

The Alpha King Call Boy

Chapter 216 Nothing Good

Chapter 216 Nothing Good

Fiona

“I just realized something—his doctor never called me back. When I was there at the nursing home, I left a message for him. The nurse said he’d call me.”

Alexander frowned down at me. “Why don’t you call him right now?”

I had just finished telling my husband about my idea for moving Grandfather here to the palace, creating a hospital suite in one of the many empty rooms and hiring medical staff. Alex’s slightly narrowed eyes had seemed a bit skeptical at first, but of course he told me that if I decided I wanted to do such a thing, he would of course support me and do all he could to help.

He offered to take the baby, so we unspooled her from the wrap around my chest and I handed her off. Then we started walking back to the West Wing together, Alex holding Lexi and me calling the nursing home on speakerphone.

A nurse or receptionist of some sort answered the line. When I introduced myself and requested to speak with my grandfather’s doctor, she got a nervous hitch to her voice and promised to go and

find him right away.

I was on hold for about twenty seconds, listening to a crackly recording of an old, saxophone-heavy song from the eighties. Finally the line clicked, saving us from the obnoxious hold music.

“Hello, Fiona?” came a gruff, hurried voice that I recognized from long-past conversations.

“Yes, hello Doctor. I believe you may already know why I am calling?”

“Yes, yes. I am very sorry not to have called you sooner, Fiona. Really, so terribly sorry. It has been quite busy here this week, I’m afraid—”

“Please, don’t worry about it.” I remembered the sweat on the tired brow of the nurse with whom I’d recently spoken. I knew that the staff at the nursing home worked hard. “I only hope you can give me an update now, if you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Of course,” he answered eagerly. “Of course.” And then he filled me in on the recent deterioration of my grandfather’s condition. It sounded pretty bad. Grandfather was having trouble eating and drinking, and had lost a lot of weight over the past couple weeks.

Then I asked the doctor about my idea for moving Grandfather to the palace. He hemmed and hawed a bit, then told me that it sounded reasonable, and that he understood why it would be

beneficial for us to have more time together. But his tone was overall subtly discouraging, and he agreed with me when I suggested that the move could potentially be disorienting and upsetting for the confused old man.

“I must warn you,” the doctor said as we were wrapping up our conversation. “The next time you see your grandfather, you may be in for a bit of a shock. You ought to brace yourself for the dramatic change in his appearance. While we are able to provide him with fluids and some nutrients intravenously, we are struggling to get him to intake enough calories. He has become rather frail. I’m afraid such a problem is quite common with patients nearing the end.”

The end.

“Is he well enough to have a visitor?”

“Yes, yes,” the doctor answered slowly. “You are welcome here any day, Fiona. Perhaps it would be best for you to call ahead, though, so my staff can confirm that it is... a good time... before you make the drive.”

I nodded. As if the doctor could see me.

And then I blurted out a question that I really wanted to ask, before fear of knowing the answer could stop me. “You said he is near to the end. How near, do you think? How much longer does he have?”

“Hm,” the doctor grumbled, procrastinating. “Well. I am sure you know that I cannot give you a precise answer. That is one of the things about this disease that can be so painful for families... living with the uncertainty.”

“Yes, but what is his prognosis?” I asked bossily.

“Best and worst case scenarios.”

The doctor coughed, then finally answered, “Best case, one year. Worst case... well, I think you already know. He has already been sick for a long time, Fiona.”

After dinner, Alex and I left the baby with Nina and headed to a room near his study, where we were meeting with a consultant.

Brandon attended the meeting as well. He offered me a kindly smile and a handshake when we entered. I saw Alex narrow his eyes at his chief of staff, probably thinking he wished the man wasn't making an attempt to touch me.

I made a snap decision to accept the handshake. Brandon wasn't a very strong broadcaster. (Or perhaps he was simply an unemotional individual—or both.) As I expected, it was actually pleasant to shake his warm hand. I picked up hardly any feelings from him at all when we touched.

