laughed, relaxing a little and taking a sip of her water. "That sounds right, actually. It wasn't until Michael threatened to shut the whole thing down that—"

"Michael... defended you?" His brow pinched together like the concept was completely foreign to him.

"Well, yeah." She shifted in her seat and immediately regretted it. The soreness between her legs flared, a reminder of what happened not even an hour ago. Of Michael's body pressed against hers. Of how full she'd felt.

She pressed her thighs together, hyperaware of the dampness there. She'd done her best to clean up in the CVS bathroom. But she could feel it, the residue of what she'd let Michael do, slowly seeping out despite her attempts to contain it.

She couldn't let Jon notice. She needed to get home. To shower. To take the stupid Plan B sitting in the bottom her purse. How could she have been so stupid? She needed a new plan. She knew Michael would never go back to condoms now. She would need to persuade him some other way, to—

"Did you hear me?"

"Shit. Sorry, what?"

"It's fine." Jon's tone was sharp and it caused the hair on the back of Wendy's neck to stand up.

"I don't know why you're getting an attitude, Jon. I said I was tired. I've been traveling all day. I haven't eaten, and now you're giving me the third degree."

"Third degree? I just asked how your meeting went and what caused Michael to suddenly stand up for someone."

"It wasn't sudden." Her hands closed into fists. "We've been working together for months. It's not like..." She realized she was yelling. Jon's eyes were wide, people were staring.

"Fuck," she whispered, grabbing her water and finishing it. "I'm sorry. Let's start over." She chewed on her bottom lip as she looked across the table at her husband who barely recognized her. "How was your day?"

"Fine." He fidgeted with his napkin. "Like I said before. I started working with Jenny. She's good." He shook his head. "She had this crazy idea that the vibe of a company is more important than the numbers. She said you'd taught her that, but don't worry, I set her straight."

"Let me guess. You told her I couldn't possibly know what I was talking about because you've been doing this longer?"

Jon's tongue slid across the front of his teeth. "Forget it." He was growing frustrated. "How was traffic on the way back? Pretty bad, I guess?"

"What?"

"The traffic. You texted that you fell asleep, so I figured—"

"The traffic was fine, Jon." Her voice came out harder than she'd intended. "I fell asleep because I was exhausted. It was a long day."

"I know. I wasn't—" He rubbed his temples. "I was just asking."

Tears stung the sides of Wendy's eyes. She was barely holding it together and taking it out on Jon. It wasn't fair, but she couldn't shake the feeling that he knew something. That he was trying to bait her into a trap she couldn't get out of.

She looked away, throat tight. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just —"

"Tired. Yeah. You keep saying that."

"Because it's true."

The curry puffs arrived. They both reached for one at the same time, hands colliding over the plate. Jon pulled back like just touching her hand was toxic. Maybe he was right.

Wendy took a bite, hoping it would ease the anxiety twisting in her stomach. She didn't even taste it. She just chewed and swallowed and worried about the stupid box that sat at the bottom of her purse like a bomb.

They sat in awkward silence for a while. Both of them pretending to like the puffs they couldn't taste. Wendy continued to study Jon. He looked agitated. Like there was something weighing on him he wanted to get off his chest and she was sure it was her affair.

The main courses arrived without either of them speaking another word. Wendy's curry looked amazing. The rich aroma of the herbs and spices made her mouth water. This was better than any comfort food. Tonight, however, it might as well have been cardboard.

He reached across the table, trying again at another attempt of forced intimacy. His touch was calming. Wendy closed her eyes, pushing the tears back as he squeezed her fingers. She loved him so much it hurt. She just wished he was different. More assertive. More supportive. More... Michael.

She gasped, pushing her chair back with so much force she nearly knocked it over. "Sorry," she exclaimed to the room. "Bathroom." She gave Jon a weak smile, then reached under the table to grab her purse and rushed away.

The bathroom was blessedly empty. Wendy locked herself in a stall and pressed her forehead against the cool metal door. She pulled the CVS bag from the bottom of her purse, the generic Plan B box heavy with bad decisions.

She unrolled a wad of toilet paper and pressed it against the inside of her thighs, letting it soak up Michael's mess. Tears stained her cheeks. *Michael's mess. Fuck.*

She dropped the wad unceremoniously into the toilet and grabbed another. There was so much.

Satisfied that she was clean enough for now, she unlocked the stall door and walked slowly to the sink. She avoided looking in the mirror, not wanting to see the accusatory eyes of the person staring back at her. Instead, she cupped her hands under the tap, popped the pill into her mouth, and swallowed. When she was done, she tossed the entire CVS bag into the trash and exited the restroom.

When Wendy returned to the table, Jon was staring at his water glass, jaw tight. Something had shifted in his energy.

She slid back into the booth across from him. "Everything okay?"

"I—" He set down his glass and held her gaze. "How do you know if someone's lying to you?"

Her blood went cold. "What?"

"I just..." he looked away and Wendy braced for the inevitable. "You're better at the whole reading people thing and well. On the way here I saw Marcus at a restaurant... With Ava."

The room went dark and for a second Wendy thought she was going to pass out. After everything, she and Marcus were still meeting. Why? She knew they weren't actually having an affair, so what other reason, other than Wendy did they have to meet?

"They were..." Jon rubbed his face. "It looked intense. Like they were arguing. Or, I don't know. But they were definitely together."

Were they planning to take her down? Did they still have some type of leverage she didn't know about? She needed to tell Michael. She needed a plan.

"Well." Her voice sounded distant, like it was coming from someone else. "I guess we never know who some people really are until their true colors emerge."

Jon nodded but didn't reach for the check. His fingers drummed the table as he stared past her. "It's just... Marcus and I told each other everything. For years, other than you, he was the person I trusted the most in the building. He helped me through all of the Olivia stuff. Told me how to be a good husband. And the whole time he..." He trailed off.

"People are complicated Jon. They do things for all sorts of crazy reasons." Her leg shook under the table. "Maybe he and Sandra were having issues at home. Maybe in some messed up way he thought what he was doing wasn't wrong."

"Wasn't wrong? He was having an affair. There's no way to justify that." He rested his forehead against the heel of his hand. "Ava never said anything you two were so close."

The color in Wendy's face drained. Of course he would see it that way. Everything was so black and white in his world. "We weren't that close. I mean, we talked a lot but that's really it."

He tilted his head. "You two were practically attached at the hip."

"I said we weren't that close, Jon. I didn't know anything. Now can we just drop it, please?"

"Oh... um sure. Sorry, I was just..."

"I'm sorry." She reached for his hand. "You're right. We were close. Some people..." Her stomach twisted, she was going to be sick. "are just really good at hiding who they really are."

Her leg was shaking so hard it was vibrating the table, and for a split second she heard the words exactly the way Jon might hear them someday.

"Yeah, I guess." Jon flagged down the server and asked for the check. "I just. I didn't want to believe it, you know. Marcus and Ava." He shook his head. "I can't believe I didn't see it sooner."

The server returned with their check and thanked Jon for their business. "Ready?" he asked, already standing.

Wendy just nodded, not trusting the sound of her own voice.

Jon pulled into the driveway and killed the engine. The silence stretched. Neither of them was sure of what to say to the other. He wanted to reach across the console, take Wendy's hand, bridge whatever distance had opened between them at dinner. But she was already opening her door, grabbing her purse.

Inside, he caught her at the kitchen entrance, pulled her into a hug before she could slip away.

"I missed you today," he said into her hair. "Felt like you were gone forever."

Her body went rigid against his. For a second, maybe less, she softened. Then she was pulling back.

"I need to shower." Her smile was tight, and she avoided making eye contact. "Long day. I probably smell like the car."

"You smell fine—"

"Jon." She was already moving toward the bedroom. "I really need to get clean. I'll be quick."

He watched her disappear down the hallway, heard the bedroom door close. He stood in the kitchen for a minute, keys still in hand wondering if dinner had been a mistake. He'd been so sure a nice dinner would help. Show her he was trying. Show her he wasn't the jealous husband Dr. Carson warned him about becoming.

Are you jealous of your wife's success?

Jon took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Maybe he was. Maybe that's all this was. Wendy succeeding wildly while he sat in the same position he'd held for three years. Her name on everyone's lips these days. Her campaign was breaking records. Meanwhile, Jon was just the numbers guy.

He pulled the Thai food containers from the bag, stacked them in the fridge. Wendy's curry barely touched. His pad thai half-eaten. Forty dollars of food they'd both been too tense to enjoy. The shower started from down the hall, breaking the silence.

Jon closed the fridge and headed for the bedroom, already working through what he'd say. *We need to talk about dinner. About why you're so defensive. About Marcus and Ava and—*

Wendy's clothes were tossed haphazardly by the hamper near the bathroom door. He shook his head, she was too tired to even spend the extra five seconds to put her clothes in the basket. Jon bent to pick them up then paused.

He saw her skirt, her blouse, even her bra. Her panties, however, were nowhere to be seen. He gave a confused look, then went over the articles of clothing in his hand again to ensure he didn't overlook them. He didn't.

He stood up, looked around the bedroom. Maybe she'd tossed them somewhere? Maybe they actually made it into the basket?

The hamper was right there. He lifted the lid, started sorting through. Yesterday's clothes. The day before. Nothing from today. His hands were shaking slightly as he set the lid back down.

Facts, Jon. Focus on the facts.

Fact: Wendy went to Cincinnati with Michael this morning.

Fact: She was gone for way longer than she should have been.

Fact: Her underwear is missing.

Trevor's voice wormed its way into his head. *Those two have been practically attached at the hip lately. But I guess that's the price it takes to become Director, right?*

There was another explanation. One he wasn't thinking of. He blinked back tears, his hands shaking as he recalled Jenny's words. *I notice she and Michael spend a lot of time together. Is that normal?*

He stumbled back to the bed, his breathing so rapid he thought he was hyperventilating. The facts were clear, they all pointed to the same thing. There was no way Dr. Carson, or anyone could deny them.

Marcus and Ava hid their affair from everyone, Jon included for God knows how long. His own mentor, and Wendy's best friend. If they could hide that, then surely...

Stop. Facts only.

Fact: Her underwear was missing. Her underwear was MISSING! What other possible explanation could there be?

The shower shut off.

Jon's heart rate kicked up. He leapt to his feet still holding his discarded clothes. He wasn't sure if he should put them back, or put them in the hamper or—

The bathroom door opened. Wendy emerged in a towel, hair dripping, and stopped when she saw him sitting there with her clothes in his lap.

"What are you doing?"

"I was just—" He held up the pile. "Putting these in the hamper for you."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Okay?"

"Where are your underwear?" The question came out more direct than he'd intended. He was shaking, unable to hold the question in a second longer.

Wendy's hand went to her towel, clutching it tighter. "Excuse me?"

"Your underwear. From today." He gestured at the pile. "It's not here."

"Jon, are you seriously going through my laundry?"

"I wasn't going through it. I was putting it away and I noticed—"

"Noticed what? That I'm missing underwear?" She crossed to the dresser, started pulling out pajamas with sharp, angry movements. "What exactly are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm asking a question."

"It sounds like an accusation."

"It's not. I'm just—" He tried to find the right words. "I'm trying to understand."

Wendy turned to face him, pajama pants clutched in her fist. "Understand what? That I didn't wear underwear today? I didn't want a panty line with that skirt. Is that okay with you, or do you need to approve my underwear choices now too?"

Jon's mouth fell open. She didn't want a panty line. That explanation... made sense. It was plausible. She'd been dressing differently lately. Shorter dresses, plunging necklines. Was going commando really that far of a leap?

"I wasn't—" He shook his head. "I'm sorry. You're right. It's none of my business."

Wendy's expression softened. She started toward the bed, swinging her hips with each step. "Why were you looking for them?"

Jon blinked. "What?"

The towel shifted lower on her chest, then fell off her body completely. Jon's eyes went wide, as Wendy marched toward him completely nude.

"My panties." She was close now, standing between his knees where he sat on the bed. "Why were you looking for them?"

"I wasn't looking for them. I told you, I was just—"

"Were you going to take them to bed?" Her hand found his shoulder, slid down his arm. "Maybe get a good scent of me while I was busy in the shower?"

Heat flooded Jon's face. "Wendy, that's not—"

"It's okay if you were." Her fingers traced down to his wrist, then moved to his chest. "I just didn't know you were that kind of man. You should have said something before."

