

## NEVER MISTAKE A QUEEN FOR A LAPDOG

Yes-man 6

She let the phone ring, making no move to answer.

She knew Seth wasn't the patient type—if she ignored the call, he'd never bother to dial a second time.

But tonight, Seth broke his own rule.

When she didn't pick up the first call, the phone vibrated again, his name flashing insistently.

This time, ignoring it would only look bad.

“Noreen Gilmore speaking. What do you want, Mr. Harcourt?” Her tone was detached and cold when she finally answered.

Nothing like before.

Seth frowned at his screen, double-checking that he'd called the right number before asking, “Where are you?”

“I'm not feeling well, so I won't make it tonight. Hope everyone has a great time.”

She was ready to hang up right there.

But Bianca's voice chimed in from the background, unmistakably bright and curious: “Secretary Gilmore isn't coming? Seth, is it because I'm not welcome?”

Then Seth's voice cut through, icy and sharp. “Noreen, drop the act. Everyone's here but you. Trying to set yourself apart?”

“\_”

“I’ll give you twenty minutes. If you’re not here by then, don’t bother coming in to work at all.”

He hung up on her.

Listening to the dead line, Noreen almost laughed.

All this—over missing a single welcome party. Seth was ready to fire her for it.

So what did all her years of hard work mean? The late nights, the endless stress, even the stomach ulcer she’d earned from drinking on business deals—what were

those worth?

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By the time Noreen arrived at the Hesper Lounge, the private room was in full swing.

Jude was leading the cheer, egging Seth and Bianca on to share a toast, arms high and voice booming.

Seth’s tone was indulgent, a far cry from the man on the phone moments ago.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh, come on, Seth! Live a little. We’re all celebrating tonight. You can’t back out

now.”

Before Seth could refuse, Bianca picked up her glass with a confident smile and turned to him. “It’s just a game, Seth. Play along, don’t make this awkward for me.”

With everyone watching, Seth lifted his glass of iced tea. For a split second, as Bianca's arm slipped around his, his gaze caught Noreen's at the door.

Their eyes met for a single heartbeat—then he looked away, focusing on Bianca as he raised his glass.

Jude whipped out his phone to capture the moment, probably to gossip about it later, and in his excitement, accidentally bumped into Bianca.

“Careful.”

The two stood close, almost pressed together.

Seth instinctively reached out to steady Bianca, catching her as she stumbled against him.

The room's energy peaked, laughter and cheers reaching a fever pitch.

From Noreen's vantage, the two looked like a couple locked in an intimate embrace. Oddly, her chest didn't ache this time.

Maybe she'd just gone numb.

But her stomach twisted painfully, waves of nausea rising up.

A sudden gasp shattered the lively mood.

Sophia, unable to hold back her surprise, called out from across the room,

“Noreen? What are you doing here? Weren't you feeling sick? You should be home. resting!”

Her concern stuck out awkwardly in the boisterous atmosphere.

11-55 )

Bianca, still nestled in Seth's arms, lifted her head and greeted her with a radiant smile. “Secretary Gilmore, you made it! Come join us—we've been waiting for you.”

“Sorry, something came up and I got delayed,” Noreen replied smoothly, stepping into the room with an air of calm.

Jude, suddenly sheepish, realized he might’ve gone a little too far with the party games. He opened his mouth to explain, but Seth cut in, his *voice* cold and remote. “The latecomer should down three drinks to show some sincerity, don’t think?”

you

The mention of alcohol made Noreen’s stomach churn violently, sharp pain threading through the nausea.

It felt like a storm raging inside her.