

18 Chapter 18 I'll Take the Penalty

Elara 1

The knock on my office door came at exactly 10 AM the next day.

"Come in," I called, already knowing who it would be.

Jack walked into my office like he owned it. Which, he probably thought he did.

"Elara," he said, sitting down without being invited. "Heard you had some drama with Tyler yesterday."

I set down my coffee and gave him my sweetest smile. "Did he come running to daddy already?"

Jack's jaw tightened. "Look, kid, Tyler's been with this company for eight years."

"And he still doesn't know how to respect his boss." I kept my voice calm. "Uncle Jack, do successful companies usually reward employees who try to sabotage their supervisors on day one?"

Jack leaned back, studying me. "You're really not that little girl anymore, are you?"

"That was a long time ago." I held his stare



without flinching. "This company grew from one hotel to a chain because of strong leadership. I'm here to continue that tradition, not coddle grown men who can't handle having a female boss."

Jack was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly. "Fair enough. Handle your department however you see fit."

The rest of the day passed quickly. Three department meetings, budget reviews, policy drafts. Actual work instead of whatever Tyler thought I'd be doing.

During lunch, my phone buzzed and Hannah's name flashed on the screen.

"Elara! Emergency best friend time needed. Camping trip tomorrow?"

I glanced at my calendar. Saturday was free.

"Sure, sounds fun."

"Perfect! I'll pick you up at nine."

What Hannah didn't mention was who else would be coming.

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The next morning, I was waiting outside my apartment building when I saw a familiar car pull up.

Zack's car.

What Hannah didn't mention was that 'pick you up' meant Zack's truck would be idling outside my building.

I saw his license plate and immediately turned to walk back inside.

"Elara, don't you dare!" Hannah yelled from the passenger window. "Get your ass in here!"

Zack leaned out the driver's side. "What's wrong? Too good to go camping with us now that you're unemployed?"

Anger flared inside me. The bastard thought I was still jobless.

I yanked open the back door and climbed in next to Hannah's other friend Sarah. "Actually, I start my new job Monday. But thanks for your concern."

The satisfaction of watching Zack's smug expression falter was worth the awkward car ride.

Hannah squeezed my hand. "See, Zack? I told you Elara would land on her feet."

Zack grunted and turned up the radio, but I caught him glancing at me in the rearview mirror. I could practically see the wheels turning in his head.

Good luck figuring that out, asshole.

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After we parked, Hannah immediately pulled me aside.

"Oh hell no," Hannah muttered, staring across the campsite. "Please tell me that's not Selina bouncing around like a damn cheerleader."

Sure enough, Selina came prancing over in a pink sundress and threw herself at Zack like he was her personal teddy bear.

"Zack! I'm so excited for our camping adventure!" she squealed, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Hannah made a gagging motion. "God, she's so fake it hurts."

I was already walking away, pretending to be fascinated by some random trees.

But I could feel Zack's eyes on me. Probably wondering why I wasn't jealous or throwing a fit like he expected.

After we set up the tents and got the portable grills going, someone suggested playing a drinking game.

"Let's do dares only. No truth bullshit. Anyone who chickens out has to draw a penalty card."

"I'm good, thanks," I said, staying put on my



camping chair.

Selina's voice cut through the chatter. "Come on, Elara! You drove all the way out here. Don't be such a party pooper."

A few of Zack's buddies joined in. "Yeah, what's the fun in sitting there like a statue?"

Hannah was about to tell them where they could shove their game when I held up my hand. "Fine. I'll play your stupid game."

The first few rounds were typical college bullshit. Carry someone piggyback, do twenty pushups, tell someone they're hot. Nothing too crazy.

Then the bottle pointed straight at me.

I drew a card and my blood went cold.

"What's it say?" someone called out.

When I didn't answer, one of the guys grabbed it from my hand. "Holy shit!

"Flirt with the person to your left for one minute."

Every guy there suddenly looked like Christmas morning had come early.

"I volunteer as tribute!" Brad, one of Zack's friends, grinned like an idiot. "Come here, Elara."

I could feel Zack's stare burning into me, probably expecting me to run to him for rescue.

Instead, I tossed the card aside. "I'll take the penalty."

"Boooo! That's no fun!"

"Draw your punishment then."

I reached for the penalty pile and handed the card to Brad without looking.

"Bow and apologize to anyone wearing pink," he read with obvious glee.

Every head turned to look at Selina in her bubblegum pink dress.

Selina's smile was pure poison, but she put on a show of false concern. "Oh my! That seems so harsh. I mean, she is just a poor half-blood, but she's still my step-sister technically."

Her voice dripped with fake sweetness. "Maybe we should skip it?"

Zack's voice cut through the fake concern like a blade. "Why would we skip it?"

His eyes locked on mine with cold satisfaction. "Rules are rules, right Elara? You wanted to play."

My heart started racing as I realized this whole thing was payback for slapping him.

Before I could even open my mouth to tell them all to go fuck themselves, a familiar voice made everyone freeze.

"What the hell is this? A bunch of grown adults playing high school bullying games?"

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