Jon was dizzy. This wasn't how Wendy talked. She was fun and enjoyed talking while having sex, but this was something else.

"Really, I was only—" Jon's body responded immediately to her touch, her smell.

"What other secrets have you been keeping from me? What other dirty things do you do when I'm not around?" Her hand slid lower, working his belt.

"Wendy, what are you—"

"Shh." His belt pulled free. The sound of it echoing through the house. "Is this what you think about when you have my panties?" Her manicured nails slid across the front of his pants, her other hand already working to lower them.

Jon's mouth went dry. He should stop this. Should pull back and ask what the hell was happening. But her hands were on him now, tugging his pants down, and his body had stopped listening to his brain entirely.

"No —"

"No?" Her hand wrapped around his exposed shaft. Her grip tighter than normal.

"I... I no. I just meant—"

"What? What did you mean, Jon?" She pushed him back onto the bed, followed him down, her hand never stopping its movement.

He wasn't sure what he meant anymore. Everything was happening too fast. His wife was acting like a completely different person, and his body was... He was so turned on it hurt.

"Did you mean you don't smell my underwear?" Her fingers dipped to his testicles, massaging and squeezing the loose flesh as Jon let out a needy sigh. "Do you wrap them around your cock instead? Is that what it is? You like the way my silk feels around you?"

Jon's face was red, his eyes squeezed shut as he tried to force back the orgasm he knew was inevitable.

"Is my grip too tight, baby? Are you used to something softer?"

Before he could respond Wendy lowered her head, taking his entire shaft into her mouth.

He was going to cum. Any second now. It was a foregone conclusion. The wrongness of it, the aggression, the way she was looking at him. And her mouth... she never used her mouth. Hated the way it tasted, the way it felt. But, as her cheeks caved in around him and her tongue slipped out to press against his sac, he let his hands curl in her hair, the sensation taking over.

"Wendy, I'm going to..." His hips lifted off the bed. He expected her to pull off, to let him finish in her hand. Instead she seemed to redouble her efforts, taking him all the way to the root, moaning gently around his flesh.

He came with a roar, his vision blurring as she sucked him through it, her throat working with each pulse of his body. She didn't pull off of him until he was shaking, his manhood completely flaccid and slipping from her lips.

"Mmm, that was fun," she giggled, wiping her chin with the back of her hand.

Jon just lay there, pants around his thighs, staring at the ceiling and trying to catch his breath.

"Jesus. What was that?"

"That was me thanking my husband for a thoughtful dinner after a long day's work." She disappeared into the bathroom. "You seemed to enjoy yourself," she called over her shoulder.

Jon didn't know how to respond. He did seem to enjoy himself, but he had no idea what the hell just happened. He pulled up his pants, his mind racing to make sense of it as he got under the covers.

Something was wrong. This was more than just a wife who wanted to say thank you. This was a completely different person. Dr. Carson had said she was finally getting comfortable with her sexuality and he should support it. But there was more than that, he just didn't know what. He couldn't point to a single definitive piece of evidence. But the woman who just did... whatever that was. That wasn't the woman he married.

By Friday, the crisis had passed. Wendy made it a point to leave when Jon left, to be home when he was home. He was a little more tense than normal throughout the week, but the conversation about her panties never came back up.

She'd also made it a point to avoid Michael, allowing her shared office with Jon to feel more like a home. They even stayed out of each other's way when mentoring Jenny, something she appreciated more than anything else.

Neither of them mentioned that night in the bedroom. They didn't need to. She caught Jon watching her differently now. Appreciation? Fear? He didn't know what to make of it. Neither did she, if she was being honest. But it had worked. He'd stopped asking questions.

They stood on opposite sides of the conference room as Brian ran through the usual list of items. Wendy was preparing to head back to her desk when Brian surprised them with one more announcement. "Before everyone gets back to work, I have an announcement."

Wendy's pulse kicked up. Brian was finally going to announce the new director. Michael had promised her a month, it had taken twice that, but Wendy didn't mind. In that time not only did

she continue to do great things with Fireball, she'd also gotten the Skyline account and finally gotten the Corsetti brothers to listen to her ideas.

"As you all know, we've been without a Marketing Director since Marcus's departure. While we've interviewed several candidates, I'm happy to say our selection is one of our own."

Wendy's gaze found Jon's and gave him a warm smile that he didn't return. She tried to read his expression. He looked more hurt than angry, but Wendy ignored the sense of dread in the pit of her stomach.

"After careful consideration, I'm pleased to announce that Wendy Taylor will be stepping into that role, effective immediately."

The applause started and Wendy closed her eyes letting the validation wash over her. The sound swelled through the conference room and Wendy beamed with pride. There were even a few whistles from the back, and someone calling out "well deserved!"

She'd earned this. All of the late nights on the Fireball campaign. The trip to New Orleans and the way she got Jack to bend to her will. The way she outmaneuvered Trevor. She exposed his fraud, won over the Corsetti brothers despite their bullshit. This was her answer to everyone who'd ever looked at her chest before her brain.

"Congratulations, Wendy!" Steve was shaking her hand, his smile couldn't be wider. "Every projection we make seems to be not high enough." He was beaming from ear to ear the way any CFO would watching revenue climb.

"Thank you, Steve." They were on a first name basis now. "I couldn't have done it without the team." A lie every important person of power tells.

As he walked away she scanned the room.

Trevor stood near the back. He was tense. His jaw so tight she could see the muscle jump. His arms were crossed, like he was physically stopping himself from doing or saying something that would get him in trouble. He was pissed. Good. He'd tried to proposition her, tried to use her like every other man who thought blonde and beautiful meant easy. She'd destroyed him instead. A satisfied smile formed on her lips. He'd gotten what he deserved, she wouldn't feel sorry for that.

Brian caught her eye and nodded. A sign of approval and respect. Over the last few months she'd become his number one employee. She'd gone from fly-on-the-wall to him stopping by several times a day to tell her all the great things he'd heard about her. He understood her worth, knew her value.

Then there was Jenny. She practically bounced in her seat, applauding like Wendy had just won an Oscar. "You deserve it," she mouthed, from across the room. The junior associate had been watching her all week, taking notes, asking questions. Wendy liked Jenny's company more than she thought she would. Sure, she still tried to position herself into Michael's orbit whenever she got the chance, but Wendy was able to play defense when needed.

Michael stood against the far wall, apart from the group. He wasn't clapping, that was never his style. But his smile was enough. It caused Wendy to shuffle her feet, her heart rate spiking for just a moment. He wasn't just her protector. He was the man who believed in her, who trusted her to make her own decisions to stand on her own two feet. Her partner.

She found Jon last.

He was clapping now, and smiling. But she knew Jon well enough to know it was forced. His clap seemed slower than everyone else's, less enthusiastic. He was saying something to the person next to him, probably that he thought her taking the position was a bad idea. He glanced at Michael, whispered something else, then looked back at her.

What was that? Was he saying that Wendy only got here because Michael liked her? That it wasn't fair because he and Michael always butted heads? He was already preparing whatever stats he needed to argue with her tonight as he explained why she wasn't ready for this.

She spun her ring as she watched him. The four quick rotations easing the tension in her shoulders for a fraction of a second. Jon wasn't happy for her. Her mind kept drifting to a few nights ago. The panic when she'd realized Michael had taken her underwear from the car. Jon spiraling into one of his paranoid theories, asking questions she couldn't answer.

She'd had to act fast.

So she did what she had to do. Went on the offensive. Turned his questions into something sexual, something he'd be too embarrassed to pursue. It worked. He stopped asking. Fell asleep confused and satisfied. She'd protected them both from a conversation that would have destroyed everything.

She was the one protecting him, he was just too blind to see it. She laid awake that night, nearly in tears as Jon slept soundly next to her. They weren't tears of guilt, but of exhaustion. The weight of protecting Jon, of handling Michael's recklessness. Jon would never be able to carry that kind of responsibility.

Colleagues began to file out. Each one stopping in front of Wendy to shake her hand and congratulate her. She wore her best smile, whispering thank yous and promising to do right by them. But her mind was elsewhere. Still thinking about that night with Jon, about the damage control that came after.

She'd found Michael the next morning, furious that he put her in such an awkward position. He just leaned back in his chair, an amused smile on his face as she struggled to keep her voice down and not break out into tears. He dismissed her concerns with the same cockiness he always had, calmly telling her that she'd handled it, just like she always did.

She'd left without resolution. Told herself she was setting boundaries. But nothing changed. Sure, she'd been more careful. She'd avoided being alone with Michael for longer than she needed. When she did go to see him, she'd stand at the door, ensuring it stayed open.

Mentoring Jenny helped. She created a buffer when needed that Wendy could disguise as helping the younger associate. Michael couldn't corner her when Jenny was there asking questions about account strategy. But she wouldn't be able to hold up the charade forever.

Yesterday Michael had brushed past her in the hallway, hand grazing her lower back. Her whole body had flushed. She'd had to duck into the bathroom to collect herself, pressing her thighs together against the sudden ache. Her body had started to crave him in ways she still didn't want to admit.

Michael knew. She could see it in how he watched her across rooms. The way he wouldn't push her for a longer meeting, but would always find a way to touch her without it seeming unprofessional.

"Director Taylor." His voice came from behind her and her breath caught. "Has a nice ring to it."

She turned. Michael stood with his hands in his pockets, casually looking over her in a way that made her throat dry. Others were still gathered around, sharing stories of Wendy's most recent successes.

"We should celebrate," he said. "Lunch. Today. We need to discuss our new strategy." It wasn't a question. It was a VP talking to his new director. Brian stood less than ten feet away, and yet her body was already answering. The warmth spreading through her core. Pulse kicking up just from standing this close.

She knew she should say no. That things with Jon were still tense and she hadn't really dealt with nearly getting caught. "I can spare an hour," she said, smiling politely as Trevor pushed out the conference room door.

"I know just the place," he said, nodding a farewell to the final outliers in the room as he held the door open for her. Wendy stood there feeling the heat still pulsing through her, hating how easily he'd dismantled her resolve, dreading and anticipating what came next.

They walked past the director's office, her new office, and she stood a little taller. After lunch she'd start moving in. She'd tell Jon that this wouldn't change anything, they would figure out how to make it work.

She really hoped it was true.

Wendy followed Michael through the office lobby, doing her best to look natural. Her heels seemed to grow louder with each step she took as she made her way down the hall. Jon had retreated to the office, almost immediately after Michael mentioned lunch. She tried to focus on what that meant, but she was too distracted by colleagues calling out congratulations and asking to get celebratory drinks next week. All the while, Michael's hand rested at the small of her back. It was just light enough to look professional, yet firm enough to make her knees weak.

The parking garage felt warmer than the office, or maybe that was just her body's reaction to finally getting the promotion she deserved. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead as they walked toward Michael's Mercedes. He opened her door for her, a chivalrous thing that made her pause to ensure she wasn't walking into some sort of trap.

When she was satisfied, she slid into the passenger seat. The cool leather brushed against her thighs, immediately making her second-guess the short cream-colored dress she'd worn.

Michael walked around to his side of the car, slamming the door shut and starting the engine with the push of a button. His hand immediately found her exposed knee, even before his seatbelt was engaged.

"Somebody's going to see." Her eyes darted to the rearview mirror, scanning for colleagues heading to their own cars.

"The windows are tinted." He backed out slowly, his touch already growing bolder as he realized she wasn't going to fight him on it. "Besides, you've been avoiding me all week. Figured I'd better make contact while I could."

Guilt pricked at her chest. "I wasn't avoiding you. I was just—"

"Placating your husband?" He tugged on her leg, parting them, his long fingers already resting on the inside of her thigh before they were even out of the garage.

"I wasn't placating anyone. He's my husband." Her hand came to rest on his, but not to move it away. "Besides, you can't really blame him for being suspicious. It's your fault I—"

His fingers brushed against the thin fabric of her panties making her breath catch. "Jon's always suspicious." He pulled into the street, cutting off another driver who blared their horn in frustration. "It's what insecure men do. They see threats everywhere because they know, deep down, that they're not enough."

Wendy opened her mouth to defend her husband, then closed it. What would she even say? That Jon trusted her? He didn't. That Jon supported her success? He'd literally tried to talk her out of pursuing the director role.

"He's just... cautious," she finally managed.