I liked Brandon, mostly because he was a true professional, and very good at his job. He made my

and Alex's lives much easier than they would be without him. And he was easy to talk to – he didn't mince words and wasn't afraid to speak his mind.

The other man in the room was a short, red-haired stranger with round, red-framed glasses. He did not dare such an informal greeting. He bowed deeply when Brandon introduced me and Alex to him. From this small, shaky man I received an immediate sense of timid, anxious energy.

Brandon showed Alexander the NDA that he'd just had the man sign. It swore the weapons expert to hold confidential all that was discussed in this meeting.

Perhaps that was why he was so nervous.

The meeting began with a presentation that the expert had prepared at Alexander's request. He showed us dozens of images of all kinds of new and innovative weapons, explaining their capabilities and how they were to be handled. The presentation ended with a review of several explosive devices, which the man already knew was the primary category that Alex wished to discuss.

After the presentation, Alexander asked the big question.

“Those last devices that you showed us – the small grenades you say are strong enough to blast

through stone – what would happen if you detonated one of those in a sandstone canyon? The kind with the red rocks?”

The small man’s light brown eyes went narrow behind his thick glasses, then darted all around the room. He looked from Alex to Brandon to me, then back to Alex again.

“I don’t know, he said slowly. “No one in the history of our world has ever detonated explosives on lithified sandstone. Those canyons are ancient landforms...”

“But what if they did?” Alex asked, trying to sound casually hypothetical.

“There is just no telling,” the man answered quietly.

“No telling what could happen if explosives were used in such a place. Nothing good, though. That much I know. The repercussions could be... well... catastrophic. Wh-why... why would anyone ever dare to find out?”

His big, unblinking eyes made another frantic trip around the room.

He found no answers in any of our gazes. Only three unrelentingly stoic and serious stares that made him even more nervous than he was before.

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Chapter 217 Beyond The Grave

Alexander

“Tell me, what exactly happens to vampires in the daytime?” Fiona asked, narrowing her pale blue eyes up at me thoughtfully. “What happens if they are exposed to sunlight? If, say...”

She pursed her lips, hesitating.

She was avoiding uttering the words: “if their tombs were bombed and they were exposed.”

Because neither of us was eager to actively consider doing such a thing anymore, after that meeting.

My wife and I had said goodbye to our employee and consultant and were now walking, hand in hand, back to the West Wing.

“They burn,” I answered. “It happens pretty quick. They burn to ash.”

“Hm. And what about... what are they like, down there in their hiding places? I know they have to go somewhere that is fully dark to avoid the light. But are they asleep, in some way? Are they... dead?”

“You could say that.” I let go of Fiona’s hand, not wanting her to feel what I was starting to feel. Her questions had triggered a vision that was now swarming before my eyes. A vision from the

last war. A scene in which I was slaughtering comatose vampires in their hiding place, as she called it.

I scrubbed a hand up and down my face, trying to anchor myself in the present moment.

Trying not to think about the blood. The black, sticky, ice cold blood that erupted everywhere

when you staked them, coating everything—

“What they really need is complete rest while the sun is up,” I said quickly. I was trying to focus on articulating an answer Fiona’s question, using that focus to shove aside the vivid memories.

“And the younger, weaker ones will be, for all intents and purposes, dead during those hours. But stronger vampires, older ones...” Like my highly motivated nemesis, Caius, who was rumored to be one of the oldest vampires to walk the earth today... “They can wake up. They can be mildly active. They can rouse and fight back if they become aware they are in danger.”

“Are they in a weakened state, at least?”

“Yes. Vampires are not at full strength when the sun is out, even if they have found good shelter from its light. It makes them much easier to overtake than at night, when they really come alive.”

Fiona was quiet a moment, processing.

“Hm. So, you will have to sneak up on them, then? I suppose flying over the canyon in a

helicopter and lowering down from it is out of the question.”

“Correct. We must approach with stealth.”

She nodded. My hand had drifted back down to my side; she grabbed it and interlaced our fingers.

“We will find another way, Alex. Another way to get you guys down there and into the caves, without leaving destruction behind.”

