

THE ALPHA KING CALL BOY

Chapter 41 She Is The Daughter Of The Enemy

Alexander

I returned to the palace after dark. I figured Fiona may be asleep already, but still, my blood ran warm with anticipation as I continued thinking about what to say to her. How to account for my outburst and my absence these past few days, when finally we were face to face again.

I worked the lock and the doorknob carefully. Eased the door open slowly. If Fiona was asleep, I did not want to wake her.

But she was not asleep.

I closed and locked the door silently behind me but

hung back in the shadows.

Fiona was lying in our bed with her legs spread wide, touching herself. A single candle on the bedside cast the scene in a small orb of flickering amber light. The rest of the room, including the doorway where I was standing, was pitch dark.

The animal inside of me was already aroused. My heart was beating faster and faster, the longer I watched. My wolf told me to tear my clothes off and dive on top of her. But I had not been planning on coming home just to jump right back into bed with Fiona.

Her long silver hair was falling forward over one shoulder, cascading down her breasts. She threw her head back, moving her hand faster between her legs, and then... called out my name.

It was a small whimper that sent a shiver down my spine.

Then she stopped touching herself and squirmed around in the bed, sighing.

I couldn't help but step in to help her relieve her desire. I paced forward into the room, stepping into the dim circle of candlelight, and paused beside the bed.

Fiona's eyes flipped open, and she sat up, startled.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I said. "I came in quietly because I thought you would be sleeping." I dared a glance down at the length of her body. Her skin was flushed all over.

Her shoulders relaxed and she breathed out a sigh. "It's okay, you just startled me."

I nodded and started taking off my jacket. “Yeah, you were pretty... preoccupied.”

A flush of pink appeared on her cheeks. But she did not look to be embarrassed. She smiled up at me sweetly, with a beckoning look in her eyes that was impossible to resist.

I kicked my shoes off and approached the bed, unbuttoning my shirt as I went. I left a trail of clothes behind on the floor and stripped naked by the time I reached her.

Fiona watched me hungrily all the while, the smile on her lips growing wider as I approached.

To my surprise, she did not wait for me to climb up on top of her. Buzzing with energy, she slid out of bed and slipped the tiny straps of her silk nightgown down

her arms.

A heavy breath tumbled out of my lips as I watched it fall to the floor, and then let my eyes rove back up the length of her gorgeous body.

Fiona put a steady hand to the center of my chest and pushed me back onto the bed suddenly.

I lay back and smiled.

Fiona

I had repressed my desire for too long. I was not going to wait around and let Alexander tease me. I pushed him hard, shoving him down onto the bed, and he was happy to go with it.

I climbed up on top of him and straddled his waist. Alexander smiled, looking up at me with pure delight

in his eyes.

I leaned forward and kissed his chest, running my lips over the ridges of his defined muscles. The desire I felt for him was frantic. And I felt his desire growing, too. Pulsing against my thighs, already rock hard. Moving closer to where I wanted him. I sat down and rocked my hips, easing him inside of me.

Alexander had his big hands on my hips, holding me steady and pressing me down against him, letting out a low growl as he went deeper and deeper inside. He kept his eyes locked on mine, the expression on his face a portrait of wild desire.

I gasped for breath as we moved our hips together in a slow rhythm, pleasure already flooding through me, lighting up every cell in my body.

I moaned, feeling my body tighten as it neared the

edge of release. Alexander could tell that I was close. He moved his body faster, throwing the weight of his giant frame into me with quick, athletic thrusts of his hips. I was spiraling into bliss a moment later and had to bring my cheek to rest flat against his chest as I rode out a long wave of pleasure, losing all control of my body as I went.

Alexander rolled me onto my side after we finished, and gently moved me up toward the top of the bed, settling my head down onto a soft pillow. I closed my eyes and sighed contentedly as he stroked my hair, and soon fell fast asleep.

Alexander

I lay beside Fiona for a moment, catching my breath. My eyes fluttered closed, and my fingers went to her hair, stroking and playing with it.

Before I could fall asleep, I forced myself up. I needed to use the bathroom anyway.

The ride Fiona had just given me was amazing. She was so sexy when she was bossy like that.