"He's weak." Michael's knuckles dragged across the front of her panties, more deliberate this time and Wendy's nails dug into his wrist. "But you already know that."

Wendy ignored his comment. There really wasn't any use in arguing, was there? Instead, she watched other cars pass by. Her mind drifted back to the show she'd practically given the truck driver the last time she was in Michael's car, causing her to open her legs a little wider.

"You know what being a director means?" Michael's tone shifted, became almost professorial, making her squirm in her seat. "It means making tough calls. Decisions that affect people's lives."

"I know what my job entails, thank you."

"You're going to have to fire people eventually." His fingers found the bottom button of her dress, just above her knee. He popped it open, never taking his eyes off the road. "Reorganize teams. Cut dead weight."

The open button created a small gap in the fabric. Michael's hand slid through it, giving him better access to her exposed thigh.

"Michael, what are you doing?" She raised an eyebrow, unsure of what he was planning while he drove.

He ignored the question, sliding his fingers across her panties again. "You have some... dead weight on your team. People who seem to have serious performance issues." He pressed the front of her panties between her folds.

"My..." Wendy's eyes fluttered shut, then snapped back open. "department is fine."

A second button popped free, and Wendy sucked in her bottom lip. "Employees with performance anxiety can really cripple a team."

The white of her panties was now completely exposed between her thighs. Wendy knew she should put an end to it. It was the middle of the day and they were driving down busy downtown streets. But then his entire palm pressed against her, causing her to arch against his touch in a way she hadn't planned.

"E... everyone has room for growth."

Michael chuckled. "Some more than others. Wouldn't you agree?" The third button popped and Michael's fingers hooked under the elastic of her underwear. She was already soaked, and a small whimper escaped her lips as her knuckles grazed her bare skin. "Take Jon, for example."

"You... fuck, Michael." Her train of thought got derailed as his fingers dipped lower exploring her folds. "You can't expect me to fire my own husband."

"Fire him?" Michael's laugh roared through the closed space of the SUV. "No. Where would the fun in that be?" He slid across her clit, making her gasp as he worked in slow, tight circles. "I'm just saying his performance has been lacking recently. Wouldn't you agree?"

Another button. The dress was gaping now, falling away from her legs almost to her hips. If anyone happened to look in the front of the window they would see everything.

"His performance is—" Wendy couldn't finish. Michael's finger pressed inside her, just one but enough to make her head fall back against the headrest. "Fine. It's... fuck. It's fine."

"Just fine?" Another finger joined the first, stretching her like only he could. His thumb found her clit, applying steady pressure while his fingers pushed deeper. "I would say you deserve more than fine. Wouldn't you?"

They turned onto another street. Wendy tried to focus on the people walking by, but her eyes were half-lidded, her hips already moving to meet Michael's touch despite his words.

"My relationship with Jon doesn't—"

Michael's fingers curled inside her, making her hips come completely off the seat.

"Ohhh fuck." Her hand gripped the door handle. She was already seeing stars. Her hips rolled creating more friction on her clit from Michael's thumb. Two more buttons popped open, without her even realizing it.

The dress fell completely open, hanging off her shoulders like a robe. Only her bra and panties provided any coverage now to anyone who happened to look inside the window of the SUV.

"Ohh, God. Don't stop." She was lost in it now. One hand gripping Michael's wrist, as he worked her into a frenzy, the other desperately anchoring her to the seat. "I'm so close. Ahh..."

The orgasm was building with terrifying speed, her body coiled tight like a spring. Michael's thumb pressed down on her clit, the sensation sending shock waves through her body as she briefly blinked her eyes open. It was only then that she realized they were driving past High Street. The location where most of the restaurants downtown were.

"Michael—" She was panting now, her hips moving against his hand. "Where... Ohhh fuck. You just passed the street."

"We're not going to lunch."

"Where are we going?" The question came out strangled.

"You know where." His fingers thrust deeper, making her toes curl in her heels. "Tell me where you think we're going."

"To..." Her thighs started to shake. She was so close, right on the edge. "To have sex."

Michael's hand withdrew.

Wendy's eyes flew open, a whimper of protest dying on her lips. He brought his fingers to his mouth, sucking them clean while keeping one hand on the wheel.

"No." He looked over at her. Her skin was blotchy, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she tried to focus her gaze on him. "I'm going to fuck you."

He turned off the street to a neighborhood she didn't recognize. She saw a homeless man pushing a shopping cart, another on the corner begging for a handout. Her face burned. Not just from what happened, but because they'd traveled here without her even realizing it.

The motel materialized ahead. It was a long, low building that had seen better decades. The siding was a faded blue, paint peeling in long strips to reveal weathered wood beneath. Half the letters on the "va a cy" sign were burned out. In the back, visible through a chain-link fence, was what might have once been a pool but now looked more like a swamp, the water green and stagnant.

Wendy looked around the surrounding area. Clearly they were at the wrong place, there was no way Michael would bring someone like her to a place like this. But then he turned in, gravel crunching under the tires. Cigarette butts littered the asphalt.

The place was disgusting, and yet the thought of Michael bringing her to a seedy motel like this made her nipples stiffen against the fabric of her dress. The wrongness of it. That's what made her squeeze her thighs together. Not the anticipation of Michael's touch, though that was there too, but the sheer audacity of what she was about to do. A woman like her, in a place like this. It was filthy.

"I'll... I'll wait in the car," Wendy said. "You get the room."

Michael killed the engine and reached into his pants pocket, pulling out a white key card. "Room 118." His eyes lit up like Christmas morning. "Already taken care of."

Wendy's stomach dropped. "You already—"

"Before Brian even made the announcement." He turned to look at her fully.

"How did you—" She was afraid to finish the sentence. "How did you know I would come?"

Michael leaned across the console, his face inches from hers. "Because I'm not Jon, Wendy. You always cum for me." His hand cupped her through her panties again, pressing hard enough to make her gasp. "Because my dick's bigger."

"Now, come on." He pulled away. "I only have it for a few more hours."

Jon would never bring her to a place like this, but then he also wouldn't make assumptions about what she wanted or try to surprise her in any way. He'd taken her to the same restaurant for their anniversary three years in a row because Wendy said how much she liked the food

there. He never tried to push her boundaries, to make her grow as a person. He certainly wouldn't do anything this reckless. She felt her slickness grow between her thighs as Michael walked to her side of the car.

She hadn't known this thrill existed in her because Jon had never given her the chance to find it. He was stagnant, and he'd anchored her to himself. How could she have discovered this about herself when he'd never given her the chance to be anything but predictable?

Michael opened her door and reached out his hand.

She took it, climbing out of the SUV and getting a better look at the motel room door with its peeling paint and tarnished brass numbers. She looked at the dress hanging open on her body, barely covering anything, then heard the car door slam shut.

The walk from car to door couldn't have been more than twenty feet, but it felt endless. Her dress hung loose, flapping with each step. The concrete was cracked beneath her heels, weeds pushing through in determined clumps. An air conditioning unit dripped somewhere, the sound echoing off the building's facade.

Michael slid the key card through the reader. The lock clicked. The door swung open and Wendy stepped inside.

The room was worse than she'd imagined. The carpet was a brown that might have once been beige, dotted with cigarette burns that formed constellations of negligence. The floral bedspread was faded to near-colorlessness, pills of fabric catching the light from the single lamp. That water stain on the ceiling spread from the corner in branching tributaries.

Then there was the smell. Old smoke layered over industrial cleaner, with an underlying mustiness that spoke of black mold and poor ventilation.

"Romantic," Wendy said, trying to kill the silence.

"You're not here for romance." Michael's hands were on her immediately, pulling her against him. "You're here because you need this. Because you've gone all week hoping your pathetic husband could make you cum, when he couldn't."

His mouth found hers before she could respond. The kiss was bruising, demanding, and Wendy responded with the same hunger.

Her hands found his tie, loosened it while he effortlessly pushed away what was left of her dress. The fabric slipped off her shoulders, pooled at her feet on the cigarette-burned carpet.

Michael's jacket followed. His tie. She fumbled with his belt while he unhooked her bra, let it fall away. His mouth moved to her neck, her collarbone, her breast. It was all happening so fast. Like they were long lost lovers, rediscovering each other for the first time.

"Michael—" She couldn't form complete thoughts, could only feel his hands on her skin, his teeth scraping her nipple. "Oh God." Her hands went to the back of his thinning hair, ignoring the moisture already forming there.

He backed her toward the bed, his fingers sliding into her panties. They slid down her legs and she stepped out of them, kicked off her heels. Then she was sitting, scooting back on the faded bedspread while he stripped off the rest of his clothes.

"God, your body is incredible." The mattress sank as he climbed between her legs. He reached between her legs, his fingers sliding over the slickness on her thighs. "And so fucking desperate for this."

She couldn't deny it. Her hips were already moving, chasing his hand, needing more. He gave her what she wanted, shoving two fingers deep inside her waiting cunt.

"Ohhh fuck, Michael." She reached out, grasping his cock and stroking him. Her pussy twitched just from the thought of how much it would stretch her. "I'm already so close."

Michael adjusted his weight, inching closer to the blonde spread naked below him. He removed his fingers, which were dripping with her arousal, and instinctively Wendy pulled his cock toward her folds.

"Mmm fuck. That feels so good." She was panting now. The heat radiating from her combining with his own as he rolled the fat head across her clit.

"Do... do you have a condom?" She bit her lip, her hips lifting off the bed to feel more of his magnificent hardness against her.

"No." Michael looked down at her, smirking. He was completely still, allowing her to get completely swept up in the moment.

"We shouldn't—" But even as she said it, she was grinding against it, gasping as she worked just the tip between her folds.

"Do you want to stop?" Michael's hands were already on her waist. He knew the answer even before Wendy.

"I..." She pulled back, just slightly, then brought her hips forward again. Another fraction of an inch pressing inside her. She could already feel it start to stretch her and it was so much better than his fingers. "N... no, but this is the last—"

"Of course." He didn't wait for her to finish before pushing his hips forward and impaling her completely in one smooth thrust.

Stars pricked her vision, before erupting into a blinding white light as Wendy's orgasm tore through her without warning. Her pussy clamped around him so tight he groaned. A cry ripped from her throat as her back arched off the bed.

"Fuck." Michael's voice was strained. "That was easy. I bet Jon never got you off that fast."

"That's. Ohhh, mmhmm, fuck." Michael rocked back into her, not allowing her to finish her thought. The haze of pleasure continuing to wash over her, as her legs wrapped around his large back.

"I'm going to make you cum again." His gut pressed against her, as he slammed forward. "Make you forget all about that pathetic husband." His grunts grew louder as Wendy's nails dug into the dirty bedspread. "You want that, don't you? You want to cum all over my dick again."

"Yesss." Wendy was immobilized by his weight. She could feel her body pushing down into the mattress. "Uhh, you're so fucking big."

The moment her first orgasm subsided she could already feel the beginnings of another. She didn't understand how it was possible. How someone like Michael could be so...

He pulled out of her, the sudden emptiness making her sigh. "Get on your knees." His hands were already on her hips flipping her over, his powerful cock jutting menacingly between his legs.

She scrambled into position, still dizzy from the building pleasure. Then he was behind her, hands spreading across her ass, pulling her hips up higher.

"Now this is a view I could get used to." He palmed her ass, enjoying the way her large chest swayed and pressed into the mattress.

Wendy looked over her shoulder biting her lip. "I didn't think you were the type who liked to watch." Her left hand slid between her legs, two fingers pushing between her folds then out across her clit. "But if you're looking for a show..." She pushed her hips backward knocking Michael slightly off balance as another bolt of lightning shot through her core and she spread her lips with her fingers.

Michael's hands went to her ass, and he started playing with her ass cheeks, grabbing them roughly and grinding his fingertips into them. "You can't blame a man for admiring perfection." He gave her cheek a slap, and to Wendy's horror, she moaned pushing her fingers back into her pussy.

The validation laced through her veins as she rolled her hips. "Fuck me, Michael. Fuck. I need to feel you again." She couldn't believe she was talking about this, but she was past caring. Michael was the only person who truly valued her, who put her in a position to succeed. She was done compartmentalizing. She wanted the rush of Michael's approval, of feeling empowered, and yes, the stretch that only he could give her.

"Well, since you asked so nicely." He held his cock in his hand and pushed the head against Wendy's wet opening and ran it up and down the slit.