I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed it.

I heard the baby crying from down the hall, just a few seconds before Fiona did, too. We couldn't help but hurry our walking pace.

“I'm sorry,” a frazzled Nina said, greeting us with the wailing, red-faced child in her arms.

Fiona moved right away to take Lexi from her while I locked the door behind us.

“Ugh,” Nina woofed, adjusting a wrinkled sweater.

The baby had been clutching at it. “I tried everything I could think of to get her to stop crying, but I think she just wants her mom...” She trailed off as her point was proven true before our eyes. Alexis was quieting down already, now clutching at Fiona's chest hungrily and looking relieved to be in her mother's arms.

“Nothing to be sorry for, Nina,” Fiona said, shaking her head at her friend. “I appreciate you watching her. And I'm sorry that she's been giving you a hard time.”

Nina smiled tiredly. “K, how about we both stop apologizing now,” she said. “Bad habit.”

Fi nodded in agreement.

I stroked the baby’s soft cheek, sliding my other arm around Fiona’s shoulders. Lexi darted her pretty eyes up to me. I made a silly face at her and she smiled.

“I’m gonna go feed her,” Fiona said, tilting her face up to mine so I could give her a little kiss.

Then she headed off into the nursery.

I asked Nina if there was anything I could do for her.

Make her a cup of coffee? Order her some dinner? It was dawning on me that our friend really provided me and Fi with a lot of babysitting services, and I never compensated her for it at all.

“I’m good,” she said, waving a dismissive hand.

“Think I’m just gonna lie down right now. That baby, phew. She can really tire you out.”

Nina left. I made a stop at the bathroom and then went to meet Fiona in the nursery. She was just finishing up feeding Lexi, and moving on to wiping the baby’s face clean and burping her.

“How are you doing, baby?”

Fi gave me a small smile. “I’m fine. I think she’s sleepy now... want to help me put her down?”

We worked together and soon Lexi was in her crib and fading fast, her belly full and her little

eyelids heavy. We stood next to her crib and watched her drift off before creeping back to our bedroom and closing the nursery door behind us. “Alex, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Fiona said quietly. She headed to the bed and sat down on the edge.

I followed and took a seat close beside her, wrapping one arm around her hips. “Sure. What is it?”

She tilted her head to the side and squinted. “Iris.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I need to go talk to her again.”

“Yeah. I hate to be a nag about it, I just—”

“You’re not a nag. I need to follow up with her. I can go talk to her in the morning.”

Fiona reached up and stroked my short beard. Her light touch made my skin tingle. “Thanks,” she said softly. “Something else I wanted to say about her too, though. I just want you to know that...

I understand. I actually have been feeling very conflicted about Iris, myself.”

“What do you mean?” I did a quick turn of my head to plant a kiss on Fiona’s palm. She smiled.

“I mean I understand why you are reluctant to push her out too aggressively. You feel responsible for her. The thing is, I actually do, too. It was after all my father who shot her, who is directly responsible for the damage that’s been done to her. I do believe it’s in everyone’s best interest that

Iris move along. I do wish to reclaim our family's privacy in our home. But I also understand why you are not rushing her out. I understand the situation is not black-and-white. She's not a tenant we're evicting. It's more complicated than that."

I pulled Fiona in close and wrapped my arms around her. Pressed my mouth to the top of her head and inhaled, relishing her sweet lavender scent and the softness of her lovely silver hair.

"Thank you for understanding," I said quietly. She nodded against my chest.

My phone buzzed abruptly in my pocket, and immediately Fiona started to withdraw her arms from around my waist. I hated how often moments with her were interrupted like this. And how quickly and responsibly she always responded.

My phone recognized the number, which I'd saved in my contacts the last time I called it. It was the city morgue.

Fi read the words on the screen along with me. Then she nodded again, saying without words that she knew I needed to take this call somewhere else. Somewhere far away from the baby.

I answered the phone while pulling the bedroom door closed behind me. My feet started me walking in the direction of my study while I started the conversation with the coroner.

