

17 Chapter 17 Counterstrike

Elara 1

I had just ended the meeting when Tyler stormed over.

"Elara, how dare you dock my performance bonus?" he said angrily. "Do you have any idea how much money that is?"

I raised my eyebrow. The diamond on my new ring caught the light. "Our department has twenty-two people. Today, eleven called in sick. Three were out in the field. Only seven showed up for the meeting. The notification was sent this morning. "

"So tell me, Deputy Director Tyler , do you think approving all these absences was reasonable?"

"I'm the Director," I continued. My voice was steady but sharp. "According to the company handbook, department leaders can decide performance bonuses for their staff."

I leaned forward slightly. My eyes locked with his. "So, Deputy Director Tyler , why shouldn't I dock your bonus?"

I didn't wait for his answer. I turned and walked straight back to my office.

I could hear the whispers from the cubicles

behind me. I hated people who played dirty games behind my back. He was just a deputy director. If he couldn't follow orders, I'd replace him.

After an hour of typing at my desk, I looked out through my glass office walls at the open floor plan. Half of the people who had "called in sick" were suddenly back at their workstations. All three who had been "out in the field" had mysteriously returned and were sitting in their cubicles.

I couldn't help but smile.

I stepped out of my office and walked to the center of the open workspace to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone, I'm happy to see our department has made such a miraculous recovery," I said. My voice carried across the cubicle farm. "To celebrate our wonderful teamwork, I've arranged for digital gift cards to be sent to your work emails."

Office psychology was so predictable. Hit them with punishment, then offer a reward. Most of them hadn't even been punished directly, but they'd all want the reward.

Within minutes, people were checking their emails and talking excitedly across the cubicle walls:



"Thank you, Mrs. Wolfe! I got \$25!"

"I got \$50!"

"Holy shit, I scored \$100! That covers my coffee for the week. Thanks, Mrs. Wolfe!"

Only Tyler's face stayed dark. Like a storm cloud ready to burst. His body language showed he was starting to understand exactly what kind of boss he'd challenged.

At five o'clock sharp, I packed up and headed out.

As I got into my car, I saw Tyler rushing out of the building toward me. His face was pale.

"Mrs. Wolfe," he called out. He was slightly out of breath. "I was out of line today. Please, you're the bigger person here. Don't hold it against me."

I rolled down my window and nodded slightly. "I accept your apology, Tyler. But we'll handle this through proper channels. I'll be discussing your performance review with HR, and you can work to earn back that bonus next quarter."

I pressed the gas and smoothly left the parking lot. I felt satisfied.

The first challenge to my authority had been handled.

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Dominic and I had agreed to meet to buy our matching wedding rings.

I followed the location he'd sent me. It turned out to be one of the most expensive jewelry stores in the city. The valet took my keys when I pulled up.

When I arrived, there was already a selection of rings on a black velvet display.

"See anything you like?" Dominic asked. His amber eyes watched me with an intensity that made my skin feel warm.

I looked at the options. I picked a pair with simple but elegant diamonds. Understated but obviously expensive. "These."

The corners of Dominic's mouth lifted into a small smile. "Perfect choice." He slid his credit card across the counter. "We'll take these."

He put his ring on his left hand easily. Then he picked up the smaller one. "Want to put it on now?"

His scent hit me as he moved into my personal space. Something expensive and masculine that made my pussy clench involuntarily.

"I suppose we should," I replied. I tried to sound casual even though my heart was beating faster.

Instead of just handing me the ring, he reached

for my left hand.

His fingers were warm as they wrapped around mine. "Let me."

The way he slid the ring onto my finger was slow. Deliberate. His thumb brushed across my knuckles as he positioned it perfectly.

"There," he murmured, but he didn't let go of my hand. His thumb traced a small circle on my palm that made me want to press my thighs together.

I couldn't help wondering if his mysterious partner would be jealous seeing Dominic wearing a wedding ring with me.

But that wasn't my problem. We had a business deal, nothing more.

The entire shopping trip took less than ten minutes.

"Let's go. The valet has my car ready on the street," he said. His voice was low and smooth.

I handed my valet ticket to the attendant. "Mine will be up in a minute. We should leave separately."

Dominic stepped closer again, close enough that I could feel the heat from his body. "If that's what you want," he said quietly, his breath warm against my ear.



The way he said it made my stomach flutter. Like he was talking about more than just leaving the jewelry store.

Author

Across the mall, about twenty yards away, Selina walked arm in arm with Zack toward the outdoor equipment store.

"Zack, the camping store is this way!" she pulled at his arm, but he had stopped moving.

Zack's eyes got narrow as he saw someone familiar. A woman with long hair who looked just like Elara getting into the elevator.

"Zack, what do you think about matching outfits for our camping trip?" Selina's voice brought him back.

He nodded without really listening. "Whatever you want."

Then he smiled. The kind of smile that looked mean. "Selina, why don't we invite your sister to hang out with us sometime?"

"Didn't you say she slapped you yesterday?"

Selina's eyes got bright with excitement. "Are you letting me get back at her? How?"

She was clearly excited but tried to look hesitant. "Zack, wouldn't that be wrong?"

Zack's eyes went dark as he touched her hair.
"Not at all. She bullied you first, didn't she?"

He smiled to himself. So Elara thought she could
block his number and ignore him? He'd show
her.

He wanted to know exactly where she got the
nerve to reject him.

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