She didn't wait for him, she rocked her hips back taking his full, bare length inside her with a satisfied moan.

"Uhhhh yes." Her body rocked back and forth as Michael powerfully fucked her. His fat cock stretched her even wider than before, hitting all the sensitive places only he could.

Michael's hand left her ass and ran up her naked back until he roughly gripped the back of her neck. He held her in place as he fucked her. She'd never been fucked so aggressively before, and her pussy quivered against the assault, her arms giving way completely until her face was buried in the dirty comforter of the bed, the smell of stale cigarettes assaulting her senses.

"Fuck," Wendy moaned into the comforter, "Fuck Michael. God. You feel so good."

"You feel that?" Michael's voice was strained now, his rhythm becoming erratic. "You feel how deep I am?"

"Yesss." Her head lolled from side to side. "You're so deep. So fucking deep."

"Deeper than your pathetic husband?"

"Yes. Ohhhh. So... so much deeper."

His hands mauled her ass, spreading her cheeks wide and watching his cock sink into her. He pressed his thumb against her back entrance and Wendy's entire body tensed. "Has anyone ever—"

"No." Wendy's hand shot back, grabbing his wrist and pushing it away before he could finish the question. "No."

"Too bad." He wrapped his arm around her waist, his fingers finding her clit as he refocused his efforts. "I want to feel you cum again, Wendy. I want you to cum so fucking loud the entire building hears you."

"Oh fuck." Wendy pushed down on her knees and rocked her ass back as Michael's cock pounded into her. Slamming again and again against her sensitive G-Spot. "You... fuck. You need to pull out." Her words slurred as she tried to focus on the argument she was about to have. "You can't—"

"Fine," he grunted. "I'll pull out. Now cum for me, Wendy."

Wendy blinked, her chest tightening. She expected pushback, some level of fight. Was he so satisfied with the performance she was giving him he knew better than to push back? Had she done that good of a job at setting boundaries?

The orgasm hit like a freight train, completely derailing her thought process.

"Ohhhh. Oh fuck," Wendy whined, "Don't... don't stop. Holy..."

"That's it. Such a good fucking director." Michael grabbed a fistful of her hair, craning her head up. "Cum all over my cock." His body dripped with sweat, his own release just seconds away.

"Oh.... Oh god." The orgasm continued to wreck her. Her pussy tightening around the plunging cock like a vise. Every muscle in her tightened as her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

"Jesus," Michael grunted, as his balls slapped against the back of her leg for a final time. "You're so... fucking.. tight."

With a final grunt, Michael reluctantly pulled his dick completely out of Wendy, her body crashing onto the bed. He spun her onto her back effortlessly, his free hand stroking his pulsing shaft as he roared.

Wendy was boneless. If it wasn't for the sudden emptiness she felt, she wouldn't have even known Michael was done. She only vaguely registered his hands on her hips, the sun hitting her face through the gaps in the shades, even the warmth of his cum as rope after rope painted her stomach and chest.

It wasn't until she heard the soft click of Michael's camera phone that she was able to open her eyes. Michael stood at the foot of the bed, phone in hand, pointing down at her. At her flushed face, her tangled hair, her chest covered in his cum.

"Delete that." She sat up fast enough to make her head spin, one hand instinctively covering her breasts. "What the fuck, Michael, delete it right now."

"Relax." He lowered the phone, that infuriating smile playing at his lips. "Your face isn't even in it."

"I don't care." Her voice was hoarse. "We can't have pictures like that circling around. Your stunt with my panties was bad enough. Delete it."

"No." He slipped the phone back into his pocket. "It's for my personal collection."

"Michael—"

"You made me pull out. At least let me have this." He grabbed his boxer briefs from the cigarette-burned carpet and stepped into them. "I can barely even tell it's you." He sat down on the bed next to her. "Besides, it seems like you handled my little stunt with the panties perfectly."

"That isn't the point." She was already losing steam, too exhausted to argue.

"How did you do it, anyway?"

"Do what?"

"Handle Jon after he figured out your panties were missing. I imagine it's not just something a husband would forget."

"Does it matter?"

Michael just waited. He was good at that. Good at silences that made you want to fill them.

"I... think I discovered something new about him," she finally said. "A side I hadn't seen before."

"Oh? Now this I've got to hear."

She chewed her lip, debating how much to share. She knew Michael didn't like Jon, and he would certainly try to use what she said against him. But she'd already said too much. She had to give him something. Besides, she couldn't protect Jon from everything, that's what he tried to do to her and it obviously didn't work.

"He was spiraling. Going through my clothes, asking questions. So I turned it around on him. Asked if he had some kind of underwear fetish, if that's why he was so interested in what I was wearing."

Michael barked out a laugh. "Holy shit, and it worked?"

Wendy couldn't help but smile. Was that pride on Michael's face? Had her ability to think so quickly on her feet impressed him? "Well... it probably helped that just before he was about to cum, I took him in my mouth."

She glanced between Michael's legs, was he getting hard again? Was she already working him into another frenzy?

"Promise me no one else will see it, Michael."

"I already told you I—"

"Promise me!"

"Fine, fine. I promise."

She knew this was a bad idea, but he had a point. She could control Jon if she needed to. And she'd won the more important battle. Made him pull out even when she wasn't sure if he would. This was just... a souvenir. A private thing that no one else, especially Jon, would ever see.

"Fine. But let me see it. To... make sure my face really isn't in it." She quickly added.

Michael gave her a knowing look then pulled out his phone and held the screen out to her.

The image was unlike anything she expected and it made her breath catch. Her body from her chin to her thighs was on display. Her skin was flushed. Her pussy red and swollen. Her mouth went dry, but she couldn't tear her eyes away. Her chest was streaked with thick white cum that stretched clear up her throat. It was the most obscene most... erotic thing she'd ever seen.

"See," Michael whispered, suddenly too close for comfort. "The woman in the photo looks like a fucking goddess."

She shoved his hand away, no longer interested in looking at it. She'd seen enough to know her face wasn't in it. He was telling the truth.

"I'm going to get cleaned up." She stood and moved toward the bathroom before pausing and walking back toward the bed. "And I'm taking these with me." She picked up her underwear.

The bathroom door creaked shut as she leaned against it. The mirror above the sink was streaked but she allowed herself a moment to look into it.

The woman staring back was a stranger. Hair matted on one side, tangled on the other. Lipstick smeared across her cheek. Neck blotchy and red. And her chest... She looked down at the mess he'd made. Touched it with one finger, felt the tackiness of it.

A fucking goddess

Michael's words replayed in her head as she smiled at the woman in the mirror. Power surged through her. She had no reason to be ashamed, he was right, she looked good. She was a force of nature. She had Michael wrapped so tightly around her finger that he didn't even question her when she told him to pull out. She was the one in control, the one calling the shots.

She emerged from the shower ten minutes later, and crossed the small room grabbing the rest of her clothes. She took a quick inventory ensuring nothing was missing while Michael scrolled through his phone looking like a bored businessman.

"Jack Peterson texted." He didn't bother looking up. "Said he'll be in town in a few weeks. Expects you to show him around town... in that gold dress."

A smile tugged at her lips. "Of course he does."

Michael finally looked up, caught her expression. "I'm proud of you Wendy. You're going to make a damn fine director. Now, let's get out of here before people start to ask questions."

"Lead the way."

The conference room was still buzzing with congratulations when they slipped away. People were shaking Wendy's hand, making plans for celebratory drinks, checking their phones for lunch reservations. The entire time Michael was standing next to her, beaming. They knew it wasn't because he was proud of her. It was because he knew it served to only pull Wendy deeper into his web.

The hallway was quiet. A few people had made it back to their desks after wishing Wendy the best, but they were too busy making lunch plans to notice anything out of the ordinary. Not that walking down the hallway was out of the ordinary, but had someone seen them duck into the empty director's office there would have been questions.

They paused as they rounded the corner, their heart racing as a maintenance worker walked out of the office. Had they been just a couple seconds early no doubt their cover would have been blown. Instead, the worker didn't even look in their direction, just walked the other way proud of the perfectly mounted nameplate that now hung on the wall. **WENDY TAYLOR, DIRECTOR OF CLIENT SERVICES**.

A nervous laugh nearly escaped their throat, as they ducked inside the empty office, locking the door. It was spotless inside, if Wendy had any idea she was actually getting the promotion today they couldn't tell. The space was nearly empty. An old bookshelf sat in the corner, its shelves filled with books no one had ever read. A potted plant sat by the door directly across from the large bay windows that thankfully had the shades drawn.

They tossed their bag onto the chair pulling out the first camera. They didn't need to rush. Between the announcement and then lunch they had at least an hour before the halls would start to fill up again, but the quicker they got it done the better they would feel.

Scanning the room, they moved to the bookshelf and found a spot on the top shelf that swept over the desk perfectly. Setting the camera up was the easy part, finding a way to make it blend in and still keep the angle they wanted was a bit more challenging, but after about ten minutes they figured it out.

The phone buzzed in their pocket as they grabbed the second camera. They didn't need to look at the caller id to know who it was.

"Tell me you've finally gotten it done?"

"Almost," they replied, grabbing the second camera and walking toward the plant. "I have the first camera done. Shouldn't take too long to get the others."

"No one saw you go in?"

"No, they were too distracted playing nice. I can't believe they don't see through it." They spun the plant, trying to find an angle that would work and wouldn't fall out. "Part of me didn't think she'd actually get it." The camera slid into place.

"Of course she got it. She's even more conniving than he is."

"I thought you two were friends?"

A laugh crackled through the phone. It was cold, void of any actual humor. "So did I. Then the bitch blew up my entire life. I caught her fucking him red handed, gave her an out and instead..." There was a pause as Ava pushed away the memory. "Payback's going to be a bitch."

On the opposite wall of the bookshelf was the only wall art in the room. An abstract photo of bright watercolors that could have either been a cheetah or a woman depending on the angle that you looked at it. They moved to it, mounting the third and final camera.

"Last one is online. Try to log in and make sure you see them."

Clicking drifted through the phone and they knew Ava was home at her computer. "Crystal clear."

"Good. Now I'm packing up before someone sees me in here."

"You did good work. Lisa would be proud."

"Don't talk about her like you knew her."

"You're right." There was a pause. They expected Ava to just hang up, that was her usual move.

"This will work. Once we expose Wendy, we will have all the leverage we need to go after Michael."

"How much longer until—"

"Knowing them?" Ava's laugh was bitter. "She'll probably be fucking him in there all weekend long."

"Jesus. It almost sounds like you want revenge more than I do."

"Justice." Ava corrected. "Not revenge. Justice."

"Sometimes they're the same thing. Just... let me know what you want me to do next. Just make sure it can't trace back to me."

"It won't."

The call ended. They took one last look around the office. At the desk. The chair. She didn't deserve any of it.

Ava's apartment was barely furnished. A cheap IKEA table. A folding chair that hurt her back after an hour. A mattress on the floor in the other room because she'd sold the bed frame when she couldn't make rent. This was her life now.

She sat at the table, laptop open, staring at the video feeds. This would work. This would have to work. It may not fix what was already broken, but it would at least restore some sliver of dignity.

When she minimized the feed tears stung the back of her eyes. She hadn't changed her wallpaper yet. It was her and David's wedding day. They were both smiling, his arm around her waist probably joking about how she had no business wearing white. It really was the happiest day of her life.

Ava touched the screen, traced the outline of David's face. She was devastated when he said he didn't believe her. That companies don't just fire people with circumstantial evidence. She tried to explain, to tell him about Michael's manipulation, but he told her she sounded crazy, obsessed.

She pulled back up the camera feed. She couldn't look at it anymore.

While she waited for Wendy to return to the office her eyes drifted to the stack of papers on the table beside her laptop. Divorce papers. David had already signed them weeks ago, sent them back through his lawyer because he couldn't even face her to end their marriage.

Her line was still blank. She hadn't signed them yet, though she wasn't sure why. Maybe because signing them made it final. Made it real. Maybe she was holding on to some sliver of hope that once she proved it all David would take her back.

Wendy had made her choices. Had chosen ambition over friendship. Even after all the warning Ava had given her. She still chose Michael over all of it.

Now she'd face what those choices actually cost.

Ava knew, on some level, that this was revenge. Knew that it was personal and justice and vengeance were blurring together in ways that would probably damn her. She just didn't care. Wendy had stolen everything from her and one way or the other she would get what she deserved.