All of the victims whose bodies had been left at the courthouse, he reported, had now been autopsied and identified. He was sending me all the victim data now by email.

I texted Fi when I got off the phone and shared the update. And let her know I was heading to my study to work.

I was impatient to read the reports. Some of these departed souls had no doubt been the vampires' first victims at the start of the invasion, and I needed to know everything about them – how long they had been dead, where they came from, where they worked, the kinds of lives they lived...

I was hoping and praying they had information for me. That they could tell me something, anything about their murderers, from beyond the grave.

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Chapter 218 Trouble Is My Puppy

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Fiona

“I did something... kinda bad...” Nina said, clenching her teeth in a guilty-looking grimace. “Or maybe it’s no big deal?”

After Alex absented himself for a phone call and then returned to work for the evening, I texted Nina and let her know I'd actually be on my own for dinner tonight, if she wanted to circle back here and join me for a pizza. She took a few minutes to shower and refresh herself, then returned to our room. Lexi was still crashed out.

I shook my head at my friend, trying to guess at what kind of "something" she was about to confess. "Hmm. Knowing you? I'd put my money on the former."

She groaned.

"What'd you do, Nina?"

Just then, a knock on the door announced that our dinner was here. Nina jumped up to answer it, apparently glad for the opportunity to delay her confession for another minute. I cleared the table and fetched a couple plates while she brought in the food. The staff had also delivered a bottle of red wine with our dinner, per Nina's request. She removed the cork skillfully and poured two glasses in the kitchenette while I served up a heap of pepperoni slices for her and a couple white sauce, butternut squash and mushroom ones for myself.

"Cheers," we said in unison, clinking our glasses together after settling down at the table.

I let my best friend take one sip of wine and one big bite of pizza, and then pressed her to spill the gossip.

She shook her head like she was reprimanding herself the whole time she talked. Apparently she had been hooking up with Kayden in the pack's training room, and accidentally wound up in a rather steamy situation involving another man watching them, a voyeur for whom she'd put on a little show—literally behind Kayden's back.

My jaw had fallen open at some point during the story. "Oh, Nina," I said when she finished.

Then I laughed. I couldn't help it.

She covered her eyes. "I know."

I pulled her hands down. Nina blinked at me, pressing her lips against a smile.

"Ohh, you really enjoyed it, didn't you?" I could tell that by the glimmer in her eyes. "You have been bored lately. I know. You were itching for some excitement, huh?"

She frowned. Then smiled guiltily again. "I dunno. I guess it's a kink. Having that... attention..."

She looked away, shivering a little like maybe she was reliving it.

I shrugged. "It's not like you had sex with the guy. I don't think you should beat yourself up over this, Nina."

She nodded, taking a giant bite of her second slice of pizza.

The more I thought about what had happened, the less surprised I felt. It kind of sounded to me like Nina was about to sabotage things with Kayden. She was starting on the road to exploding their relationship. This event was just a little baby step in that direction. But knowing Nina, she might break into a sprint at any moment.

In any other situation, my friend simply would have ended this thing with Kayden a long time ago. Before it... well, before it turned her hair pink. But as long as Alex and I kept our friends in each other's lives, it seemed Nina and Kayden just could not resist staying involved. Even if one, or perhaps both of them were not really ready for a serious, long-term relationship.

But I kept my opinions to myself this time. Nina just needed to talk and be heard right now. I actually hoped she would not ask for my advice about where to go from here with Kayden. Because if she did, I would not know how to answer. "Oh, Nina," I muttered, after washing down a bite of pizza crust with another mouthful of delightfully smooth, rich and delicious wine. "Nina, Nina, Nina. You just can't keep away from trouble, can you?"

She cast me a big-eyed, defeated look. “Trouble is my puppy,” she grumbled. “That bitch just follows me around.”

I laughed, snorting. It was an apt metaphor.

Nina pulled a loose pepperoni off her pizza and threw the crispy little slice of meat at me. I caught it before it could hit my face, and ate it.