I caught my reflection in the bathroom mirror. The idiot looking back at me had a big, dumb grin on his face. I shook my head and frowned, remembering myself. I washed up and splashed cold water on my face, trying to sober up from... whatever it was Fiona had me feeling.

She was fast asleep, snoring lightly. I went back to bed and curled up close beside her, wrapping our bodies together in the blankets. Still sleeping, her body instinctively relaxed back against my chest, and I cradled her in my arms, bringing us as close as we could be.

The lone candle on Fiona's nightstand was flickering wildly, burned down to its last nub of wick, licking a whisp of black smoke up into the air. I glimpsed something orange on the table beside it. It was a prescription bottle.

The guilt I had been ignoring for the past two days came full force to the center of my attention. I had let Fiona suffer without me. It was cruel to do that to the pregnant mother of my child, and I knew better. But the medication told me it may be worse than I had already imagined.

I looked at Fiona's sleeping face. Her beauty was unmatched. And there was no denying she was a devoted Luna and a good woman... and that she had found her way into my heart.

I was still not convinced that she was the one who had leaked my intelligence to her father. The narrative

that implicated her was... almost too perfect. There had to be more to the story, and I was going to find out the whole truth.

But regardless of whether Fiona was involved in this breach, there was still an ugly truth that remained, either way.

Fiona was the daughter of the enemy. An enemy I had pledged to kill.

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Chapter 42 A Wall Went Up Between Us



Fiona

Alexander was in the shower when I woke in the morning. I stretched out under our silk sheets, feeling relaxed in my body. Finally, some of my strength and energy was coming back. But my mind was not as calm.

I thought about what I would do with my renewed energy today, frowning when I considered I had no plans to look forward to. No plans today, or tomorrow, or the day after that...

For years, my life had been a busy schedule of work and pack business. But I had quit my job. Left the Red Moon Pack. Left all my stake in the family business to my father. I had signed all my rights over to him in an act of protest, one I did not regret but still wished had not been necessary.

High-pressure environments were where I truly thrived. This idleness in the palace was becoming painful.

Alexander emerged from the bathroom in a towel, looking steamy and perfect as always.

“Morning,” he said, standing in the doorway and running a second towel through his hair and beard. His eyes were serious as they looked me over, clearly trying to assess my physical condition.

“Good morning.”

His golden hair, wet and pushed back behind his ears, was getting long, and his beard looked extra shaggy. Wherever it was that he had been this week, he had been skipping his grooming routine.

It was not my place, though, to ask where he had

been, or why he'd left me here alone. And apparently, we were not going to continue our conversation from before. He strode into his dressing room, dropping his towel to the floor. I took the opportunity to slip into the bathroom and close myself inside.

I ran the bath water and sat on the edge of the tub as it filled, staring at the wall and trying to put a name to the way I was feeling.

It was good that Alexander was back. But I guess I had been hoping for some closure after our argument, and it felt now like I was not going to get that.

A wall had gone up between us. Whatever it was that Alexander might have been feeling for me, it seemed like it was now suddenly gone.

I almost let the tub overflow, catching sight of it at the last second and scrambling to turn the water off. I

plunged my hand down into the water to lift the drain plug, hardly noticing at first that the water was scalding hot. I ripped my arm back when the pain finally reached the front of my mind. The skin was bright red and steaming.

Alexander noticed something was wrong when I came out of the bathroom later in a daze.

“Let me take you to get some breakfast,” he said. “Get dressed.”

I wasn't in a mood to take my time with getting ready, so I pulled my hair back quickly, slipped into a comfortable dress, and followed my fiancé to the dining room. As we walked, he kept stealing glances at me. But we maintained an uncomfortable silence the whole way.

I hardly knew how to start speaking to him again. It

felt like he needed to be the one to begin.

The dining room smelled of fresh breads, sweet and spicy baked goods, and other delicious aromas. We sat across from each other at one end of a big table, upon which a tremendous spread of breakfast foods had already been arranged on tiered golden trays and platters. Alexander asked for a pot of coffee, and a steaming golden teapot arrived a moment later. He insisted on pouring his own cup, though, waving away an over-eager maid.

