

NEVER MISTAKE A QUEEN FOR A LAPDOG

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The mention of her child was like a crack in a dam for Noreen—the pain she'd forced herself to suppress began seeping out, spreading slowly through her chest.

She could never forget the icy brightness of the hospital's fluorescent lights, the sharp, chemical tang of disinfectant in the air, or the chill that sank into her bones after the procedure.

Those memories would stay with her for life.

She'd always remember the agony of something torn from her very soul.

Looking back, maybe her child had sensed it all along. That's why he'd come quietly and left just as silently, almost as if he'd arrived just to help her weather a storm.

When the meeting ended, Bianca turned to Sophia. "Send me the minutes from today's meeting."

Still simmering with irritation, Sophia snapped, "They aren't ready yet."

"Then send them over when you've finished," Bianca replied, composed.

"I'm swamped. I don't have time to sort them out."

Bianca shot Sophia a look, her brow furrowing.

But Sophia ignored her, busying herself gathering up Noreen's things and tidying the conference room.

Only after Sophia left did Noreen speak gently, trying to calm her down. "You need to remember—never bring your emotions into work. That's not tolerated here at Aurelion Group. If you want to go far here, don't cross anyone, especially those above you."

"I just don't think it's fair to you," Sophia muttered.

"There's no such thing as 'fair' or 'unfair' in these things," Noreen said, her tone cooling.

To her, love was never a transaction.

Her kindness to Seth was her own choice. How Seth responded was up to him.

She never tried to balance the scales between them—she knew that way lay only disappointment.

>She loved Seth. That was why she was willing to bet her future on him, giving up a

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chance to study abroad, staying to help him build his business, playing the support

role behind the scenes.

It hadn't ended the way she'd hoped, but she'd never regretted it.

Sometimes, life demanded you accept the outcome and move on—often, your greatest enemy was the prison of your own thoughts.

Still, the end of a relationship always left you exhausted and hollow.

She just needed a little time.

She'd get through this.

Right before clocking out, Noreen messaged Bianca to let her know all the project files from Division Three were ready and she could deliver them anytime.

Bianca replied almost instantly:

[Secretary Gilmore, please bring the files to Seth's office. I've just returned to the States and I'm not familiar with the local business landscape. I need Seth to help me analyze them.]

She called him Seth—over and over, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Seth never corrected her. He let Bianca call him by his first name as much as she

liked.

But Noreen remembered all too well how much Seth hated anyone in the company using anything but his formal title.

For seven years, Noreen had never slipped, always addressing him as Mr. Harcourt in the office and at any business function.

Diligent. Professional. Always keeping her distance.

Now, it all seemed like a cruel joke.

Seth's rules, it turned out, were only for outsiders.

And she was the outsider/

With the people he favored, there were no boundaries.

Noreen simply replied "Received," then gathered the project files—along with the documents needing Seth's signature—to bring to his office.

Before she left, she took her signed resignation letter out of her drawer and tucked

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it into the stack she was handing over.

Whether Seth would sign it or not was out of her hands. But she had to go through

the motions.

Arms full of paperwork, Noreen headed straight *to* Seth's office.

As always, she knocked, then pushed open the door without waiting for an answer.

This was the only privilege Seth had ever given her. As his secretary, she often needed quick access for work matters, and not having *to* wait at his door saved them both time.

It had become muscle memory—knock, then enter.

But this time, before she could even greet him, what she saw inside hit her like a punch to the chest, leaving her heart twisted and aching.