“Hey,” she said, giggling. “I have an idea.

Remember when we were in high school, and we’d play ‘Truths’?”

“Of course.”

Nina had spent many, many nights at my house when we were younger. In our high school years, we’d taken to playing one particular game during all our sleepovers. It was very straightforward.

Truth-or-dare, minus the dares. Basically, we just badgered each other with personal questions and didn’t let each other dodge any of them.

“Let’s play,” she said, pouring herself another glass of wine. I wasn’t finished with mine yet, but she topped it off. “Like old times.”

“Hmm. But is there anything I don’t already know about you, Nina? Do you have any secrets from me anymore?”

She sipped her wine, leaning back in her chair and arching an eyebrow mischievously. “I doubt it.

But maybe we play an updated, adult version this time. ‘Sexy Truths.’”

I blew air out of my mouth noisily. And then took a sip of liquid courage. "Alright," I said, licking my lips. "You go first. What do you wanna know?" It was quite late when Alexander was finally finished working. Nina and I had been having a good time. I was shocked that Lexi was still out, having slept through all our chatter and giggling.

I met my husband at the door, eager for a kiss. I missed him. I'd been talking about him a lot. He looked amused the instant he met my eyes. And chuckled into my mouth when he tasted the flavor of wine on my tongue.

"Are you drunk?" he asked, arching one of his thick, beautiful eyebrows. He slipped his hands around my waist and started to feel me up a little. I'd only had two glasses of wine. But I have never been much of a drinker at all; Nina's always called me a lightweight. And abstaining for months while I was recently pregnant surely only made that more true.

"Not sure I'd say drunk," I hedged. "Tipsy? Perhaps." I'd been sitting down for a while, and now that I was standing, realized that I needed to use the bathroom. I gave Alex one more little kiss and excused myself to do that.

When I came back out into the bedroom, I found Alex was talking quietly with Nina in the

kitchenette. He was putting a kettle on to boil while Nina thumbed through my tea box.

“What are we whispering about over there?” I asked. Alex had a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He strode quickly in my direction. Nina kept her head conspicuously bent over the teas, as if she were extremely focused on making a selection from the box, but I saw her lips curling in a conspiratorial smile.

When he reached me, Alex grabbed hold of my wrist and tugged on it somewhat roughly, pulling me toward the door.

“Where are we—”

He looked down at me with an unmistakably lusty grin and said, “Upstairs.” As soon as we were in the hall with the door closed behind us, Alex suddenly pressed me up against the wall, pinned my hands over my head and hovered his lips over my ear. I gasped in surprise.

“You remember the last time I got to play with ‘tipsy’ Fiona?” His hot breath on my neck sent shivers down my spine.

“Hmm. You mean the first time we met?” My cheeks flushed as I recalled the night in question.

“Mm-hmm. You were... so much fun.”

I don’t know why this made me laugh. Alex was trying to be sexy. But the memory of that night

was a bit cringey and embarrassing for me. Yes, the sex was... hot doesn't even begin to describe it properly. But I'd also been a hot mess. I guess Alex had a different way of remembering it, though.

Whatever the reason – embarrassment, awkwardness, wine – now I was cracking up, snorting through a fresh batch of giggles. Very un-sexy, I thought.

But my adoring husband seemed to like it, actually. He laughed a little, too, and then started peppering my neck with hungry, sloppy kisses.

Then he swept me up into his arms and carried me upstairs, where we proceeded to have... so much fun.

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Chapter 219 A Small Price To Pay

Chapter 219 A Small Price To Pay

Lexi cooed in approval as I made a selection from the fabric samples Isabel had laid out on the table in front of us. It was a super-soft forest green velvet. I handed the little rectangle of material to the baby, who squealed with delight and made a determined effort to keep her tiny fingers

tightly clasped around it.

“Well, that seemed to be an easy choice,” the decorator said, smiling at Alexis.

The fabric was for a big couch that would fill one of the side rooms in the suite that used to be Scarlet’s. Isabel and I had been mostly focused on tricking out this room this morning, since it was the largest one in the East Wing renovation project.