Movement on the center feed made Ava sit up straighter in her chair, her heart rate spiking.

Wendy walked into the office alone. Ava cursed her luck, hoping by some miracle Michael would follow her in there and take her right on the desk. Instead, Wendy just looked around the empty office, an unmistakable smile on her face.

She moved around the desk, running her fingers over the edge as she opened the blinds and let the afternoon sun pour in. It was only then that Ava could see how wrinkled her dress looked, how multiple strands of hair seemed out of place. She shook her head in disgust.

Wendy sat down in the seat, sinking into it like she owned it. She pushed back from the desk slightly, then spun with a satisfied smirk that made Ava want to launch her laptop across the room.

"Director Taylor," she whispered, too quiet for the cameras to catch, but Ava could read her lips. Ava's hands tightened on the edge of the table.

She knew she needed to be patient. This was just the beginning. Wendy would come here with Michael eventually. She would fuck him in that leather chair, on that mahogany desk, against those floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. And when she did, she would give Ava everything she needed to destroy her.

She'd lose everything, just like Ava had lost everything.

Justice.

Ava watched Wendy spin in the director's chair one more time, the smile never fading from her face.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Ava whispered to the screen. "I'm going to take it all away from you."

Wendy spent most of Friday evening waiting for the fight that never came.

They ordered pizza because neither of them had the energy to cook. Jon sat on his end of the couch scrolling through his tablet while Wendy curled into hers, a blanket pulled over her legs even though the house wasn't cold. A true crime documentary played that neither of them watched. Every few minutes Jon would glance at her and she'd brace for it. He'd barely spoken to her in the office. She was in and out of their office after lunch moving things to the new space and he'd just kept his head down too busy with work to acknowledge her. But now, he just looked at her like he barely recognized her.

"You've barely eaten," he said, nodding toward the untouched slice on her plate.

"I had a big lunch." The lie came so naturally she almost believed it herself. Her big lunch was nothing more than a granola bar and a bag of chips Michael had in his car when they drove back from the hotel. She reached for her ring. The hotel where he'd fucked on a cigarette burned mattress and covered her in his cum.

"Right. Michael took you to lunch. Was it somewhere nice?"

She stared at her pizza, afraid that if she looked at him he'd see the lie in her eyes. "Some sushi place I'd never heard of. It was fine."

Jon studied her and it looked like he was going to call her out on something. Instead, he set the tablet down on the table. "I wanted to say something about today. About the announcement."

Here it comes. She pulled the blanket tighter.

"I know I wasn't... great. In the conference room." He pushed his glasses up, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I was caught off guard. I didn't know it was coming and I think my face probably showed that."

"It did."

"I'm sorry." He turned toward her. "I'm happy for you, Wendy. I really am. But it was also my first time hearing the news, which meant I was also processing not getting the promotion myself." He touched her leg over the blanket. "I just wish you would have told me sooner."

"You wouldn't have wanted to hear it. You..." She took a breath. She wasn't trying to start a fight. "That wasn't fair. You're right." She placed her hand on top of his. "But honestly, I didn't know for sure until Brian said my name." Another lie, smoother than the last. "I knew Michael's thoughts, but nothing was confirmed."

"Michael." Jon nodded slowly, then pulled his hand away. "Right."

They sat in silence for another ten minutes before Wendy grabbed the remote and changed the channel to a cooking show that was equally as boring. "I won't apologize for him seeing something in me." She couldn't stand the silence anymore. She knew he was judging her, hating her because Michael trusted her more than Jon.

"I don't expect you to apologize, Wendy. I just... I feel like you're pulling away."

"Maybe I'm pulling away because it seems like all we do is fight about work anymore."

Tears pricked the side of her eyes as she watched Jon. His jaw clenched and unclenched. She'd seen it countless times before when he was working out a problem in his head.

"You're right." He reached for her hand again. "Maybe now that the director position is settled we can move past it."

There was an ache in her chest as she looked into his eyes. She wanted to believe him. If he could just accept that she got the position and he didn't then maybe they could go back to the way things were.

"I hope so," she said, honestly.

"We should celebrate this weekend," He squeezed her hand. "Maybe brunch tomorrow? That place on Fourth Street you like?"

"That sounds nice."

When they climbed into bed Jon pulled her close, his hand resting on black lace of her panties.

"Are you trying to see what they feel like so you can use them while I'm sleeping?"

His fingers stilled and she couldn't help but smile.

"Wendy, I don't actually—"

She turned to face him, pressing her hips against his obvious erection.

"I think you like it more than you want to admit."

In the dark she saw his mouth open to retort. She pressed against him again making her intentions known and instead of arguing his mouth found hers.

She closed her eyes, deepening the kiss as her hand slid down to where their hips met. But behind her eyelids it wasn't Jon's mouth on hers. It was the smell of cigarette smoke and a dirty comforter. The weight of a different body.

Jon rolled her onto her back and she let him, wrapping her legs around him as he maneuvered between her thighs. He commented on how wet she was, and she purred into his ear letting him think it was all his doing.

Wendy was in the kitchen making coffee when her phone lit up on the counter. Jon was in the shower. She glanced at the screen.

Michael: Can you guess what I'm doing right now with my new favorite photo?

Her hand froze on the coffee pot. She didn't have to ask to know exactly what photo he was referring to. She should have made him delete it. She'd told herself it was fine because her face wasn't visible, that it could have been anyone. But it wasn't anyone. It was her, and of course Michael would find a way to hold it over her.

Heat bloomed low in her stomach before she could stop it. She could picture Michael right now. Alone in bed, phone in one hand while the other—

Wendy: what the hell Michael. What you do in your free time has nothing to do with me.

The reply was immediate: *In this instance I think it was everything to do with you. Do you need a picture to help you understand why?*

Wendy: I'm serious Michael. It's Saturday. I'm with my husband.

Michael: Whatever. I just thought you'd like to know I was thinking about you.

"who are you texting?" Jon asked as he padded down the hall running a towel through his hair. Wendy's face went white as she placed her phone face-down on the counter, her pulse hammering.

"Michael." She poured two cups of coffee, trying to keep her hands from shaking. "He's already sending me director stuff. Doesn't understand what a weekend is." She rolled her eyes for Jon's benefit as she handed him a cup.

"Thanks." He kissed her temple, taking the cup. "On a Saturday? You better set some boundaries now before—"

"I know, Jon!" She winced at herself. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. You're right. He needs to learn boundaries."

Her phone buzzed again. Then again. Jon's eyes flicked to it.

"Must be really important."

"It's not." she grabbed her phone. "I'll remind him it can all wait until Monday."

She scanned the thread: *I know you're not actually mad.*

Followed by: *Wear stockings Monday. Those legs deserve to be on display.*

She held her breath when she read the last message, quickly glancing at Jon. She'd never worn stockings before. Tights sure, but stockings felt more intimate. And why would Michael even care? It would just look like she was wearing pantyhose or maybe not even visible at all.

She was taking too long. Jon was watching.

Fine. Now stop texting me. I mean it.

She hit send before she could think about what she'd just agreed to, then turned the phone over again and looked at Jon with what she hoped was exasperation.

"I told him weekends are off-limits unless it's an emergency." She sipped her coffee. "He won't listen, but at least it's on the record."

"Good." Jon seemed satisfied. He sipped his coffee as he smiled at her, probably still thinking about last night. "So. Brunch?"

"Brunch." She smiled. "Let me get ready."

The hallway was quiet when Wendy made her way to her new office at 7:03 AM Monday morning. She had a small cardboard box tucked under her arm. Her laptop, mouse, and a few other things that were left at her desk in the office she shared with Jon. She spent the weekend moving the big things in and now she stood outside the door with a smile she couldn't wipe from her face.

WENDY TAYLOR, DIRECTOR OF CLIENT SERVICES. She'd stopped to stare at it every time she came into the building as if someone was going to realize their mistake and take the letters off. When she was satisfied they were there to stay she pushed open the door, setting her box on the closest chair.

The space felt massive. She walked along the perimeter slowly, running her finger across the wall, the bookshelf, the odd painting on the wall that had been there for as long as she could remember. She had gotten use to the cramped space of sharing an office and she suddenly realized she wasn't sure what to do with all of the extra room.

Sharing an office with her husband had become suffocating. Their fights would carry over from home to the office and then back. She told herself that was at least part of the reason why they were fighting all the time, that and Jon's incessant need to question her every decision and make her feel small. Space would fix that. He could breathe without her there, and she could work without feeling like he was judging every decision she made.

She reached into the box, pulling out a photo of her and Jon. She studied it for a minute. It was taken right after they bought their house. She held up the keys proudly while he smiled behind her. That version of Wendy had been so small. So eager to please. She ran her hand over the frame. Her body was angled away from the camera, not wanting to be the center of attention. Jon encouraged it, of course. Never did anything to push her out of her comfort zone.

Her chest grew tight as she recalled the memory. She set the picture at the end of her desk then pulled out her track pad, mouse and keyboard next. Twenty minutes later she was unpacked and checking emails as downtown Columbus came to life through the window behind her.

Just after eight a knock on the door pulled her attention. Jenny stood in the doorway, smiling from ear-to-ear as Wendy glanced up from the screen.

"Sorry, I know it's early. Do you have a second?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

Jenny walked toward the desk. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt this morning and Wendy wondered if she needed to talk to the junior associate about the dress code policy. "I was just looking at the Fletcher Hardware proposal. Jon helped me put together a spring campaign targeting suburban homeowners, but it just feels... bland."

Wendy flipped through the pages. It was mostly template language, stock photography suggestions, a social media plan that could have applied to any hardware store in the country. She pulled up the account on her computer and rolled her eyes. The company budget was minimal at best. Knowing Jon, he saw that combined with the sales numbers and thought they didn't need anything custom.

"You're right, it's boring." She closed the folder and slid it back across the desk. "We need Fletcher's customers excited. That drives sales, which increases our budget for next quarter."

"I thought that too, but Jon was worried about the budget. It's really limiting—"

"The budget is what it is. That's not the problem." Wendy leaned forward, holding Jenny's gaze. "You're pitching based on what the numbers say, not what the client needs. They've been losing market share to Lowe's for three years. They need something that makes people drive past a Lowe's to get to them."

Jenny bit her lip. "But if I push too hard and they reject it—"

"Then you own that conversation." Wendy's voice sharpened. "You make Jon see that this is the direction that will move the needle. If he pushes back, and he will, you show him projections. Show him what happens if even a tenth of Lowe's traffic comes to Fletcher instead. He'll respect the numbers, even if he doesn't respect the idea."

"That... that makes sense." Jenny stood. "You're good at this."

"I am." Wendy smiled. "Before you go..."

Jenny paused at the door.

"If you're going to be handling accounts, you need to look the part." Wendy kept her tone light, almost friendly. "Save the casual Friday look for casual Friday."

Color flooded Jenny's cheeks. For a second, Wendy thought she might actually push back. Then her shoulders dropped. "Understood. I didn't get through laundry this weekend. It won't happen again."

"That's all," Wendy said, dismissing her like she was just another employee.

When she was gone Wendy smiled to herself, she was made for this role. She was halfway through her inbox when another knock broke her concentration. She gave an annoyed sigh before looking up to see Jon standing at her door.

"Hey." He gave a crooked smile as he pushed into the office. "Love what you did with the place," he said, awkwardly.

"Thanks." She watched him move through the space, cataloging every inch. His fingers trailed along the bookshelf. He paused at the window, hands in his pockets, looking out at the skyline she got to stare at every day now. The view he didn't have from his desk.

"Big upgrade from our old space."

"It is."

"More privacy too." He turned to face her.

The way he said it made her stomach tighten. She thought about Saturday morning, Michael's texts lighting up her phone while Jon stood in the kitchen toweling his hair. The stockings she was wearing right now, the lace tops pressing against her thighs beneath her gray skirt. A secret sitting six feet from her husband.

"Jon—"

"Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it." He moved toward her desk and his eyes landed on the photo she'd set at the corner. "Oh my God, where did you find that?" He reached for it, smiling. "Talk about a blast from the past."

"It isn't that old," she laughed. "I had it in my desk. The desk in there was too small to have it out."

Jon held the photo with both hands, staring at it in a way that made Wendy's throat tighten. She could see him disappearing into the memory. The version of them that existed before any of this.

