

[Insider] Executive Privilege Ch. 19

Jon stood at the stove with his back to her, the whole kitchen smelling like strawberries. Batter sizzled in the pan, and sunlight came through the window over the sink, falling across the counter where she'd left her coffee mug the night before. He was making pancakes. Her favorite.

She walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his back. He turned in her arms and smiled so wide that the knot she'd carried in her stomach for months finally loosened.

"I'm so proud of you," he said, pressing his lips to her forehead. "You were right. You were made for this. You're an amazing director."

"Oh, baby. You have no idea how much I needed to hear that."

Her eyes welled as Jon kissed his way down to her neck, turning her around and wrapping his arms around her from behind. She tilted her head, giving him better access as his lips worked toward her collarbone. This was all she had ever wanted. Jon believing in her.

His hips rocked forward and she felt him hard against her ass. She pressed back with a moan, his cock stiff in a way it hadn't been in months. The heat between her legs had an edge to it, almost urgent. She closed her eyes and continued to rock her hips into him, letting the strawberry smell and the warmth of his chest consume her.

His hands settled on her hips. His grip tightened, harder and more impatient than Jon had ever held her. She pushed back, wanting more, urging him to take her. One hand slid across her hip, his fingers finding her clit.

"Oh God, baby."

She was soaked. Wetness ran down the inside of her thigh as his fingers pressed into her. They felt thicker than they should have, stretching her in a way that confused her even as she cried out, hungry for more.

Her eyes opened and the kitchen was gone.

She blinked as the hotel room came into focus, pale light slipping through the half-drawn curtains. The television hung dark on the wall in front of her, reflecting the bed behind them. Michael lay flush against her back, his thick fingers moving between her swollen folds.

"Ohhhh." Her head rolled to the side.

The strawberries hadn't come from pancakes. The bottle of lube sat next to the bed. The scent clung to the warm slickness between her legs, coating his fingers and the insides of her thighs. He worked the lube over her clit before dipping between her lips, then dragging his fingers farther back until her body tightened.

The ache between her legs went deeper than anything she could explain. The wet spot spreading across the sheets wasn't only lube. She'd been worked up before they ever boarded the boat, and everything that happened last night should have taken the edge off. Instead, she had woken up desperate for more. She pushed her ass into his hand as Michael's mouth found her neck. She could tell he hadn't brushed his teeth yet, but she purred under the attention as his free hand slid around her body and settled over her breast. He squeezed hard enough that she sucked in a breath.

"I'm going to fuck you." His words sent goosebumps across her flesh.

"Yesss." She rolled her hips, seeking out his cock even while his fingers stretched her past her limits.

"You fucked Jack." His voice was lower. Two large fingers penetrated her, curling forward until all she could do was moan. "I went downstairs and came back to the sight of you fucking him. With no regard for what I wanted."

"I thought—"

Before she could protest further, his teeth found her shoulder.

"Ahhh." Her hand found his hip and pulled him closer, needing the full heat of his body against her back.

"Who fucks you better?" His tongue moved over the mark he'd left, tracing her shoulder and neck before flicking against her ear, making her shudder.

"You do."

His thumb ground against her clit as the hard length of his cock slid through the crease of her ass.

"Your pussy is mine to fuck. Not Jack's."

Her hips rolled into his hand, chasing his fingers deeper. She was so sensitive it almost hurt. Every nerve felt exposed. She grabbed his forearm, her nails digging into the skin as a live wire of pleasure exploded through her clit.

"Just you," she panted. "Fuck me, baby. Please. I need it so bad."

Michael pulled his fingers free, and Wendy whimpered at the loss. His hand closed around her hip, rolling her onto her stomach before pulling her up onto her knees. She smiled to herself. This seemed to be Michael's favorite position, not that she could deny how incredible it felt.

The mattress dipped behind her as he took up position. Her fingers slipped under her body, circling the hard nub of her clit as she waited desperately for Michael to fill her.

"I don't do sloppy seconds."

Wendy sucked in a breath as warm lube ran between her ass cheeks. The strawberry scent filled the space between them while his fingertip circled her ass and pressed gently. His cock rested hard against her lower back. Her fingers moved faster over her clit, and her thighs began to shake.