“Are you still having trouble eating?” he asked once we were alone.

I nodded, starting to fill my plate with a few little items. Everything smelled so good, but still a lump in my throat kept me from hunger.

Alexander reached across the table and touched my

hand. I hadn't even realized I was feeling cold until his warm hand was wrapped around mine, pressing heat into it.

I looked up at him and couldn't help but smile. I saw a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth too, but he resisted it, blinking hard and turning his face away.

He cleared his throat, stroking the top of my hand with his thumb. "I'm... I'm going to do better," he finally said, his eyes still gazing down the length of the table at nothing. "I'll be here with you more, if that's what you need."

"It's not just about what I need," I replied. He looked at me then, understanding immediately what I meant, his eyes dropping a moment later to my abdomen. "I understand that you have responsibilities and other places to be. But didn't you move me here so that I could at least sleep beside you at night? For the

health of our child, as well as my own?”

Alexander nodded, his countenance dropping. He bowed his head and squeezed my hand tightly before releasing it and moving both his hands to his face.

“You’re right.” He sniffed a heavy inhale through his nose and straightened his spine, all of a sudden gathering his composure. It was an interesting scene to witness... a brief, fleeting moment of sincere emotion, and a quick recoil into coldness.

My next thought almost made me laugh aloud. I was not one to judge – I had been perfecting my own mask of cold indifference for as long as I could remember. I was a Luna. Control and composure made me good at what I was born to do.

I had to admire Alexander, too, for the way he inhabited his role. He was a true Alpha. Savage when

he had to be, but honorable when it mattered.

“There’s something else,” I said.

Alexander nodded, giving me his full attention.

“It’s not all about our time together. I’m also having trouble adjusting to my new lifestyle here.” I looked around the dining room where we were seated. It was basically decorated in a theme of overindulgence in luxury, decked out in white and gold linens, with opulent chandeliers, gold-framed mirrors, and bouquets of roses everywhere.

He followed my eyes around the room but did not appear to see what I saw. Did not know what I was saying.

“I’m used to being active. Here, I have no purpose. I’m good at the work that I do, but now I’m

unemployed and I just feel... adrift.”

Alexander met my eyes. His expression was blank, or at least unreadable. “Did you really resign from your father’s business?”

I nodded, making an effort to keep my face as neutral as his own. “I signed my shares over to him, as well. He would have fought me for them anyway if all I did was quit. And I just wanted to be done with dealing with him altogether.”

My fiancé nodded, keeping his eyes locked on mine. “So, are you looking for something new?”

“Yes. I haven’t started looking yet because I feel behind. I need to update my resume.” I sighed, suddenly realizing I was not going to be able to provide references for past employers.

I flashed back to being plunged underwater in my parent's bathtub with a rough hand palming the back of my head and then ripping me back out. Going deaf and dizzy as my father's voice called out, demanding I pledge loyalty to him, as I gasped for air and choked water out of my lungs.

A dry chuckle escaped my lips, making Alexander raise a questioning eyebrow at me.

"I just... feel like I don't even know where to begin," I told him.

It was not the reason I was laughing at myself, but it was true.

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Chapter 43 It's Time To Bury Her

Alexander

My uncle came striding down the hallway from his office to where I waited in the lobby, smiling wide and extending his arms out. He was wearing a crisp, expensive gray suit with a bold, plum purple tie and matching pocket square.

“Nephew,” he said, pulling me in for a hug.

“Uncle Conrad. It’s been a while.” I returned his gruff embrace, then stepped back and flashed him a grin.

“Isn’t it always? We’re busy men. Here, walk with me.” Conrad was always in a hurry, and I had only called him an hour ago to request an appointment with the

notoriously hotheaded CEO.

Not as if he could refuse a meeting with me. I did, in fact, own fifty-one percent of the company that my uncle ran.

I followed Conrad back down the brightly-lit hall and into his office, a huge corner suite with windows stretching across all the exterior walls. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from his desk and motioned me along as he slipped through a barely visible door that opened onto a little private rooftop deck.

“So,” he said, selecting a long, thin cigarette from the pack and placing it gingerly between his weathered lips. “What can I do for you, Alexander?”