"We looked happy," he said quietly. Then caught himself. "We are happy. I just meant—"

"I know what you meant." She reached out, touching his arm. "With my new salary we can finally do some upgrades like we always talked about."

His smile faltered. His nose crinkled, brow pinching as he set the photo back down with too much care. "Yeah. Maybe."

Wendy pulled her hand back. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just..." He adjusted his glasses. "Feels like a lot is changing fast."

"Good things are changing, Jon."

"No, you're right." He nodded, but his gaze had drifted to the window again. When he looked back his eyes landed on her monitor. Wendy had three different accounts pulled up on the screen. She was doing the job that should have been his, and the worst part was that it didn't feel like they could share it.

"Jenny stopped by earlier," Wendy said, filling the silence. "She had questions about the Fletcher proposal."

Something shifted in his posture. He straightened, his chin lifting slightly. "I know. I sent her." He crossed his arms. "I told her to run the creative direction by you because I wanted your perspective. Wendy, you're looking at the whole thing wrong."

She arched her eyebrow. So that's why he was here. He wanted to pick a fight. To show her on day one that she didn't deserve this position. "And how is that exactly?"

"If you pull up the sales numbers—"

"Have you ever been to Fletchers? Taken a step inside their store?"

Jon blinked. "What?"

"Have you been in there? Talked to the owners about what they think their identity is? It's a mom and pop shop, Jon not some big box retailer that lives and dies on spreadsheets."

His jaw shifted. "The data tells us what we need to know. That's literally what gap analysis—"

"Jon." She leaned forward, both hands flat on the desk. "I've seen the numbers. The opportunity is obvious. What I need from you is a campaign that makes people feel something when they see it. If the data can't tell you what that feeling is, go visit the place. Buy a hammer, for God's sake. Then build the campaign."

The vein in his temple pulsed as Jon removed his glasses and rubbed his temple. "The gap analysis shows why they are losing ground." His voice was calm, low, like he was using every ounce of self-restraint to keep from yelling at her. "I can tell you the zip codes, the demographics, the seasonal patterns. I know which Lowe's locations are pulling their traffic and at what rate. I don't need to go shake the owner's hand to understand that."

"But you need to understand why people drive past them. Data doesn't tell you why." She shook her head. "See, this is how it always is with you. You don't see the—"

"They drive past because there's nowhere to park." He said it with such authority Wendy leaned back in her chair.

"W... what?"

He tossed his glasses onto the desk. "Look at the customer satisfaction surveys. People go to Lowes because Fletcher's has six spots in a gravel lot behind the building. The Lowe's less than two miles east has two hundred and forty."

"Well, I still think—"

"You know what else the data shows. The weather."

Wendy tilted her head.

"It's rainy season, Wendy. Would you rather walk through mud and gravel or a paved parking lot?"

Wendy's hand drifted toward her ring under the desk. She opened her mouth to tell Jon he was out of line, but quickly closed it. He was right. She hated how right he was. She watched as he scoffed at her, snatched his glasses and headed toward the door.

"So," she said, stopping him mid-stride. "What's your recommendation."

He turned to look at her over his shoulder. "They've got a vacant lot adjacent to their property." He took a breath. "They need to save money on advertising this quarter, use the generic campaign I put together and then after they acquire the lot they do a whole campaign around expansion, improved parking, the works."

"Fine. But I still think you need to go visit the store."

He shook his head. "You know, the parking data would have come up in my full report. All you had to do was wait for me to give it to you. There was a reason Marcus trusted me, you know."

"I do trust you, Jon. But Jenny—"

"Jenny is a junior associate who is eager to impress her boss." He tapped the doorframe twice with his palm and walked out. His footsteps receded down the hallway, steady and even. Wendy listened until they faded, then stared at the Fletcher file on her screen. The parking data. Six spots in a gravel lot. She hadn't known that. She should have known that. She told herself that was the worst of it.

She reached for her coffee when a voice carried down the hallway.

"There she is. Director Taylor in the flesh."

Trevor materialized in her doorway, one hand resting on the frame, the other holding a travel mug. He didn't step inside. He was being loud enough that everyone on the floor could hear him.

"I just wanted to drop by and congratulate you properly, Wendy." His smile was wide, all of his teeth showing, like a proud parent. "Not everyone gets to move up that fast. It's inspiring, honestly. Gives the rest of us something to aspire to. What's your secret?"

"Thank you, Trevor." She reached for her ring under her desk. "Just a lot of hard work."

"Of course. Hard work." He raised his travel mug in a mock toast, eyes never leaving hers. "All those long nights strategizing with Michael. Really paid off, didn't it? You earned every inch of this."

The emphasis on every inch made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

He pushed off the doorframe and was already typing out a message on his phone, his footsteps disappearing down the corridor before she could respond.

Her face was red with anger. He was being childish and petty because of the Skyline account. It would blow over soon enough. She released the ring and turned back to her monitor. Seventeen emails were now twenty-three.

This was fine. She was a Director now. She had Michael's backing. Trevor was just noise. But her fingers trembled slightly on the keys, and she hated herself for it.

Two hours later, her door opened again, this time without knocking. She looked up from her computer, annoyed. When she saw Michael enter the room her pulse stuttered.

"Look at you." He smirked as he walked into the office like it was still his. His eyes dropped from her face to her blouse, then lower. She'd unconsciously pushed her chair back from the desk allowing him a quick sweep of her legs. "You look good behind that desk. Powerful."

He knew. She could tell by the way his gaze lingered a half-second too long below her waist. She couldn't tell if he'd actually seen anything or if he was just checking, but the heat that crawled up her neck told her he'd seen enough.

"Did you need something, Michael? Because if not, it's already been a stressful morning and I have work to catch up on." She did her best to focus on her monitor and not the way her pulse quickened as Michael moved further into the room.

"Lots of good memories in here." His eyes traveled from her face to the desk, ignoring her comment completely. "This thing could hold some weight." He moved toward her, his bulk filling the space. "I think it's time we give it a proper christening. Don't you?"

The familiar tightening low in her stomach was back, the ache between her thighs where the lace tops of the stockings gripped her skin. She pressed her knees together under the desk.

"Not here." She tried to sound authoritative as she glanced at the door. Trevor's voice still echoed in her head. "People are already talking, Michael. I'm not giving them ammunition."

"Let them talk." He sat on the edge of her desk, shifting his weight. The framed photo of her and Jon tipped forward, then fell shattering on the floor.

Wendy stared at the broken frame. At Jon's face split by a diagonal fracture.

"Shit." Michael glanced at the fractured frame on the floor. "Didn't see it."

Wendy stared at the photo. The glass had spiderwebbed from the corner across Jon's face.

"You've been in here for two minutes and you're already breaking things." She stood, walked around the desk and picked up the frame. She hesitated as she did, a brief second, then bent at her knees to pick up the frame. She wasn't sure if he'd knocked it over on purpose to get a proper view of what she was wearing, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "This is my office, Michael, not yours." She put the frame face down in the drawer.

"Fair enough." He raised his palms. "You can't trust yourself to be quiet. I can't say I blame you." He leaned back, bracing his hands on the desk behind him as he watched Wendy's irritation grow. "Let's go back to your house for lunch. I would love to—"

"Absolutely not." Her hands slammed down on the desk. She thought about Jon getting home from work, he'd notice something was off.

"My house is off limits. That's not negotiable." She wet her lips. He looked shocked by her assertiveness. He probably didn't expect the outburst. Good, she liked it when he was on his back foot. "What... what about the motel again. It was close." She squirmed in her seat, her body temperature rising as she thought about how degrading the place was.

Michael tilted his head with an amused expression on his face. "No... I want this time to be special?"

Wendy rolled her eyes. "I don't know what you think is happening Michael but I'm just—"

"We'll go to my place."

Wendy blinked. In all the months of hotel rooms and backseats and that filthy motel, she'd never once been to Michael's home. He existed for her inside Buckeye's walls and inside whatever room he'd booked for the afternoon.

"I... what? Your place?"

"It's not far from here. Maybe ten minutes." He stood from the desk and moved around to her side. Before she could react his hand was on her knee, sliding the hem of her skirt up just enough to expose the lace band at the top of her thigh.

When his eyes met hers again the smirk said everything he didn't.

His fingers on the lace were barely a touch, but the quiet satisfaction in his expression made her face burn.

Her stomach clenched as she pushed his hand away and tugged at her skirt. "I told you. Not here."

He leaned closer to her, his voice a whisper. "I've been thinking about what's under this skirt since you walked into the building."

"You're lucky I'm wearing it at all. You need to learn boundaries, Michael." Her tone wasn't as harsh as she'd hoped it would be. It almost sounded playful. She heard it and hated it. She clicked open her calendar.

"Besides, I have a full afternoon. The Skyline metrics are due to Steve by three, I still need to review Jenny's Fletcher revisions, and I have a call with the Corsetti brothers at four." She scrolled through the blocks on her screen, not wanting to look up and meet his eyes. "So whatever you're imagining, it's not happening today."

"Sure." Michael buttoned his jacket. He didn't argue. Didn't push. Just watched her with that patient, knowing expression that made her want to throw her coffee at him.

Her cursor hovered over the noon slot. She told herself she was checking for conflicts. That's all. Just making sure nothing was already scheduled there, because a good director keeps a clean calendar. Her index finger clicked. A new block appeared: *Out of Office — 12:00-2:00 PM.*

She typed nothing in the description field. Left it blank. A two-hour void in the middle of her Monday that could mean anything. Lunch with a client. An errand. A dentist appointment.

Michael was still watching her. He hadn't moved toward the door.

"While you're not thinking about it." His tone shifted, to business. "Jack Peterson will be here in a week. Walk me through the plan."

"Numbers review here in the morning. Dinner that evening." She watched him carefully now, the way his shoulders squared at the mention of dinner. "He wants to discuss the national rollout. He sees this as a bit of a celebration dinner I think."

"Good. I'll clear my schedule for the dinner."

"Actually." Wendy paused. "Jack requested it be just the two of us."

His jaw didn't clench. His expression didn't darken. But his weight settled differently, the hand buttoning his jacket stalling for a half-second before resuming.

"Just the two of you."

"He trusts me, Michael. It's a good thing" She kept her tone professional. "If you're there he'll defer to you out of habit. I need him focused on the strategy, not the hierarchy."

Michael studied her, his hand clenching into a fist then lying flat on the desk.

"All right." He shook his head "But he's going to expect the VIP treatment."

"And he'll get it."

"Meet me downstairs at noon for lunch." He paused at the door. "Don't keep me waiting."

When he was gone Wendy sat there, staring at the door. She wasn't sure what to make of his reaction to Jack. He seemed... different. She dismissed the thought and opened her desk drawer. The frame was ruined. She could barely make out Jon's face through the spiderweb of cracks. She'd have to find time to replace it.

Ava had been watching the feed all morning. She took no satisfaction watching Jon be talked down to by his wife. There was however a flicker of amusement when Jon turned it around on Wendy and made her realize just how in over her head she was. But aside from that, she just sipped her coffee and watched.

Then Michael walked in and closed the door and Ava nearly knocked over her coffee mug.

She caught it with her left hand, eyes locked on the center feed. The audio crackled to life. First his voice, then hers. Ava turned up the volume, the tinny speakers filling her bare apartment.

For twenty minutes she watched them talk. He sat on the edge of her desk. Knocked over a picture frame. Wendy's frustration climbed but nothing happened. No hands where they shouldn't be. No clothes coming off. Just two people negotiating something Ava couldn't quite piece together until she caught a single word that changed everything.

Motel.

She rewound the audio. Played it again.

"What about the motel again. It was close."

Motel? Ava grabbed the notebook beside her laptop and scribbled it down. Which motel? The audio didn't say. But it was close to the office, Wendy said. That narrowed it. She flipped past the pages she'd already filled. Camera placement diagrams. Michael's office schedule copied from the company calendar before her access was revoked. A timeline of every closed-door meeting she'd observed since the feeds went live.

Michael made a comment about the motel that she couldn't make out, but then followed it up quickly by suggesting they go to his place.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Ava said, to herself as she picked up her phone. She didn't know where Michael lived. It was possible that she could get that info from Marcus, but a tail would be a quicker solution.

Ava: They are going to his place for lunch. Can you follow?