"Michael—"

"You told me you'd do anything I asked. Did you mean it?"

The blunt head of his cock pressed against her virgin entrance. Her body locked, and her fingers stopped moving. Michael's palm settled against the base of her spine. She could have crawled away. Her knees slid farther apart, and she pushed her hips back into him.

"I..." She slipped two fingers into her pussy, needing something inside her. "Just... be careful." Her free hand reached behind her and gripped his thigh.

Michael's hand tightened on her flesh as he pushed forward. The head of his cock spread her slowly, forcing a sharp cry from her throat. Her fingers clamped around his thigh and her body tried to crawl away from the pressure, but he held still.

"Ahhhhh." The stretch she'd felt before around his fingers was nothing like this. "Ohhh fuck... slower, baby." She could feel herself opening around him. His cock sank deep behind the two fingers still inside her pussy, filling her from both sides until she could barely breathe.

White dots freckled her vision as the pain began to dull, giving way to something she couldn't yet describe. The sudden fullness consumed her, igniting her body in an inferno of pain and pleasure.

"Push back against me."

She obeyed, and another inch slipped inside her. Her fingers pulled free from her pussy and returned to her clit, rubbing through the burn as the pressure slowly changed. She moved faster, trying to keep the pleasure ahead of the pain.

"That's it." Michael's hand gripped her tighter, holding her steady as he pushed deeper. "Even better than I imagined." He stopped whenever her body closed around him, waiting until she loosened enough to take more. Strawberry lube dripped from her thighs and pooled in the sheets beneath her knees.

"Oh god, oh fuck, oh god." The words came with each slow push. Her ass burned and ached, but the pleasure underneath it kept growing. She circled her clit faster as her body finally began to give around him. Her thighs shook. One hand gripped the headboard while the other kept working between her legs.

When his stomach finally pressed against her ass, Wendy let out a broken moan. She had taken all of him. Her breath came in short, ragged pulls, and neither of them moved for several seconds. She released the headboard and twisted her hand into the bedding.

Michael pulled back an inch and Wendy's fingers stopped on her clit as the movement dragged through every sore place he had opened.

"Breathe. I knew you could take it."

He pushed forward again, slower so her body could adjust. Her mouth hung open against the sheets.

"Nnnnggh...aaahhh." The sound was closer to a moan as Michael started to find a rhythm. "Fuckkk, Michael." She rocked back, testing how much she could take. She was close. The orgasm was building, spreading through her stomach. "Just like that. Don't go faster yet."

His pace increased almost immediately, drawing a desperate cry from Wendy. "I decide when we go faster." Michael's hand slid up her spine and closed around the back of her neck. Her body sang with pleasure as he slammed his hips forward. "I heard you tell Jack how hard you wanted it. Don't go soft on me now."

Wendy's mouth curved against the sheets. She drove herself harder, giving him more, and felt his grip tighten at the response. Jealousy wasn't a look she'd seen on Michael often, but Jack seemed to bring it out of him. She slipped two digits into her pussy, throwing her head back in pleasure as the pain started to subside. She needed to cum. She could feel herself right on the edge. She spread her knees wider, lifting her ass.

"Harder," she whispered. "Fuck me the way Jack did."

She regretted saying it, instantly. Michael's hand struck her ass at the exact time she rocked into him. The burn was immediate, but so was the orgasm that crept nearer.

His hand came down again, harder. Wendy yelped, her whole body clenching around him as the pain shot straight to her clit, where her fingers still worked in frantic circles. Michael grabbed her hip, drove forward, and buried himself as deep as he could. Then he held her there.

"The way Jack did?" Amusement crept into his voice. He pulled back and slammed into her hard enough to shove her knees forward across the sheets. Wendy's eyes rolled back. "Whose dick is bigger?"

"Ohhh fuck. Yours... Your dick is bigger." She didn't have to think about it.

"Damn right it is." Another thrust emptied her lungs. "Maybe you just need to be reminded what I can do with it." He grabbed her hair and pulled her head back as his hips drove into her faster. "You're mine, Wendy. Every. Fucking. Inch. Of. You."