Scarlet had had the suite set up with two rather formal sitting rooms on either side of the main bedroom area. That concept seemed quite pointless to me. (Who needs so very many tables and chairs just for sitting?) I was now turning one of these little rooms into a kind of mini movie theater, with a plush, comfortable couch and a big screen TV. That seemed like something that guests, especially if they had traveled a long way to meet us here at the palace, might enjoy for relaxing.

The overall theme of this suite was a forest aesthetic. The gigantic, dramatic four-poster bed was

crafted of ornately carved and polished wood.

Linens on the bed and other furniture were in varying complimentary shades of greens and blues, with sleek black, soft gray and natural wood

accents everywhere. Artful black and white photographs of forest scenes hung in expensive wooden frames against walls freshly painted deep green. All the décor finishes had a warm, cozy vibe.

After looking over a few more fabric samples, Isabel, Lexi and I got up and resumed our tour of the construction in progress.

We peeked into the bathroom in the master suite first. It had been demolished and completely rebuilt already, with the majority of the space's square footage now devoted to oversized, luxury spa features. The big soaker tub had jacuzzi jets and was spacious enough for two (or more) people to relax in comfortably. The spa shower had gorgeous, smooth gray stone walls and more nozzles than I can count that released water both from overhead and from the sides.

The East Wing halls were full of commotion. Dozens of workers were installing hardwood floors in the new conference rooms. The smell of fresh paint filled the air.

Isabel, Lexi and I traveled upstairs next, to the other in-progress guest suite. This one used to be Alexander's stepbrother Lucas's old bedroom. Since this space was up in a tower, with a big balcony that overlooked a gorgeous view, I opted to

give its décor a theme centered on a feeling of being up in the clouds. The bed linens were white and fluffy. The furniture featured an elegant mix of sleek gold and rustic light wood. The huge, plush rug stretching over the amber hardwood floors featured a sophisticated abstract pattern of orange, purple and pink colors. I also picked out some impossibly soft and fluffy pillows and throw blankets in similar shades of rich, dramatic sunset hues.

Isabel and I paced the room and chatted about what sort of artwork to purchase for the walls. I decided that I wanted to use framed mirrors to make the suite look even more spacious and elegant. And asked her to add houseplants to both rooms, too, to brighten and liven them up.

Alexander happened to be converging upon our bedroom at the same time that Lexi and I were returning from our morning with Isabel. He was coming back from that visit to Iris that we had discussed.

Alex beamed when our eyes met. A good mood boded well, in terms of how that visit had gone. Or so I hoped, at least. Once we were inside, with him helping me to remove the baby from her sling, he gave me a summary of their interaction. “She apologized profusely,” he said, “for the way that she behaved the last time we spoke. And

said that she has made her peace with leaving, and even has begun to look forward to reuniting with her cousin.”

“Well, that sounds like a step in the right direction.”

He nodded, taking the baby from me and making some funny faces at her. He succeeded in getting her to release a tiny little giggle.

“I also told her that I want to give her a one-time payment,” he continued. “A large sum of money that should sustain her and her cousin for many years. I’ll write her a check when she is leaving. She seemed happy with this offer. I’m glad—I told her I’d support her, but I do want to be done communicating with her once we say goodbye.”

“Very good. Did you discuss a date? Or travel arrangements?”

Alex focused his gaze on the baby, who met his eyes and then narrowed hers critically.

“I did bring it up,” he said. The tenor of his voice made it sound like he was attempting to remain calm while perhaps truly feeling otherwise. “She got a little sensitive again though, when I did.

Said she wants to meet with the doctor once more, for one thing. To discuss what she should do in the future should her ‘symptoms’ return. I called the doctor up and arranged for her to come over to Iris’s room to talk to her tonight. I’ll need to follow up on the travel details with her... another

day.”

I nodded. And did not press the point.

“She needs to be changed,” I said, giving the baby a sniff.

“I know. I got it.” He laid Lexi down on the changing table and started on the task.

