



You're
Fired?



Shaya Crabtree

Chapter 1

“I REALLY HATE YOU.”

“You know you say that to me literally every shift, right?” Phoebe didn’t look up from her computer screen. “I’m numb to your anger by now.”

Rose glared from across the cubicle. Phoebe ignored her and kept typing until Rose diverted her attention back to her own computer.

“You’re the reason I have this stupid job,” Rose said.

“I’m the reason you’re able to pay your bills and afford your tuition. But whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“I could’ve worked at McDonald’s,” Rose whispered, laying her head against the desk. “I could be eating a free burger right now.”

Phoebe scrunched her nose. “You’d smell like french fries all day.”

Rose sighed. “French fries. Hot and sizzling straight out of the fryer and not frozen like this goddamned office.” She shivered. “Why do we have a fan on in the middle of winter? It’s December!”

“Because this office is like two feet wide and there’s a hundred people in it,” Phoebe told her. “Turn that fan off and we’ll all be sweating. This place will reek of B.O. faster than Garth’s gym.”

Garth’s gym. I should have gotten a job there. Fit, shirtless men. Ripped women walking around in nothing but their underwear. She could get fit and consume eye candy at the same time. That was the dream life. Too bad that Garth was Phoebe’s ex. Rose would never side with him after their breakup. Instead, desperate for a part-time job,

she had agreed to help Phoebe do data entry for this stupid company in this stupid office. Literally nothing could be more boring, but it paid her college fees and that's what mattered. Only another month of this and she'd have saved up enough to leave work behind for the semester and focus on school.

Rose tugged her cardigan closer around her body. It was entirely unintentional when her hand slipped into her pocket and she pulled out her phone. She was good at letting her personal life distract her at work.

Twenty minutes after descending into Facebook Hell—surprisingly without reprimand from Phoebe—Rose looked up to see her screen had gone black. She moved the mouse frantically, hoping it was just the screen saver, until she gave up and accepted reality. Her computer had shut itself off again, and she was left staring at her reflection in the darkened monitor screen. The harsh lighting in the office made her blonde hair look white. She did like her new lip gloss, though, even if her lips were turned down in a pout. It brought out the brown of her eyes.

“Goddamn it,” she yelled, smacking the monitor on its side. “This stupid thing is older than I am. It shuts down every time I leave it idle for too long.”

“Why were you leaving it idle?”

“Shut up, Pho.”

“Point Phoebe. You know, you could just fix it yourself. Why are you spending all that money on tuition if you're not going to use your degree?”

Rose pressed the power button on her tower. The lights flashed, followed by a whirring that sounded like a lawn mower, and slowly the computer began rebooting itself. Rose sat back in her chair, unlocked her phone, and waited. “I took some computer science classes, not archaeology classes. I know how to fix real computers, not dinosaurs like this one.”

“You could figure it out,” Phoebe said.

“I could,” Rose agreed, “but why put the tech department out

of a job? Plus, computers aren't my favorite thing in the world. I'm better with numbers. Unlike whoever decided that broken staplers were a better use of the budget than new computers. Do the rest of Gio's branches operate like this or is it just us? Because I have no idea how any company can be internationally successful yet behind the third world in terms of technology. Where is all this money we're making going?"

"Hey, Rose. Hi, Phoebe." At the sound of her name, Rose looked up to see Mason approaching.

Rose and Phoebe's cubicle was in the back corner, far away from most of the people who did the real work in the office. They seldom had visitors. Rose was glad to see Mason, though.

"Hey! What's up?" she greeted him.

"Oh, nothing much." He rested his arm over the cubicle wall. "I'm just bored and on my break. Have you guys drawn for the Secret Santa yet?"

"We're doing a gift exchange?" she asked, surprised. "I hope someone gets me a new computer. This thing's a piece of shit." She gestured at the monitor which had blacked out again while she talked to Mason. This time she didn't even attempt to turn it back on.

"Need me to fix it?" Mason asked. "I can do it in..." He glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes when I'm on the clock and getting paid for it."

"Sounds good to me." Rose shrugged, then turned to Phoebe. "And that's what I mean by keeping the tech department in business."

He turned to head off, but Phoebe's cry stopped him. "No, wait!" He froze mid-step like a burglar caught sneaking into a house.

Phoebe cleared her throat. "I just mean... You're off the clock. You should get one of the other technicians to do it. Like...Harley. Maybe."

Mason and Rose shared a knowing look, and Mason took a step back.

"All right," he said, grinning. "I can get Harley to come over here

for you. I'll get her to bring the Secret Santa bowl too, so you can draw out your names."

Phoebe nodded and returned to work with a satisfied smile. Rose grinned too, then stuck a finger down her throat in a gagging motion for Mason's benefit. He laughed, and Phoebe shot them both a suspicious glare.

Rose feigned innocence. "Hey, don't look at me like that. All I've done today is save Harley's job by giving her work to do. You should be grateful."

"So who'd you draw for the Secret Santa?" Phoebe asked Mason, changing the subject.

"You'll never guess."

"You're right, I probably won't."