The orgasm tore through her mid-thrust. Her mouth dropped open and a broken cry ripped out of her as every muscle in her body clenched at once. Her fingers ground against her clit, slick and frantic, while Michael stayed deep in her ass. The pressure hit again and again, hard pulses that made her thighs jerk and her stomach lock. Her pussy clenched around her own fingers, soaking her hand as wetness spilled down her wrist. She collapsed onto her chest, gasping into the mattress, but her hips kept bucking back against him through every aftershock.

"Fuuuuckkkk." She screamed into the sheets, her hips shaking violently as it rolled through harder than any orgasm she'd ever experienced. Her hand fell free of her folds, her pussy still contracting in hollow spasms. Michael didn't stop. He kept fucking her through it, each thrust extending the orgasm until she was clawing at the sheets and gasping for air.

Wendy moaned as her oversensitive body protested and responded at once. The soreness from the first orgasm hadn't faded, but it was already turning back into pleasure. Michael released her hair, and her upper body collapsed onto the bed. He didn't slow down. Each thrust drove her face deeper into the mattress, her body throbbing around the cock still inside her.

"Can Jack make you cum like that?" Michael pulled back and pushed forward slowly, making her feel every inch.

"No." She pressed her forehead against the bed.

"Nobody can." He laughed and thrust again, his cock pulsing inside her. His hand traveled down her spine and gripped her ass. "Not Jack. Not your pathetic husband. Just me."

She didn't argue. Her hips had already found his rhythm, and the soreness continued to recede beneath the pleasure. A puddle had formed on the bed between her thighs. The smell of sex and strawberries filled the room.

"You can't get enough of it, can you?" Michael planted one foot on the mattress and drove into her from a steeper angle. "You're addicted to my cock." His stomach bore down on top of her butt. "Face down. Ass up." He buried himself again, forcing a grunt from her throat. "When I'm done with you, no one else will be able to give you what you need."

She bit into the pillow and slid her hand between her legs. Her clit was still swollen and slick, and the first touch made her hips jerk forward.

"Ahhh... fuck." Her mouth fell open against the pillow.

Michael's sweaty palm clamped over the back of her neck, pinning her there as he fucked her harder. Wendy desperately worked her clit, her tongue hanging from her mouth as she chased another release.

"Fuck yourself with your fingers. Feel how deep I am."

It sounded like a great idea. Her fingers slid down through her folds and pushed two deep inside her pussy. She worked at fitting a third while Michael kept driving into her ass. Each thrust forced her pussy tighter around her fingers, pressing them against the thin wall where she could feel the hard ridge of his cock moving on the other side.

"Ohhhhhhh god." Her vision whited out as the double fullness hit and her hips ground into her own hand. Each thrust pushed him against her knuckles, the pressure shifting as he moved.

"Look at you." Michael ground forward in short, punishing strokes. "You fucking love it."

She wanted to snap back. Her hips rocked into him and she moaned into the sheets instead, her fingers curling deeper as his cock pushed against them from the other side. He wasn't wrong. Her pussy clenched around her fingers every time he bottomed out, dripping down her knuckles, and the pain that had scared her minutes ago had burned off completely. There was only fullness and the obscene wet sounds between her legs while he fucked her ass.

"No one's ever been here." His hand tightened around her, pulling her back until his stomach lay flat against her. "This is mine."

She wondered if there was anything left she wouldn't let him claim. Michael groaned as she pushed back and took him deeper. Her clit throbbed against her palm, and her body tightened around everything inside her.

"Tightest thing I've ever fucked." He pulled back and slammed forward hard enough to shove her into the headboard. His hand slid between her legs from behind, thick fingers closing over hers and pushing them deeper inside her. She gasped and her thighs locked. "You're dripping. All over my cock. Down your thighs."

Her hips ground into their stacked hands, her words coming out garbled and broken. "Make me cum again."

Six months ago, she wouldn't have recognized the woman begging beneath him. Michael had given her the Fireball account, put her in rooms where people once talked over her, and taught her how to make them listen. Every new door seemed to open into another hotel room, another boundary she hadn't known she wanted to cross until he placed it in front of her. Now his cock was buried in her ass while she stuffed three fingers into her pussy and begged him for more.