I excused myself and went to the bathroom. I was feeling a bit frustrated, though I also felt I ought not have been. I just needed a moment alone to right my mind.

The truth was that this update on Iris only had me cautiously, tenuously optimistic.

Because I knew this woman pretty well by now. Well enough to know that she was entirely unpredictable. And a shameless liar.

I went to the sink and threw some cold water on my face, trying to force a change in my mindstate. Then I did it a second time. And a third.

I patted myself dry with a plush white towel and sighed, meeting my own eyes in the mirror.

I wanted to be excited about the prospect of Iris leaving soon, but my instincts just had me hesitant to trust today’s compliant mood would last.

But I did mean it, all that I said about Iris the night before. I felt guilty when I thought about rushing her out against her will... because of whom was responsible for the damage to her brain that probably made her so unstable in the first place.

I pledged, when I learned about what my father had done to Iris and Alexandra, to do whatever I could to right his wrongs. To atone for his sins, if I could.

Letting Iris stay at the palace just a little longer seemed like a small price to pay, in consideration of all my scoundrel father took from this world before he left it. And so I was going to bite back my irritation and pride, and pay it.

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Chapter 220 Boss Bitch

Chapter 220 Boss Bitch

Fiona

Dear Conrad, I typed into the email draft window. And then I was stuck for a while, staring at a blinking cursor on the screen.

I'd finally managed to hit reply on that email from my old boss, but getting an actual message typed out was harder to do.

Alexander had received a call from Conrad while he and I were having lunch. Apparently there was a situation that required an emergency meeting with their company lawyers, and Conrad asked if Alex could join. He of course left for the city right away, with a promise to return to the

palace by sundown.

That got me thinking about Conrad again, and the email he'd sent me.

I just could not handle having it looming over me any longer. The lack of closure, the knowing that he may be waiting for my response and wondering about it... it was bugging me, living rentfree

in my mind. So I decided just to reply. I envisioned sending a brief, professional response that closed the loop but didn't get too deep into the personal subtext.

Thank you for your email, I started typing.

But then I got stuck again.

I groaned quietly.

Stop overthinking it, I told myself. Just write something.

I tried to go into work mode, channeling the boss bitch energy that fueled me in workplace settings to be confident and quick and decisive.

I appreciate your kind words about my contributions at Crescent Ventures. I learned a lot during my time there, and I'm pleased to hear that my hard work had a positive impact on the business.

As you know, Alexander and I are quite busy these days. I have no availability now for an inperson meeting, but I will consider reaching out in the future should I find myself, as you say,

ready for such an appointment.

Please give my best to the team. I hope they are all doing well.

Regards,

Fiona

The new email notification sound that came from my computer a few minutes later, while I was making myself a snack in the kitchenette, gave me an unexpected startle. My first thought, of course, was that it was a reply from Conrad.

Fortunately, it was not.

It was a message from one of our incoming visitors.

The woman's name was Olivia. She was the Luna of the pack leader, Grayson, with whom Alex was hoping to form a new alliance. The two of them lived in a tiny desert town about a hundred miles away from the canyon where Alexander believed the vampires were making their camp.

A hundred miles was not really close. But it was the closest populated area to the canyon, by far.

The only other inhabited area that was closer was Blackout Casino and Resort, which Alex believed to be occupied by and under the control of the vampires, too.

Olivia confirmed by email that Brandon had provided her and her husband with the train and plane tickets they needed, and that they'd be leaving early the next morning. Also coming along

on the journey was Grayson's Beta and that man's Luna. The four were scheduled to arrive here at the palace late next evening.

This gave me just one more full day to prepare the East Wing ahead of their arrival. But I was not worried. Those workers had been moving at a fast and efficient clip this morning, and I trusted Isabel would make sure her deadline was met.

"Fiona," Brandon answered cheerily. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

After replying to Olivia, I decided to call Brandon just to triple-check that he really had provided her and her troupe with everything they would need for their day of travel. I ran through my questions quickly and Brandon answered in kind, putting my mind at ease with his confident and thorough answers.