I cupped my hands around his mouth to block the wind as he lit the cigarette with an ornate gold lighter. “I have a favor to ask of you,” I said.

He took a step toward the railing at the edge of the rooftop and blew a dense stack of gray smoke out into the open air, then stood still a moment, watching it disperse into the wind.

“What’s this favor?” he asked, turning his gaze down at the city below. We were downtown, on the top floor of the highest high-rise in the city.

Our company had recently been ranked the top investment firm in all the werewolf world. Conrad had devoted his life to the business, building it from the ground up alongside my mother, starting back when they were in their twenties. She was the visionary behind it, the one who wrote the original business plan and owned the controller’s share of the company she operated alongside her brother.

And when she died, my mother left her shares to me,

leaving me as the ruling owner of the business. But Conrad and I were the only ones who knew this. And that was how it had to be.

Scarlet's war against me in indiscriminate – she had been coming at me from every angle she could find ever since the day she bedded my father and decided to do all she could to make her own son the future king. I didn't need her to know about all my assets, everything I had to lose. And Conrad was the public face of the company, anyway.

"I need you to hire Fiona," I said, walking to Conrad's side. "She's qualified. And she just left a high-ranking position at her father's company."

Conrad did not react. He took another drag of his cigarette before responding. "Left her father's company, huh?" He turned his body to face me and leaned his hip against the railing.

I nodded. “He asked her to conspire with him against me. In response, she cut ties with him completely, resigning her post and signing over her company shares to him.”

Conrad’s eyebrows went up and he let out a low whistle. “And she told you about all that?”

“I want you to hire her,” I continued, breezing past this question. Conrad would notice this, but he would not press me about it. “To head up the expansion project.”

“The expansion project?”

“Yes. It’s time.”

Back inside his office, Conrad was pacing. “The expansion project, Alexander. Now?”

“We’ve been waiting for the right person to head it up, and I’ve found her.” I took a seat in an armchair near my uncle’s desk.

Conrad chuckled. “Son, consider what you are proposing. We have been waiting to launch this project for years. It’s going to either make or break us. And you want to hire your fiancée to take the lead on it?”

“She is not just my fiancée.” I gave Conrad a stern look, reminding him to watch his tone.

He finished his pacing and approached, finally sitting down behind his desk. “But she is still his daughter.” He shook his head side to side slowly. “You already take a risk by entrusting her in your own home. But this? This company is your mother’s legacy.”

“I trust her,” I said firmly. The words just came out. I hardly even knew that I believed them until they were out there, hanging in the air between my uncle and myself, the real and honest truth.

I did trust her. And I knew she could do this job.

The timing was right. Not only did pregnant fiancée need a job to keep her active and well. But as a businessman, it was also my responsibility to take advantage of opportunities when they appeared. I needed to swoop Fiona’s talents up before another firm had a chance to do so.

“And you’re sure she’s up for this project?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Conrad wiped his mouth and looked out the window at the blue sky, contemplating. “And do you have a

plan for the inevitable roadblocks your stepmother will throw in our way once she finds out about it? She won't be happy to find herself squaring off against Fiona, of all people. It might motivate her to fight us even harder.”

I shrugged, maintaining an air of collected confidence. Conrad needed to understand I knew what I was doing. He could not refuse me either way when it came down to it – I was ultimately the one in charge here. But I liked to keep our relationship a peaceful one, and that meant showing my uncle enough respect to talk him through my decision.

“We have always known Scarlet will oppose the expansion,” I said. “But she is the one who went into competition with you and Mother in the first place. It was her choice to wage war against our family. It's time for her to suffer the consequences.”

Conrad nodded, rocking slightly in his desk chair and chewing on a toothpick. “We cannot underestimate her, though. Scarlet is powerful.”

“I’m telling you, Uncle. This is our path forward. Fiona is the right person for this job. And she is strong enough to stand against Scarlet. And I will be there to back her when it comes to that.”

Conrad leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. He threw his mangled toothpick into a bin under his desk and met my eyes at last.