His palm cracked across her ass, and Wendy screamed into the pillow. Her body clamped around him hard enough to pull a growl from his throat. His cock twitched inside her, thickening with each frantic thrust. He was close. She wanted it. God, how she wanted to feel him cum.

She was right there with him. Her fingers slipped free and found her clit. Her toes curled into the sheets and her mouth hung open and every muscle in her stomach locked.

"Tell me you love my cock."

"I love it." Wendy's voice broke against the mattress. Her fingers ground harder against her clit as Michael drove into her, every thrust forcing her closer. "Ohhh fuck, I love your cock."

"Tell me you love what I do to you." His commands came between labored breaths.

Her thoughts blurred. She tightened around him, desperate to feel him lose control. "I love it," she gasped. "I love how you make me feel."

"Tell me how badly you need me."

Her vision clouded. Her back arched, and her ass clenched around him as the pressure wound tighter. Her pussy tightened, wetness slicking her palm. She was right there, her hips bucking harder with every thrust.

"I need you." Her body seized around him. Wetness flooded her palm as her pussy seized around nothing and the orgasm detonated through her. "Ohhh fuck, I love it. Uggghhh, God, I love it. I love you." Her body kept clenching, kept shaking, and she couldn't stop the words any more than she could stop the orgasm.

"Uuuugghh, fuck." Michael drove forward and buried himself to the hilt. His thighs locked against the backs of hers and she felt him pulsing inside her, thick, hot ropes exploding into her ass. Wendy's eyes went wide, her entire body shaking with tremors more powerful than some orgasms.

Even as his cock began to soften, it stayed inside her. His chest dropped against her back and drove her flat onto the mattress while her body continued to spasm around him. Each contraction pulled a grunt from his throat as she milked the last of his release, his weight pinning her beneath him.

He pulled out carefully, and Wendy gasped at the sudden emptiness, her body contracting once around nothing. The mattress shifted as Michael rolled away. She dragged in a breath, then another.

She stayed on her stomach with her face turned into the pillow. Her body felt rearranged. The ache had already started to settle in, a deep soreness that would follow her through the airport and make every minute in the plane seat miserable.

I love you.

The words were still in her mouth. She couldn't believe she had said them. Michael had worked her into it, one filthy admission after another, until she was too close to know what was coming out. That was all. She loved what he did to her. The sex. The power. She didn't love him.

Cum and strawberry lube leaked from her ass and ran between her thighs. Wendy buried her face deeper into the pillow as her cheeks burned. Her body had taken over. The orgasm had ripped the words out before her mind had a chance to stop them.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand as Michael climbed off the bed and walked into the bathroom. Wendy rolled onto her side, wincing as she reached for it.

What time does your flight land?

Jon. Her stomach tightened. He was probably home working early, trying to catch up on everything she had dumped on him before the trip. Or worse, still sick and forcing himself through it because she wasn't there to help. She pictured him at the kitchen table with his coffee and glasses, one leg bouncing beneath the chair while he tried not to check his phone again.

Around three. We're coming straight back to the office. I can't wait to see you :)

She pressed send and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The shower was running behind the bathroom door, so she pulled out her clothes for the flight, a fitted black top and tailored jeans, and laid them across the bed. She would wait until Michael finished. It made sense. Her ass was sore, and she needed a few minutes before she could stand beneath the water without wincing.

Warm cum slipped between her cheeks.

Wendy closed her eyes and pressed her thighs together. The throb between her legs refused to go away. She released a breath, crossed the room, and slipped inside.

Jon had been at his desk since six. He knew the office would be empty, giving him a few hours to work in silence. He had brought coffee from home in a thermos and surrounded himself with everything he could pull from the company system. Wendy's shared calendar filled the monitor on his left. Michael's expense reports covered the center screen. His own notes sat open on the right.

He wasn't completely sure what he was looking for. All he knew was that he needed something on Michael, and he trusted that he would recognize it when he found it. Marcus and Ava had tried to bring Michael down through HR, and the attempt had destroyed them both. Jon wasn't going to make the same mistake.