The reply came thirty seconds later. *Can't. Back to back meetings until 3. Sorry.*

Ava typed an angry reply then deleted it. Typed it again making herself sound more desperate but deleted that too. She set the phone down carefully on the table. Picked it up. Set it down again. Then hurled it at the mattress in the next room where it bounced once and landed face-up on the bare sheets.

She leaned back in the folding chair until it groaned under her weight. This was a two-person operation. She couldn't chase them all over Columbus. But the motel. Wendy had said it like she'd been there before. Which meant it wasn't a one-time thing. Which meant they'd go back.

Ava sat up. She didn't need to find Michael's apartment. She needed to find a motel close to the Buckeye building where two people could disappear during a lunch break and be back before anyone noticed. That narrowed it. Not the Hiltons or the Marriotts where someone might recognize a VP from the biggest branding firm in the city. Somewhere cheap. Somewhere that didn't ask questions.

She could work with that. A motel like that would have a front desk clerk making twelve dollars an hour who wouldn't think twice about letting someone review security footage for the right price. Or maybe she wouldn't even need footage. Maybe she just needed a name on a guest registry and a room number.

She looked at the Moleskine. Twelve pages of notes. This was supposed to be simple. The cameras were supposed to catch Wendy and Michael in the act, hand her the leverage she needed to go after both of them. But they were leaving.

She couldn't control where they went. But she could be waiting at the places they came back to.

On the feed, Wendy's office sat empty. The chair still spinning slightly from where she'd pushed back from the desk. Ava closed the laptop halfway, just enough to dim the screen without killing the feed, and went back to her notebook.

The drive took closer to fifteen minutes because Michael missed the exit arguing with someone on the phone about a vendor invoice. Wendy stared out the window watching downtown Columbus shrink in the side mirror. He hadn't touched her. She'd expected him to go straight for

her stockings when they got into the car, but he kept his hands on the wheel the entire drive. She shifted in her seat. Uncrossed her legs. Crossed them again.

She wasn't disappointed. She was just noticing.

By the time he pulled into the parking garage of a high-rise condo on the east side, she'd actually had the thought that maybe this was just lunch and nothing more.

The elevator opened on the fourteenth floor and Michael unlocked a door at the end of the hall. He stepped aside, letting her enter first.

"Wow," she whispered, stepping across the threshold and taking in the view. The living room had floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out across the Scioto River. She pulled her gaze away from the view to look over the rest of the apartment. A leather sectional faced the windows. She could tell from the stitching alone it was something that was outside her price range. Her nose crinkled as she noticed the crumbs against the black material, and what looked like a half eaten bag of chips half-stuffed into the recliner. Behind it sat a bar cart stocked with bottles she recognized from the Fireball campaign.

Then the rest of it registered. The sink was buried under dishes. A pan sat on the stove with something dried and brown crusted to the sides. Takeout containers lined the counter near the bar cart, one still open with chopsticks resting inside like whoever was eating just got bored and walked away. Mail piled on the kitchen island, thick enough to slide. A gym bag sat unzipped near the door, a damp towel spilling out of it that had crossed over from smelling like sweat to smelling like mildew.

"It's not much." Michael tossed his keys onto the island. They skidded into the mail pile. "View makes up for it."

Wendy spun in a tight circle taking it all in before gravitating back toward the windows. She'd imagined this place a dozen different ways. She'd expected it to look exactly like his office. She wasn't far off.

"It's bigger than I expected." She looked out over the water. "The view is incredible."

"I couldn't agree more," he said, admiring the way her skirt had ridden up slightly.

Wendy's cheeks flushed and she reached back, smoothing out her outfit. "That smell though. Michael, that towel needs to be thrown away."

"Noted." He didn't seem embarrassed, just shrugged and kicked the flap of the gym bag closed knocking the towel inside. "I'm not here enough to notice, I guess."

She crossed the living room toward the kitchen. Her gaze drifted to the shelves flanking the TV. Industry awards. Books she doubted he'd opened. And more photos than she expected. A woman with Michael's same jaw and dark eyes standing on a beach with two boys, all three squinting against the sun. Another of Michael on what looked like a camping trip, one nephew on his shoulders, the other clinging to his leg like he might blow away. A newer looking one had the boys in football jerseys holding a trophy, Michael kneeling between them. He was grinning in a way she'd never seen at the office. He looked proud. Like a man with his arms around two kids who clearly worshipped him.

She picked up the football photo. "Your nephews, right? Gosh, they're getting big."

"Growing like weeds." Michael dropped onto the arm of the sectional, and loosened his tie. "Tyler's twelve now. Plays quarterback. Kid's got an arm on him. Danny's the smart one. Nine years old and reads more than most adults I know."

"You sound like a proud dad."

"Uncle." He corrected, but the smile only grew. "Their actual father is a waste of space. My sister picks winners." He ran his hand through his hair "Two divorces by forty. But the boys turned out good despite him."

Wendy set the photo down carefully. She recognized the shift in his voice, it was a side of Michael she didn't see very often. She moved toward the sectional, then remembered the crumbs and decided to stand.

"You're good with them."

"I like kids." He shrugged. "They have a no bullshit approach that really resonates with me." He groaned as he stood back up and untucked his shirt. "More people should be like that."

She thought about the first time she'd seen those photos, back in his office when this thing between them was still... whatever it was. He'd said something similar then, that kids hadn't learned to be ashamed yet.

"You ever think about having your own?" She wasn't sure why she asked.

"Sometimes." He took a small step toward her. "Not the minivan bullshit. But yeah. I'd be a damn good father."

"Humble as always." She couldn't help but laugh.

"What about you and Jon? You two ever talk about it?"

The question landed differently than she expected and she was suddenly very aware of where she was. "We decided early on it wasn't for us. Jon's never been the type. He likes things... structured. Kids would be too unpredictable for him."

"Sounds like Jon decided and you signed off on it."

"That's not—" She stopped. Took a breath. "We decided together."

"Sure you did."

"Michael."

"I'm just making an observation." He was close enough now she could feel the heat radiating from his body. "You want to know what I think?"

"I really don't."

"I think you'd be a hell of a mother." He watched as she closed her eyes, clearly not expecting the compliment. He reached out, putting his hand on her waist. "I think the reason you agreed was because you knew he wasn't the right man for the job." His fingers moved across her waist to her stomach. "You needed a real man to put a baby in you."

Her whole body went rigid. She grabbed his wrist intending to shove it away, but didn't. "That's disgusting. Let me guess, you're a real man?"

Even as she said it she felt an electric current shoot through her body as Michael's fingers curled against her abs.

"I think we both know the answer to that."

She stepped forward, her neck hot. "Is this what you do? Invite women up here and pitch them on getting pregnant?"

Michael barked out a laugh that tore through the apartment. "It wasn't a pitch." His gaze raked over her body. "And only the ones that I think can actually handle it."

She opened her mouth to yell at him then paused, not expecting the strange compliment. Before she had a chance to think of a response he was already heading down the hallway.

"Come on. Saved the best for last."

She followed him down the short hall past a bathroom she didn't look into and a closet with the door half open. The bedroom door was already ajar. He pushed it open and stepped to the side.

The room was cleaner than the rest of the apartment. King-sized bed with a dark gray comforter that looked recently made. Heavy curtains framing another wall of windows. Nightstand with a lamp and a phone charger and a book she couldn't read the spine of. It smelled like Pine-sol.

"Where the magic happens."

"You actually cleaned in here."

"Had motivation." His gaze went to the hem of her skirt.

Her stomach pulled tight. She was standing in a man's bedroom at noon on a Monday wearing stockings. She knew what was about to happen, and it was getting harder to convince herself it wasn't what she wanted.

"Now, show me what I've been dying to see all morning."

She searched his face for the smirk, the vulgarity, the aggressive hands. He just stood there... watching her.

She took off the blouse first, determined to make him wait a beat longer for what he wanted. Her hands trembled slightly as each button popped free, until she white lace bra was in full view. She shrugged it off her shoulders, turning her head to look at him.

"Is that what you were hoping for?"

He didn't respond. He just stared at her with an intensity that made her thighs rub together.

She reached for the zipper at the side of her skirt next. Her bottom lip sliding between her teeth as the sound of it dragging down rang through her ears. She stepped out of it unceremoniously, her eyes locking with Michael who didn't even blink. The white lace searing her skin as she stood before Michael wearing next to nothing.

"Fuck, Wendy." He said it low. Almost to himself. "That's even better than I imagined."

She braced for it. Expecting him to close the gap between them quickly. To toss her onto the bed and fuck her the way he had at the motel. When he didn't move, she turned more fully toward him. Waiting for the comment about her tits or her ass or what he was about to do to her.

"You're stunning. You know that? Absolutely breath taking."

Not *you're hot*. Not *look at those fucking legs*. Not anything she was prepared for. She hated how that made her squirm and look at the ground.

"So... are you just going to look or..."

Michael smiled. The cocky smile, she'd been waiting for. "Or what, Wendy?"

She licked her lips, gazing up at Michael through her lashes as he took a step toward her. She'd walked right into that one. But she didn't care, her heart was beating out of control, her pussy leaking as Michael stepped closer to her.

"Do you have a condom?" She already knew the answer.

He unbuttoned her shirt, tossing it onto the floor next to the bed, despite the dresser being within arm's reach. "If you wanted condoms, you should have let me take you to your place like I suggested." He kicked off his shoes, sending each one flying in separate directions. "Because we both know the type of man you married." He unbuttoned his pants and Wendy's pulse spiked. "I'm sure he has a whole nightstand full we could have used."

She should have been angry. She was angry. But she couldn't help but think about the box of Trojan's in Jon's nightstand. How he would reach for one every time she initiated sex.

"You're an asshole."

"And yet here you are." He closed the distance. His hand found her jaw, tilting her face up. "Waiting for a real man."

He kissed her. The word that floated through her head was slow. It was so different from their other times together that it took her a moment to register what was happening. His lips moved against hers without urgency, his other hand coming to her waist, pulling her against him. When she opened her mouth to deepen the kiss he let her set the pace.

Her fingers pressed against his chest, waiting for the moment he shoved her to the bed, but it never came. His tongue brushed against her with a tenderness, not the wet and sloppy kisses from before. Her hands moved down his chest surprised to feel his pants still fully on. She could feel his gut pressing against her, the heat of his skin, the coarse hair under her palms. For a moment neither of them said anything.

She pulled him toward her. Walking backward until the backs of her knees hit the mattress. He stood over her, one hand cradling the side of her face, thumb tracing along her cheekbone. The gentleness of it made her chest ache in a way she wasn't prepared for.

"Lie back."

She did.

The mattress gave under his weight as Michael climbed over her. She expected him to shove her legs apart. To pin her wrists the way he had at the motel, or flip her onto her stomach before she could catch her breath. Instead, his mouth peppered her throat with gentle kisses.

She stared at the ceiling, almost wishing he'd shove her face into the mattress and fuck her. His lips moved down her collarbone at an agonizing slow pace, tasting the skin above the lace of her bra. His hand played with the band of the stocking on her left thigh, his fingers running along the edge where lace met bare skin. He wasn't pulling at it. Wasn't ripping it aside. Just... touching it. Like he had all the time in the world.

"Michael—"

"Shh." His mouth moved lower, pressing between her breasts through the fabric of the bra. His free hand slid beneath her back and unhooked effortlessly. She arched slightly, letting him pull it free. The cool air hit her nipples and she sucked in a breath.

He took one into his mouth. Not biting, not devouring the way he usually did. His tongue circled slowly, his hand cupping the other breast, thumb brushing across the peak until it stiffened.

"Mmmm," she cooed softly. "What are you doing?" She grabbed at his waist attempting to ground herself into him, but he didn't allow it.

"Setting the mood." He placed another kiss on her nipple then trailed his lips down her rib cage.

"Just fuck me already, Michael."

"As much as I love hearing you beg. You deserve more than that."

This was wrong. Not the act itself, she was long past that particular crisis of conscience. But the pace. The tenderness. She ran her fingers through his thinning hair meaning to pull him back up her body.

When his lips grazed the waistband of her panties, her grip in his hair tightened, the plan abandoned.

"Uhhhhh." Her hips lifted as Michael's tongue ran along the middle of her panties.

His fingers hooked the lace, dragged it down her thighs slowly. She lifted her hips to help him, hating how excited she already was.

She was bare except for the stockings now. Michael knelt between her legs and Wendy chewed on her lip waiting for the moment his tongue touched her bare slit. When it didn't come her eyes fluttered open and she saw Michael just looking at her.