There were too many people at this company for Rose to know all of them, especially when she was confined to her cubicle most of the time she was here. Aside from traveling across the office to the bathroom or to the kitchen on breaks, Rose hadn't seen much of the place. If her computer actually worked like it was supposed to, she would never even have met Mason or Harley.

Mason dug into his pocket and held up a piece of paper proudly. Rose squinted to read it, but Mason was all too eager to tell her. "Bailey."

Rose racked her brain for a moment to place the name. "Is Bailey that hot manager you have a crush on?"

"He sure is," Mason confirmed, folding the strip of paper and slipping it back into his khakis. "Drawing his name was the most luck I've ever had."

"Or it was fate," Phoebe offered kindly.

"Fate. Luck. Whatever it is, I'll take it." Mason glanced at his watch again. "Anyway, I better get back to work. I'll make sure to get Harley for you, Pho."

Phoebe blushed but recovered well and offered Mason a small "thanks" before he left.

Rose continued to ignore her computer. She'd care about it again

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once Harley made it operable. Until then, she had better things to preoccupy herself with.

“So,” Rose drawled, wheeling her chair closer to Phoebe. “You and Harley, huh?”

Phoebe pushed her away playfully, sending Rose rolling back to the opposite side of the cubicle. “Whatever, Walsh.” Phoebe spoke confidently. “Harley’s hot and you know it.”

“I didn’t say she wasn’t,” Rose agreed. “You should go for it. I’m just jealous you’re moving on from Garth so fast. I haven’t been with anyone since Chad, and I’m starting to wonder if I should hit on Harley myself.”

Phoebe glared at her. “I saw her first. She’s mine.”

“Gross, Pho,” Rose scolded playfully. “She’s not an unmarked plot of land you can stick a flag in and call your own. If that’s how you treat women perhaps I should let Harley know.”

“Rose, you know I wouldn’t—”

“Joking.” Rose held her hands up. “You’re so snappy today. ’Bout time you got laid again.”

“You’re one to talk,” Phoebe said. “Garth broke up with me two weeks ago. Chad broke up with you two *months* ago. Have you even talked to anyone else yet?”

“Well there was someone who tried to hit on me a few weeks ago,” Rose said tentatively. “But I turned them down. Not for the reason you think,” she quickly interjected. “Not because of Chad. He was a shitty boyfriend, and I’m over him.”

“Someone was flirting with you?” Phoebe asked curiously. “What the hell? Why didn’t you tell me? We’re best friends. We’re supposed to tell each other everything.”

Rose shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d want to know.”

“Of course I want to know!” Phoebe exclaimed. “Who was it?”

“Your brother.”

The silence in the cubicle was almost as awkward as it had been for Rose to be hit on by her best friend’s brother. Phoebe didn’t take long to break it.

“Ew. You’re right. I didn’t want to know. I think it’s safe to say that Christopher has officially hit on everyone now.”

“Pretty much.”

“For real, though.” Phoebe shifted backward. “You should find someone new. Or at least get laid sometime soon.”

“I know.” Rose sighed. “But I don’t trust any random dude to pick me up in a bar for the night, and girls always want to take things further. I don’t think I’m ready for another relationship yet. Not while I’m busy with school and work.” Rose paused for a moment, considering. “Some sex sure would be nice, though.”

“Masturbate more,” Phoebe offered helpfully.

“Tried that,” Rose answered honestly. “I’m already bored of touching myself.”

“Then spice it up.”

“Huh?”

“Get yourself a nice dildo.”

Rose chewed her bottom lip for a moment. “That’s...not a bad idea, actually.”

“Of course it’s not,” Phoebe said. “Have I ever given you bad advice?”

Rose could recall many, many nights when Phoebe had urged her to drink those extra shots. Or to pour more vodka into that Moscow Mule. She recalled the mornings after those many, many nights. Mornings spent on the bathroom floor in front of the toilet. And she could also recall the day Phoebe had suggested Rose take this job.

Before Rose could call Phoebe out on all of the awful advice she had given her over the years, Harley peeked her head around the corner of their cubicle.

“I heard there’s a computer that needs fixing?”

In one hand Harley held her tool box. The other gripped a small bowl filled halfway with folded strips of paper, which she set on the counter.

“Yes.” Rose rolled away from her desk to give Harley more space

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to work. "It's a piece of junk. I'm not even sure it's worth fixing at this point. I need a new one."

"No way this office can afford new computers," Harley told her, crawling underneath Rose's desk. "They haven't had a budget for that since the nineties, judging by the age of this thing."

Rose could have figured that out. It was clear from day one that whoever was operating this place either didn't have money or didn't have any idea how to allocate it. If Rose were in charge of an international corporation like Gio, her employees would have a lot more to work with than mediocre equipment and a lack of job security. Hell, if all went according to plan, she could get her degree and buy Gio out in ten years. With Rose in charge, maybe this branch would actually be successful and everyone here would make the wages they deserved.

"Oh, you guys can draw names if you want." Harley gestured to the ceramic bowl.