He'd spent a lot of time thinking about what he wanted. About the punishment Michael deserved, and what Wendy's part in it should cost her. The answer was more complicated than he cared to admit. He wanted Michael gone from Buckeye Branding and pushed far enough away that he could never do this again. What he had done to Lisa. What he was doing to Wendy. Jon wanted some assurance that there would never be another woman after them, though he had no idea how to guarantee it. That was why he needed something concrete. Something so damaging that Michael would have no choice except to accept whatever terms Jon gave him.

But Michael was careful. His expense reports were clean, every charge coded correctly, every receipt attached, every client dinner logged with attendees and account numbers. His calendar was meticulous. His project files were organized in a way that made Jon's look sloppy by comparison, and Jon was the most organized person he knew.

Then there was Wendy. Just thinking about her now, about the way he saw her with Michael, made his gut twist so much he nearly doubled over in pain. There was no fixing them; that part was obvious. Still, he wasn't Ava. He didn't want Wendy destroyed. If she became collateral damage in whatever took Michael down, Jon could live with that. He simply refused to cause her undue pain.

Four hours later, he was no closer to an answer than when he had started. Jon had searched every report, filing, and budget allocation Michael had touched during the past year. All he had

managed to prove was that Michael was damn good at his job. Every expense was itemized. Every decision had an explanation. There was nothing there.

That was its own kind of suspicious, of course. A feeling wasn't proof. He needed a crack in the system, a line item that didn't add up, a pattern Michael had missed or grown careless about. Jon removed his glasses and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. This was what he did. It was what made him good at his job. Michael's arrogance and refusal to see his own shortcomings were just as fundamental to who he was. Something had to be there. Jon only needed to find it.

He and Wendy used to do this together. Back when Jon first became an account manager, before he knew how to build a deck that didn't put the room to sleep, she would sit cross-legged on the couch with her laptop while he talked through numbers at the kitchen table. She'd let him go for a while, then cut in. *No one cares about the retention rate, Jon. Tell them what it means for their business.* She always found the story in the numbers before he did. Jon could build the spreadsheet. Wendy could make someone care about what it said. He used to think that was what made them such a good team.

They would order Thai food and work past midnight. Wendy would steal his glasses and put them on, squinting at the screen as though they actually helped. Jon could spend two hours building a competitor analysis she would crack open in ten minutes. She found the angle he missed because she wasn't buried in the data the way he was. She could step back and see the whole picture.

He missed that. He missed her. Tears gathered in his eyes, and he shook his head. Their life had been so ordinary before all of this. Easy. He wanted to go back to that version of them on the couch, eating cold pad thai in sweatpants and laughing because Jon had once again missed the obvious.

Maybe that had been the problem all along. Wendy wanted more, and she deserved the chance to reach for it. He hadn't been fair to her. When she first mentioned the director position, he dismissed it. He knew she was capable. He simply didn't want to lose the life they had built or face what her success might change between them. So he shut her down. Dr. Carson had called it jealousy, but the truth felt uglier and more ordinary. Jon had been afraid to change. Michael had forced his way between them, but Jon had left room for him. He withdrew when Wendy needed him to stand beside her. When she earned the director position, he should have been proud. Instead he quietly resented it. He made it about himself when it should have been about her.

His phone sat facedown on the desk. Jon turned it over. Wendy had texted back an hour ago.

Around three. We're coming straight back to the office. I can't wait to see you :)

He stared at the smiley face. How long had she been lying to him? If they were coming back at three, he had only a few more hours to find something. Jon placed the phone facedown again.

He tried to return to the expense reports, but all he could think about was Wendy and Michael together in New Orleans. Closing his eyes made it worse. He saw her straddling Michael, her breasts moving above him while she drove down onto his cock. Jon's fists tightened beneath the desk. He could almost hear the sounds she made, the breathless cries he had once believed belonged only to him.

His eyes snapped open. He forced his fingers apart and reached for the thermos at the edge of his desk, but his hand shook badly enough that he nearly knocked it over. The clock above the door read 9:47. He didn't have time for this. The office had filled around him while he searched, and three different account managers had already emailed asking him to review their numbers. His own work was piling up. He was drowning.