"What are you doing?" She propped herself up on her elbows.

"Looking at you."

Something in the way he said it made her stomach flip. She was suddenly keenly aware of where she was. This wasn't some seedy motel room, or his office after hours. She went to his apartment in the middle of the day. This wasn't some moment she could tell herself she got lost in, it was a full fledged affair.

His fingers slid between her legs and her thoughts scattered. He found her clit and her mouth fell open, her hips rotating on their own.

"You're already soaked."

"Don't flatter yourself."

His fingers sank into her and she gripped the blanket.

"Nnnngh."

Then they were gone. Before she could protest, his mouth was on the inside of her left thigh and her eyes snapped closed. His breath was fire against her skin as he pressed his lips against the bare skin just above the lace band of the stocking, then dragged them higher. His stubble scraped against the sensitive flesh and she flinched, her hand shooting to the top of his head.

"Michael, if you don't fuck me soon—"

"We have plenty of time." He turned his head, pressing his mouth against the lace itself and kissed the stocking. His tongue traced the edge where fabric met skin and Wendy's fingers curled into his thinning hair.

"You ever wear anything like this for Jon?"

Before she could respond he switched to the other thigh. His breath sweeping across her lips making her arch further off the bed. She squirmed, as he kissed the same spot on the other leg trying to angle his mouth where she actually needed it, but he held her hips in place with both hands.

"These look even better than I imagined." He spoke against her inner thigh, the vibration traveling straight to her core. "I love that you wore them just for me."

"I wore them because—" She stopped. There was no version of that sentence that ended well. He looked up at her from between her legs and she could see the satisfaction in his eyes. He didn't need her to finish.

His mouth moved higher. He kissed the crease where her thigh met her hip, then the other side, his hands sliding beneath her ass to tilt her toward him. She could feel his breath against her, hot and close. Her thighs tensed.

"Ohhhh fuuuck."

The first touch of his tongue was electric. she pulled down on his head needing more, but he refused to give her what she wanted. That was the part that undid her. He worked in long, slow strokes from bottom to top, the flat of his tongue spreading her open before the tip circled her clit. Her hips bucked and he pressed them back down, his fingers digging into the nylon of the stockings as he held her legs apart.

"Michael." She was panting already. One hand fisted the sheets, the other gripping his hair.

"That's... oh God." She spread her legs wider giving him better access.

"Your pussy is perfect. I'm going to be licking your juices off my sheets later."

The vulgarity of what he was saying only seemed to intensify the heat building inside her. Her core spasmed and she was hyperconscious of the way her juices slide down her thighs.

He hummed against her, the vibration making her legs shake. His tongue pushed inside her, then withdrew, flicking back to her clit in a rhythm that was designed to drive her insane. Every time she got close to the edge he'd slow down, pull back, press his lips against the stocking on her inner thigh before starting over.

"Michael, please—" Her voice cracked. She hated begging. Hated how quickly he reduced her to it.

"Please what?"

"Just... fuck. Let me cum, please. Right there. Fuck, right there."

He sealed his mouth over her clit and sucked, two fingers pushing inside her at the same time. His other hand gripped her thigh through the stocking, bunching the material in his fist. She was right there, teetering, every muscle in her legs coiled tight.

Then his mouth shifted. His tongue dragged lower, slow, tracing a path from her clit down through her folds. She felt every inch of it, the flat of his tongue fucking her before being replaced by his digits. His fingers curled inside her, keeping the pressure on that spot while his mouth traveled south. Past where his fingers worked her.

"Ohhh. Ffff Michael. What are—" The orgasm ripped through her, fogging her mind as she bucked against Michael's fingers. His tongue pressed against her ass, not penetrating, just a soft wet stroke. The sensation fused with the orgasm already tearing through her and something detonated at the base of her spine that she'd never felt before.

"Oh God. Ooooh fuck, Michael—" Her back arched off the mattress, her thighs clamping around his head as she shook. It was sharper, deeper, radiating out from somewhere she didn't have a name for. Her hand pressed against the headboard to stop herself from sliding up the bed. The other tangled in his hair, holding his mouth against her as she rode out wave after wave.

When it finally ebbed she went limp. Her legs fell open, trembling. Her chest heaved as she stared at the ceiling, her vision slowly coming back into focus. Michael kissed the inside of her thigh, almost affectionate, then sat up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Her body was still humming, every nerve ending raw and oversensitive. She barely registered him moving up her body, barely felt his weight settle over her until the head of his cock pressed against her folds. The contact after the orgasm made her gasp, her hips jerking.

"Michael, I just—"

"I know." He rocked forward, sliding through her wetness without entering. The friction against her swollen clit sent a jolt through her that made her grab his arms. "And this one will feel even better."

He rocked again, dragging the full length of himself across her, and she realized with a spike of panic that the orgasm hadn't satisfied her. It had opened a door. She was more sensitive now, more exposed, her body already reaching for a second climax before the first had fully faded.

He pressed the tip of his pulsing cock against her entrance. "You know what I want to hear."

She looked up at him. His face was flushed, sweat already forming along his hairline, his gut pressing against her stomach. Her arousal was smeared across his chin. She should have been disgusted. She should have told him to get a towel, to give her a minute, to find a condom.

"Fuck me."

He grinned as he pushed inside her. Her mouth fell open as he moved with control she didn't know he possessed. She could feel every inch as his fingers dug into her legs.

"Faster," she whispered, locking eyes with him as a bead of sweat dropped from his forehead onto her.

"You feel so good, Wendy. So tight."

"Uggghh, yessss." She felt him bottom out. After the orgasm her body was so sensitive that the stretch nearly made her cum again on the spot. She dug her nails into his shoulders, gasping, trying to hold it together.

"I love the way your body responds to me." His voice was low, strained. He pulled back and pushed forward again only increasing the speed slightly. His hands ran down the outside of her thighs, fingers tracing the stockings from her knees to the lace bands, gripping them as he thrust. "Don't you love how my dick feels inside you?"

She couldn't answer. Her legs wrapped around him instinctively, the nylon sliding against his back as she pulled him deeper. He dropped to his elbows, his mouth by her ear, and for a long moment the only sound was their breathing and the wet slide of their bodies.

"God, you're body is on fire. You want to cum again don't you?"

"Yes. Oh God. Make me cum, Michael." She expected his movements to get more frantic by her words. Instead he came almost to a halt.

"If I had this body next to me every night. I would ensure it was properly worshipped."

"Mmm. Fuck, don't stop."

"I would watch you cum over and over again." His pace quickened and an aftershock of an orgasm seemed to wash over her.

"Yesss. Don't stop fucking me."

"I would fill you with so much cum it'd be impossible for you not to get pregnant."

"Nnnnggh." Her nails raked across his back as another moan tore out of her.

"Even while your belly started to grow, I'd still... Fuck. Still, give you everything you needed."

"Michael, stop—" But her hips lifted to meet him, her body contradicting every word. His cock hit deep inside her and she choked on the rest of the sentence.

"You'd look so fucking good." His pace sped up, driving Wendy closer in the process. His mouth pressed against her ear, his tongue snaking across it and making her gasp. "Full of me. Walking around the office. Jon would have to know."

She turned her face into the pillow. Another moan escaped her lips. Her pussy clenched around him and she knew he felt it. "Just shut up and fuck me."

"You're so wet." His hand came to the side of her face, turning her back toward him. His thumb parting her lips. "You're picturing it, aren't you?"

She told herself she was closing them to focus. To shut him out, to stop looking at his face so she could concentrate on the orgasm building inside her without his words getting in the way. Her eyes shut and his hips rolled forward again, deeper this time, and behind her eyelids the image materialized before she could stop it.

Her stomach. Round and full. Michael's hand on it the way it had been in the living room but now there was a reason for it.

Her pussy clamped down on him so hard they both groaned.

"There it is." His pace stuttered. "Fuck, you just squeezed me so tight."

She grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his mouth to hers. Kissed him hard, desperately, her tongue shoving past his lips to shut him up. She moaned into it, rolling her hips to match his rhythm, trying to drown out what she'd just seen behind her eyes with the physical. The kiss only made it worse. The second orgasm surged forward with terrifying speed, the combination of his cock and his words and that image she couldn't scrub from her brain building into something she couldn't outrun.

He broke the kiss. His forehead pressed against hers, his breath hot on her face. "I'm going cum. Mmm fuck, here it comes."

Her legs tightened around his waist. Her ankles locked behind his back, her own release teetering on the edge. It took her mouth a half second longer to catch up.

"You have to pull out."

But her legs didn't move.

"You don't really want me to." He thrust deeper, harder, and she cried out. "Not this time."

"Michael—"

"Cum with me, Wendy." His thrusts were getting more urgent now, the brutal toe-curling pace she was used to.

The pressure was building between her thighs. The fullness of Michael, the weight of him on top of her. She was losing control. Her hips bucked against him, the orgasm winding tighter with every thrust, bigger than the first, fed by everything he'd poured into her head. Her hands left the sheets and grabbed onto his back, holding him in place so he wouldn't leave and tease her again.

He pinned her hips to the mattress with his weight, grinding deep. "Your body knows what it wants." His breath was ragged now, his own release imminent. "It wants me to breed you."

"Ohhh fuck." Her eyes squeezed shut. She couldn't think. Couldn't form a sentence that wasn't his name.

"You want to cum don't you? Cum with me, Wendy."

"Yessss." The words fell out of her mouth. "Oh God. Don't— fuck, Michael, don't stop—"

His cock pulsed inside her and the heat of his release spread through her like a current. The groan that tore out of him vibrated through her chest, raw and broken, and it pushed her over the edge she'd been clinging to.

Her orgasm intensified, peaking again just as she thought it was starting to fade. "Oh god. Uh, ah, ooh fucckkk. Mhmmmmmmmm."

Michael looked down at Wendy, her eyes were closed but her mouth hung open, gasping for air as she felt his cum flooding into her body. Her pussy clamped down on his cock, milking him as

her back arched completely off the bed. Her legs locked around him, the stocking-clad thighs squeezing his waist, pulling him deeper even as the rational part of her brain screamed at her to push him off.

When her climax finally died, she still didn't push him off. She held him there, her body trembling, aftershocks rippling through her as he pulsed again and again. His forehead dropped against her shoulder, his breathing harsh and broken against her skin. She ran her hand up his neck, the slick of his sweat coating her fingers as she ran them through his hair.

For thirty seconds, neither of them moved. The only sound was their breathing and the hum of the building's ventilation somewhere behind the walls.

Then the fog cleared.

Her legs unlocked. She stared at the ceiling, her chest heaving. Michael's weight was still on top of her, his cock softening inside her. She could feel him leaking out around the edges where their bodies met.

Michael lifted himself onto his elbows, looking down at her. "Fuck." His thumb ran along her bottom lip. "I'm never going to get tired of that."

She shoved his chest hard enough that he had to catch himself on the mattress. The immediate emptiness made her wince, the wetness pooling between her legs, trickling down the inside of her thigh and soaking into the lace of the stocking. She pressed her thighs together. She couldn't look at him. Not after what he'd just made her picture.

"I need... where's your bathroom?"

"Down the hall. Left."

She sat up. The room swayed. Her legs were unsteady as she swung them over the side of the bed, the stockings still gripping her thighs, damp now with sweat and cum. She could feel him seeping out of her with every movement. She didn't look at him. She grabbed her panties from the floor and walked down the hall on shaking legs, shut the bathroom door, and leaned against it.

The woman in the mirror looked wrecked. Hair stuck to the side of her face. Mascara smudged. Neck blotchy. The stockings were twisted, one rolled slightly at the thigh where Michael's hands had bunched the fabric.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," she said to the woman in the mirror.

She turned on the faucet and pressed a cold washcloth between her legs. Her hands were trembling. She'd need Plan B again. Another forty dollars. Another lie.

She needed to get a handle on the Michael situation. She needed...

Another glob of cum leaked down her leg. Her body was still buzzing from the second orgasm. Or was it the third?

She braced both hands on the sink and stared at the woman in the mirror. She could fix this. She'd fixed everything else. The IOU, the underwear, Jon's questions, Trevor, all of it. She'd handled every crisis Michael created and come out the other side stronger.

Her eyes dropped to the washcloth between her legs, already stained.

She just wasn't sure this was a crisis she wanted to end.