"Thank you," I told him once we'd finished up that bit of business. "I really appreciate how on top of things you always are."

"Coming from you, that's quite a compliment." He chuckled. "You know, I was actually planning to give you a call later today, Fiona. I have something else to discuss with you." "And what is that?"

"You asked me to screen some candidates for a personal assistant," he reminded me. "I've got a

short list ready for you. I've interviewed them all by phone already. Some promising folks. Would you like me to send over their resumes—or just set up interviews?”

“Oh.” I thought about this a moment, recalling how much time I wasted trying to find an assistant when I was working at Crescent. “How about we do a group interview? Have them all come in to meet with me at once. I feel like I could probably weed through the candidates faster that way.”

It would also create a bit more of a high-pressure environment, I imagined. Interviewing the candidates in front of each other, challenging them to out-perform each other. And I wanted to find someone who not only could handle pressure, but thrived under it.

“Sounds great. When would you like to schedule the interview?”

I looked at my watch.

Alexis was sleeping, out cold in the deep slumber she only seemed to achieve in the afternoons.

“How about... today? Think you could round up those candidates within the next few hours?”

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

“Great. Let me make sure I can get someone to watch the baby, then I'll text you to confirm.

About two hours from now should be fine. Look for my confirmation text in a minute.”

Nina came by within a half hour, time that I used to draft a list of interview questions.

Once my friend was here and on call for Lexi duty, I took a quick shower, fixed my hair and makeup, and changed into the outfit that Nina had surreptitiously selected for me and lain out on my bed while I was in the bathroom.

And then, soon enough, I was click-clacking my high heels over to a room near the center of the palace, where Brandon had succeeded in collecting my applicants together in a large meeting room. They were seated all around a long, oval-shaped conference table. When I entered the room, they all hopped up to their feet expectantly. I felt rather powerful, seeing how fast something like this could be set up at my demand. It gave me a boost of energy, being back in this professional mode and seeing how eager all the candidates were to impress me.

The interview lasted only about fifteen minutes. I'd learned a lesson, when I interviewed assistant candidates at the office. That my instinct was always right, and I didn't need to waste time on all the formalities of chit-chat and questionasking, when really I could tell rather quickly that someone was not up for the job.

I went through my questions in rapid-fire fashion, and started sending candidates away as soon as

I knew that I was not going to hire them. Palpable tension buzzed in the room as more and more of them were declined and asked to leave. Finally, only one remained. The young woman – her name was Tracy – turned to me with a proud, confident smile after the last of the rejected candidates left the room.

“You’re it,” I told her. “Congratulations.” And then I shook her hand.

Tracy was practically glowing with happy, positive energy. I knew she and I were going to get along. She was someone who could handle stress with aplomb, that much I could tell so far.

Once she and I agreed upon a wage, I left my new assistant with Brandon to sign some paperwork and make everything official.

And then I headed back to our room, texting Alex while I walked. I was excited to share my news with him, and grinning from ear to ear as I wrote all about the impromptu interview and my successful hire.

But apparently, Alexander was not having such a great afternoon. I should have expected as much—I’d kind of forgotten that he was handling some sort of legal emergency. With his beloved uncle.

Alex: Congrats, Fi. That’s great.

I grimaced. He was trying to be supportive, but I could tell he was no longer in a good mood.

Me: Everything going alright over there?

Alex: It's fine. Crisis has been averted. Nothing to worry about.

I was frowning, looking at these messages and trying to interpret my husband's tone, as I entered our room.

"Oh, no," Nina said quietly. She was seated at the table, eating potato chips and scrolling on her phone. "Interview didn't go well?"

I laughed a little. "Actually, it went great. I hired someone."

"Then what's with the sad face?" She noisily folded the top of the chip bag and clipped it closed, wiped her hands on a napkin, got up and headed over to meet me by the door.

"I was just reading a text from Alex. I think he's having a tough afternoon. Dealing with something unpleasant over there at Crescent."

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