Jon shoved the thermos aside and stared at Michael's expense reports until the rows of numbers blurred. Frustration climbed into his throat, and he was one breath away from shouting when Jenny appeared in the doorway.

"You look like shit," she said with a smile as she stepped into his office. She wore a checkered flannel that fit snugly around her chest, the top two buttons undone showing a hint of her collarbone. She slid a water across his desk.

"Thanks." Jon ran his fingers through his hair. "I can't say the same about you."

Jenny lifted an eyebrow as she settled into the chair across from him.

"So," she said, letting his attempt at flirting die on its own. "Tell me you found something."

"Nothing." He picked up the water, deciding that any more coffee would be a mistake. "I've looked through every credit card statement and budget report I can access. He's either much more careful than I gave him credit for, or I'm not as good at this as everyone thinks."

"Don't do that." Jenny reached across the desk and rested her fingers against the back of his hand. The tenderness made Jon flinch before he could stop himself. "You're the smartest person I know. You'll find something."

His shoulders loosened, and he managed a stiff smile. He knew she was telling him what he needed to hear. God, he needed to hear it anyway.

"Have you looked at the Skyline account?" she asked, leaning forward to study his screen.

"Skyline?" Jon frowned. "Why? Trevor handled that account by himself for years."

"When Wendy was building the case against Trevor, she had me pull the CRM data and compare the raw numbers with what he submitted in his quarterly reports." Jenny set her coffee on the edge of the desk and reached for her laptop bag. "He reported ten percent growth, but the actual performance stayed between five and seven. He smoothed out the numbers so the account looked stronger and more consistent than it was."

"Trevor was cooking the reports to keep his job. That only proves Michael wasn't paying attention."

"Maybe." She pulled out her laptop. "But you just said every report tied to Michael is perfect. Isn't it strange that the one account with manipulated numbers is also the one he supposedly ignored?"

Jon sat back.

She was right. The anomaly wasn't Michael's attention to every other account. It was his complete disregard for this one. Michael micromanaged everything. Fireball was proof of that. Nobody questioned why he spent so many late nights personally working with Wendy because

that level of involvement fit the way he operated. Yet Trevor had falsified Skyline's performance for years without Michael noticing.

Her cheeks turned pink as she opened her laptop and started typing.

"Show me everything you found about Trevor and the Skyline account."

Wendy walked into the Buckeye Building a little after three, her carry-on rolling behind her. Michael hadn't said more than a few words since they boarded the plane. He was probably exhausted after the morning, then the shower. She smiled to herself as he strode ahead with his phone pressed to his ear, debriefing Brian on the trip. Usually she couldn't keep his hands off her. Wearing him out felt like its own small victory.

The soreness had dulled to a low ache she could ignore as long as she didn't sit too quickly. Everything else still hummed beneath her skin, leaving her too restless to stand still for long. She blamed the deal. Fifty million dollars. She still couldn't believe she had pulled it off.

She dropped her bag in her office and checked her phone. Nothing new from Jon since the thumbs-up he had sent when she landed. Between the trip and how sick he had been before she left, she had barely seen him. She wanted to see his face, hear about everything she had missed, and sit across from him over dinner like they used to. In the break room, she pulled a dark roast pod from the cabinet and started the Keurig. One sugar. Jon could barely function without his afternoon pick-me-up.

Diane from accounting stood at the sink refilling her water bottle. "Back already?" Her eyes traveled over Wendy. "Girl, you are glowing."

Wendy laughed. "A yacht ride and a successful contract negotiation will do that, I guess."

She carried the coffee down the hall. Things with Jon had been bad for a while. Her promotion had been difficult for him, and she had hoped the time apart might help him adjust to their new normal. Maybe they could finally go back to the casino soon, order drinks, and spend an evening people-watching the way they used to. Maybe all they needed was a chance to remember how easy they could be together.

His door was open. Jon sat behind his desk with Jenny across from him, both of them bent toward the monitor. His glasses rested low on his nose, and the familiar crease had formed between his eyebrows.

Wendy leaned against the doorframe. "Hey."

Jon looked up. "Hey. You're back." He smiled, then glanced at the clock as though he hadn't realized how late it was.