“We’re ready to finally set this plan in motion and make my mother’s company into what it was always meant to be. Scarlet dug her own grave when she opened her rival business, all those years ago. We just haven’t had the right opportunity to bury her in it yet. Fiona is that opportunity.”

Conrad placed his hands flat on the surface of his big mahogany desk, nodding resolvedly.

“I’ll have HR call her to schedule an interview,” he said. “And I’ll start drafting the offer letter now.”

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Chapter 44 Crescent Ventures



Fiona

Alexander said he had business matters to attend to in the city and needed to leave for a few hours. His eyes were narrow and solemn as he told me he would be back to join me for dinner in the evening.

He had not apologized for leaving me alone here for days. But I knew better than to expect an Alpha to say he's sorry. Admitting fault could be perceived as a sign of weakness. But Alexander was trying to impress upon me with his actions that he was repentant.

I felt sure he was sincere. He believed himself when he said he was going to stay by my side.

But I had a hard time believing it myself. Only time would tell whether his actions would match his promises.

Contemplating what to do with my day, I sat down at the table in the corner of the room with my laptop and a few of the magazines I'd been reading. I'd been finding it hard to focus on the solitary, self-driven work of reading, doing research, and preparing to apply for

new jobs. I pledged to myself that I would work for at least an hour before whiling away the rest of the afternoon chatting with Nina or taking another nap.

I opened my laptop and went to my email. It was a matter of habit, the first thing I did on weekday mornings... back when I had a job. I wasn't expecting to see anything in my inbox worth a second glance.

But there at the top was an email from Crescent Ventures.

It was from a recruiter who stated he had recently been made aware of my departure from my family business. And he was inviting me to come interview for a position.

I looked over at the cover of one of the magazines on the table beside me, my jaw dropping. I had just read that Crescent Ventures was named the top

investment company in the nation this year.

I would never have even thought to apply for a job at such a bigtime firm. It was notoriously difficult to get a foot in the door there. I shook my head in disbelief.

I had done some great work at my father's company, but because I never actually received the promotions I was always promised, the credit for my successes always went to my father. And Father never trusted me enough to let me take over the core business operations, even though I'd practically re-written the entire operating procedure, and trained all our analysts myself.

I sighed, thinking about how limited I had been with him. For years I'd been battling my ignorant father, whose business acumen was laughable, on every major decision. His choices kept our company firmly in the middle of the industry, teetering between a

business of mediocre success and a soon-to-be bankrupting disaster.

Straightening my spine, I gave myself a quick internal pep-talk.

I could do this. I was up for it. I might not have the resume I'd expect Crescent Ventures to be looking for, but apparently that didn't matter to them anyway.

Before I could overthink it any further, I scrambled for my phone and dialed the number the recruiter provided in his email.

This was my chance at a rare opportunity, not just to get back to work, but to finally make a real move forward in my career. It did not make a lick of sense that this company wanted me. But I was not going to waste time second-guessing what might be the opportunity of a lifetime.

I checked in with a fast-talking receptionist at the big, circular front desk on the first floor of Crescent Ventures headquarters, an impressive glass-walled skyscraper in the center of the city, my head spinning as I took in the atmosphere in the lobby.

It was a shock to my system. Crowded, loud, and chaotic, with men and women in well-pressed suits rushing in and out purposefully, carrying briefcases and speaking on cell phones. Sweaty interns in ill-fitting business attire rushing through metal detectors and waiting impatiently in the elevator bay, carrying more trays of take-out coffee cups than should be physically possible.

“Your meeting will be on the eighty-ninth floor,” the receptionist said, making my eyes go wide.

I could not even imagine how high up that was.

“Just go through the line right over here,” she continued, pointing. “Go through security and head up in any of the main elevators. You’re riding that to the eightieth floor. Get out there and they’ll be waiting for you at the desk. The second elevator will be locked, but they’ll let you right in. Okay?”

I nodded confidently, though my mind was reeling.

Why was my meeting being held in one of the chief executive offices? Those were the only floors that would be locked to the public.