"I brought you coffee." She crossed the office as he quickly minimized the window and stood.

"Oh... Um, thanks." He reached out, taking the cup. "I actually brought a whole thermos this morning."

Wendy wrinkled her nose. "The thermos? I didn't realize you still had that thing."

Jon leaned toward Jenny and murmured something Wendy couldn't hear.

“So, we got approval for the rollout,” she continued. “Fifty million dollars allocated for the campaign.”

“That’s great. Really.” Jon nodded, but his pen had already started tapping against the desk. His attention drifted back toward the monitor.

Wendy stood there with the strap of her bag still over one shoulder. Jon whispered something else to Jenny, and Wendy’s eyes narrowed. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, resisting the urge to remind Jenny that she had her own desk.

“Give me twenty minutes?” Jon finally looked up. His eyes were glassy with exhaustion. “We’re right in the middle of something.”

“Of course.” Wendy placed her hand on the desk between them.

Jon’s eyes dropped to it. For a fraction of a second, she waited for him to reach for it. Then he turned back to the screen.

She stood in the doorway a second longer as Jon and Jenny returned to whatever they were working on. The buzzing beneath her skin seemed to intensify when she pulled the door shut and headed toward Michael’s office. They still needed to discuss the distributor strategy. They had planned to go over it that morning, before they got distracted.

Michael’s door was open when she arrived. He had rolled his shirtsleeves to his elbows while he worked, exposing his forearms. Wendy’s nipples tightened beneath her top.

“Got a second?” She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. A half-eaten protein bar sat beside his keyboard. Michael didn’t look up.

She lowered herself into the chair across from him, shifting when the seat pressed against the soreness she had carried all day. “We should talk about the tier-three rollout. I want to start distributor calls this week.”

“That’s an excellent idea. We’re already behind the curve.” He scrolled through an email without lifting his eyes.

“I’m thinking we start with the eight Southeast markets. Two a day. If we front-load them, we can have commitments before the end of the month and—”

“I trust your judgment, Wendy.” His attention remained on the screen. “Get it done. I shouldn’t have to hold your hand through this.”

Her jaw tightened. “I’m not asking you to hold my hand. I’m giving you the timeline so we’re aligned before I send the deck to Jack.”

Michael’s eyes lifted at Jack’s name, but only for a second. “Send it when it’s ready.”

“Maybe I’ll call him personally.” A smirk tugged at Wendy’s mouth. “Thank him for showing us around town and being such a good host.”

The vein in Michael’s neck pulsed, and his jaw tightened. His gaze held hers before he reached for the protein bar beside his keyboard. “That’s a good idea. Tell him I said hello.”

Her mouth parted as he turned back to the screen. She had expected a cutting remark. Maybe for him to drag her across the desk and remind her who she belonged to. The dull pulse between her legs sharpened at the thought.

Wendy stood and walked slowly around his desk. She stopped behind his chair and placed both hands on his shoulders.

“I like dealing with you much more than Jack,” she whispered. Her thumbs pressed into the tense muscles along his neck as she leaned close to his ear, her breasts settling against his back.

Michael groaned under his breath, and the ache between her legs deepened. She wanted to spin his chair around, lower herself into his lap, and make him tell her she was a good girl. Her fingers slid down his chest, finding the strip of warm skin between the buttons of his shirt, then continued toward his belt.

He let her reach it.

Then his hand closed around her wrist. “I have another call.”

Wendy stumbled half a step backward when he pushed her hand away. She couldn’t tell whether he was trying to punish her, sulking over the comment about Jack, or something else completely. He'd been like a moody teenager lately. The restless energy she had carried into the building drained out of her.

She straightened and adjusted the neckline of her top. “Let me know when you’re free.” Her voice came out cool, preserving what little dignity she had left.

“Will do.”

Wendy walked around the chair, opened the door, and stepped into the hallway. Two analysts she didn’t recognize passed without looking at her.

Back in her office, she dropped into her chair and pulled out her phone.

Thanks for being such an attentive host. Made it back in one piece. Let me know the next time you’re in Columbus :)

She pressed send, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

Jon had been staring at the same spreadsheet for forty minutes before he realized the cleaning crew had already come and gone. He barely even noticed them. The vacuum had registered as background noise, no different from the HVAC cycling through the ducts above him. Now the floor was dark except for the glow of his monitors and the fluorescent strip in the hallway that never shut off.

Wendy had first texted an hour ago to ask when he would be home and whether they should order dinner. A second message followed a few minutes later saying she missed him and wanted them to reconnect. Jon gave her a half-hearted excuse about finishing the last of his work so they could focus on each other once he got home. He hated lying to her, but after everything she had hidden from him, one more lie hardly tipped the scale. Fifteen minutes ago, she had messaged again asking him to stop at the drugstore. The flight had upset her stomach,

and she had been getting sick in the bathroom. He promised he would go as soon as he finished.

His thermos sat empty at the corner of the desk. He had told himself he would leave at six. Then seven, when Wendy's first message came through. Each time, the numbers pulled him back in until he stopped checking the clock altogether.

Somewhere down the hall, a phone rang. Four times, before voicemail picked it up. Nobody was here to answer it. The building settled around him, pipes ticking behind the walls, and for a few seconds he just listened.

He started where Jenny had pointed him, comparing Trevor's quarterly reports against the raw CRM data. Once he knew what to look for, it was obvious. Trevor flattened the peaks, filled in the valleys, and submitted a version of Skyline that appeared more consistent than it was. Jon could have spotted it in an afternoon. A first-year analyst with half a brain could have found it in a week. It was lazy work designed to protect a lazy man, but Jon knew there was more buried beneath it. He simply hadn't cracked it yet.

Trevor's fraud was small. Fireable, certainly, but small in the larger scheme of things. The interesting part was the question Jenny had dropped on his desk that afternoon.

Why didn't Michael catch it?

Jon had spent the rest of the day proving what he already suspected. Michael's work on every other account at Buckeye Branding was meticulous. Fireball's projections tied to the decimal. The Hendricks Group's quarterly submissions matched the CRM within rounding errors. Even the smaller accounts, the ones Michael reviewed as a formality, carried his corrections in red throughout their filing histories. The man had caught a two-percent variance on a mid-tier brewery account and dragged the issue through an email chain four replies deep. He didn't miss things. That was the reason everyone at the company tolerated him. Yet on Skyline, Jon could count the number of line-item corrections Michael had made on one hand.

He opened a new spreadsheet. Hours of reviewing the existing reports had gotten him nowhere, so he started transferring the line items one by one, hoping the repetition might reveal something he had missed. He began with Michael's upstream expense submissions to Skyline and cross-referenced each entry against the CRM data in Trevor's reports. Entering the first-quarter records took nearly an hour. By the time he reached the final rows, his eyes lit up. He sat up straighter in his chair as he started to see a pattern form.

Jon wrote down the discrepancy and opened the files from the next quarter. He'd read somewhere that almost eighty percent of data entries carried small inconsistencies when data moved between systems, especially after months of manual entry. A few mistyped figures could create the appearance of a pattern where none existed. He needed to see it repeat. One quarter of bad numbers wasn't proof of anything.

It was nearing nine before Jon finished entering the full year of data. He resized the window and scrolled back to the first quarter, where the highlighted rows appeared in sequence. Then he ran the comparison again. A second time. A third. His fingers twitched against the desk. He hadn't made a mistake. The hallway light buzzed behind him, and the HVAC shut off, leaving the floor so quiet he could hear the blood moving in his ears.

"You're still here?"

Jon nearly came out of his chair. Jenny stood in the doorway holding a brown paper bag dotted with grease stains.

“Jenny?”

“I had a feeling you would be.” She stepped into the dim office and lifted the bag slightly. “I bought an extra burger in case you were hungry.”

She set it on his desk and lowered herself into the chair across from him.

“Any luck?”

“I...” Jon turned the monitor toward her. “I think I found something.”

Jenny tilted her head and leaned closer. Her eyes moved between the highlighted cells, then back to the column labels as she tried to understand what she was looking at.

Jon removed his glasses and pressed his thumb against the bridge of his nose. Jenny’s breathing changed as she followed the figures from one column to the next. He put his glasses back on. Jenny had gone white.