I took a few deep breaths in and followed the receptionist’s instructions. The elevator was packed full when we started in the lobby, and suddenly dense with aromas of coffee, Italian takeout, and body odor. Every couple floors, the cabin halted its aggressive upward propulsion to open the doors and let a few

people out. The crowd grew thinner and thinner as we rose into the sky, my ears popping around the fortieth floor, and again when I finally reached my stop, alone now in the big elevator cabin.

A polite security guard wearing a well-stocked gun belt escorted me to the second elevator. I entered and discovered that 89 was the highest floor in the whole building. Pressing the sparkly gold and black button, I noticed that my hand was shaking.

The elevator zipped upward in a flash and the doors rolled open again mere seconds later.

I put on my best smile, straightened my spine, dropped my shoulders, steadied my hands, and walked inside with confidence.

The interview with the recruiter went by in an eyeblink.

He asked me questions at a rapid-fire pace. I answered fast, showing no doubt or hesitation, relying on my instinct and trusting that that my acumen could carry me through this test successfully.

Finally, after five intense minutes that felt like an eternity, the man sat back and looked once more at the one-page resume I had given him at the start of our meeting.

“Alright,” he said, his tone neutral. “Everything looks good. All that’s left is the salary negotiation, but I’ll let your new boss take over for that.”

I kept my mouth closed, but it took all my willpower to do it. I couldn’t believe it. I was getting an offer.

The recruiter left the room, and I took the opportunity to do some deep breathing. Bracing myself for what

was coming next.

I could not have prepared myself, though, for who came striding in.

“Conrad Knight,” he said, extending his hand in introduction. I rose to my feet and shook his hand firmly. “And you’re Fiona.”

“Yes sir. It’s an honor to meet you. I had no idea I was interviewing for a position working directly with you.”

Conrad Knight was a superstar in the finance world. And the CEO and co-founder of Crescent Ventures.

“Ah.” He moved to the other side of the table and motioned for me to take a seat, then did so himself.

“That’s how I like to do it. And I also like to hand-select the people I even consider bringing in for an interview, when I’ve got a new position I need to fill.”

I nodded, waiting to see if he would elaborate.

There was one other thing I knew about Conrad Knight. He was Alexander's uncle. The brother of my fiancé's departed mother.

So I guess I knew, now, exactly why I had been hand-selected.

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Chapter 45 Burning The Midnight Oil



Fiona

“Thank you for setting up that interview,” I said to Alexander, as soon as we were alone in the dining room, our glasses and dinner plates full.

He looked at me with mild surprise, paused, then shook his head.

“You don’t need to thank me. Once I realized that your talents were available, I knew I needed to make Uncle Conrad aware. He’s been looking for someone to head that project for a long time. And candidates like you don’t become available all the time.”

I stared him down, considering this.

The fact was, I had done an objectively exceptional job in my interview. I hardly had any time to think while I was in it, but thinking it over later, I was proud of how I answered all the questions and truly believed, more than ever, in my own skill, strength,

and aptitude.

I decided that I believed him. It was, after all, not Alexander's company. He might have recommended Conrad hire me, but the man could have said no. And I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"What?" Alexander asked, his face breaking into a smile.

"Nothing," I said. "Just... thanks. Again."

"You deserve it." He extended his hand across the table, open palm facing up.

I slipped my hand into it, and he leaned forward and kissed my knuckles. His light beard tickled a little, forcing me to smile.

He released my hand and said, "Please, eat now."

Don't make me beg you."

I hardly slept that night, but not for the fun reason.

I could not tear myself away from my laptop. Starting work the very next day after my interview was exciting, but it also meant I had nearly no time at all to prepare.

"Don't worry about it," Conrad had said at the end of the interview. "You'll train on the job. I wouldn't hire you if you didn't already have everything you need to hit the ground running."

But I knew these were just things that people said. I had to, at the very least, study up on the company's current executive staff, so I'd be prepared when meeting them in the office. And I memorized the Crescent Ventures mission statement from their website. Not like there was going to be a pop quiz or

anything.

I started getting ready before dawn, selecting a perfect outfit for my first day and fussing over my hair and makeup. I finished pressing a deep maroon lipstick into my lips and stepped back, smiling. I felt like myself again.

Alexander was still sleeping as I crept out of the room and departed for the city. I'd be arriving over an hour and a half early, but that was fine. I needed to show up well at the start of this new opportunity and being only on time was most certainly not what Conrad Knight was expecting from a new project manager.

My boss was on the phone at his desk when his secretary ushered me inside his corner office when I arrived. He kept pace with his conversation while waving me over to him, his face stern.

I sat across from him and waited patiently.

“I’ll call you in an hour,” Conrad told the person on the phone, and then he hung up before they could reply. He swiveled in his chair to square his body to mine.

“Fiona, how are you this morning?”

“I’m very excited to be here, sir. Can’t wait to get started.”

“Excellent,” he said, frowning. Then he looked at his watch.

It was nearly six a.m. The glass-walled room was glowing gold, the sky outside just starting to turn pale peach with the rising sun.

“I suggest arriving a little earlier tomorrow. New employees tend to forget about the time it takes to get through security downstairs. Perfectly

understandable.”

I nodded. “Absolutely, sir.”

“Please, call me Conrad.” He grinned. Then the energy in the room shifted, as I suppose my first reprimand was concluded. “These are yours. ID badge, you don’t have to wear that around your neck, but keep it on you. And your elevator key.”

Conrad slid the items across the desk. I picked them up and tucked them into the pocket of my jacket.

He stood abruptly then and clapped his big hands together. I rose from my chair. “Let’s get to work, then, shall we? I’ll show you to your office.”

The rest of the workday flew by in a blur.

A voice on speakerphone – a tech who worked sixty

feet below us in the same building – guided me through setting up my email password. And then the inbox started loading. It was already full of hundreds of things I needed to sort through immediately.

But first, I had meetings. Conrad took me around to shake hands with all the executives on the top floors, introducing me with charismatic pride. A half dozen other short meetings followed, in various conference rooms and offices.

Just as I began to feel faint from the sudden surge of activity, an intern appeared to take my lunch order. I smiled at her gratefully as she recited the many, many options available. And I felt very spoiled indeed when the dish I requested, a salmon salad, arrived at my desk just minutes later, complete with proper flatware, a carafe of lemonade, and a plate of assorted cookies.

Catching enough time to eat was a different story. My schedule was packed impossibly tight. But somehow, I managed to whittle away at my small lunch feast throughout the afternoon, holding my giant salad bowl in one hand while typing with the other, in the little gaps between the many meetings and calls I was required to attend.

Dinner service was the same routine, and soon enough I was vaguely noticing the sun setting dimly in the distance, reflexively pulling a chain to turn on a desk lamp as the room darkened.

“Burning the midnight oil already?”

Conrad was standing in my doorway, smiling. I blinked up at him, shocked at how dark the offices were beyond him. I looked at the clock on my computer and found it was, in fact, ten minutes to midnight.

“Go on home,” he said. “It’s my share of the task to work all night when necessary.” I narrowed my eyes at him, and he chuckled. “Or every night. But unlike you, I’ve got a fresh suit in my closet. Go on home, Fiona. Back at it tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” I replied. “But since I have you right now, can I ask you just one question first?”

“Sure.” He paced into my little office but didn’t take a seat. He walked over to the exterior wall instead, looking out through the tall glass at the colorful lights of the city below.

“I read those reports you sent me this afternoon and found something that I knew had to be a problem, so I’ve been digging into it.”

“What kind of problem?”

I shook my head, looking at my computer screen. “I was worried, at first, that someone had stolen from the escrow account. The withdrawals were pennies on the dollar more than the amounts approved, but for some reason the bank allowed them to go through anyway. It’s pennies at a time, but with weekly payments over the past ten years, it has added up...”

I rolled my chair away from the computer, making room for Conrad as he moved to stand behind my desk. His face was lit in the blue-green glow of the monitor, and I watched as the wrinkles in his forehead deepened while he read the comparison reports I had started.

“I’m not finished with the analysis yet, but I have actually figured out the source.”

Conrad straightened his back and looked at me.

“And?”

“There was an arithmetic error in the original contract, if you can believe it. That’s all. It just went unnoticed for ten years.”

He looked me in the eye and the wrinkles on his face started moving around again, finally settling into what I could only describe as an expression of true bewilderment.

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