Phoebe smiled and settled the bowl on her lap. Rose reached between her legs to grab a name.

Vivian Tracey. Rose had never heard of her.

Phoebe busied herself drawing a name, and her eyes went wide as soon as she read the slip. She tilted the paper toward Rose. "Look," she whispered.

Rose read. *Harley Dayton.*

"Fate," she said, and Phoebe nodded.

"You look happy." Harley glanced up from where she was unscrewing the cover of Rose's CPU. "Who'd you get?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Phoebe teased. "It's called a Secret Santa for a reason. I'm not telling anyone whose name I drew until the gift exchange. You'll just have to wait to find out."

"Boo." Harley pouted. "Who'd you get, Rose?"

"I have no idea," she said honestly. "Some girl."

Harley nodded understandingly. "Yeah, I have no idea who the person I drew is either. Guess I'll meet them at the Christmas party."

Rose watched Phoebe's face brighten at the word *party*. It wasn't the first time. "When's the party?"

"Christmas Eve. We've still got a couple weeks until we have to spend money we don't have on complete strangers we don't care about."

"Do you think someone'll get me a new computer?" Rose asked hopefully.

Harley scoffed. "Yeah, if hell freezes over like this damn office. Have you seen this place's budget? They're in the fucking tank. I can't believe they can even afford to pay us as much as they do, and they sure don't pay us a lot. The insurance here barely covers enough physical therapy for me to pay for the rest on my own. I know we're just regular employees, but even the managers can't make much more than us."

Rose and Phoebe nodded in understanding.

Harley snapped the cover back on the tower. "Well, your computer should work for at least the rest of the day. It's still a piece of shit, though. There are some miracles even I can't perform." She crawled back out.

"Thanks, Harley. You're a life saver."

"Don't mention it." Harley tossed her tools carelessly back in the toolbox. She took much more care in grabbing the bowl off of Phoebe's thighs, standing closer than she needed to.

Rose let them have their moment.

"Well, I guess I'll see both of you at the Christmas party." Harley tucked the bowl against her side.

"You most definitely will," Phoebe said.

Harley's smile widened. "See you around, Pho."

"Damn," Rose said after Harley left. "She totally has a thing for you."

Phoebe leaned back in her chair, throwing her arms over her head and stretching. "I know," she moaned. "And it's so great."

"I'm jealous," Rose admitted. She missed the thrill of infatuation. The breathlessness, the giddiness. The way that special someone

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made her body feel. The way she could think of no one else. But at least she could live vicariously through her best friend.

“You should be jealous, Rose,” Phoebe said dreamily. “You should be very jealous.”

* * *

“So I ordered two of them.”

Rose was actually working for a change and had been for the past couple of hours. Her computer hadn't shut down in days, and it was so refreshing to have the screen stay on that Rose thought she'd take advantage of the opportunity and help out Phoebe by doing some work.

“Two of what?” Phoebe asked distractedly, glancing over from her own desk.

“What you told me to buy,” Rose said. “Dildos.”

Phoebe paused. “Why do you need two?” Her hands hovered over her keyboard as she focused on Rose. “I'm going to regret asking that, aren't I? Never mind, don't answer. I don't want to hear about your weird double penetration fetish.”

“They're not both for me.” Rose's face scrunched in discomfort at the thought. “Plus they were on sale. Buy one get one free.”

“Who else are you buying dildos for?”

“Whoever this girl I drew for the Secret Santa is.”

Phoebe quickly trundled her seat over to Rose and said in a harsh whisper, “Rose, you cannot give some random girl a dildo for Christmas. You are going to get in so much trouble for that.”

“What are they going to do? Fire me?” Rose looked Phoebe straight in the eye. “Oh no!” She gasped and clutched her face. “What a *tragedy*.”

“Rose, I'm serious,” Phoebe whispered. “That's an awful idea, and you know it.”

“I think you meant to say a *hilarious* idea,” Rose corrected. “And incredibly economical.”

“It won’t be hilarious if you embarrass that poor girl and she files a sexual harassment lawsuit against you,” Phoebe said.

“Come on, Pho. It’s just a gag gift—it’s not that serious. I’m sure she’ll laugh at it. This office is so boring. I can’t be the only one dying for a little excitement. You have to admit it is kind of a funny idea.”

“Okay,” Phoebe said, taking a breath. “It’s *kind of* funny. But in the story way. If someone told me they did that once upon a time, I’d laugh. But if my coworker slash best friend is telling me they’re going to do it and probably get themselves fired, it’s not quite as funny. At least get the girl a real gift, too. One she can actually show her children when she gets home and they ask her what she got.”

Rose sighed. “Fine. We’ll compromise. That’s one of your better ideas, I guess.”

“Hey. Have I ever given you a bad ide—”

“Yes,” Rose cut her off. “You’re giving me party-pooing ideas right now. When I tell this story to all our friends and they laugh their asses off, I’ll let them know how you tried to stop me and ruin the fun.”

“Bitch.”

“Damn right I am,” Rose said proudly, opening a browser on her computer. “I guess I’ll buy the girl some soaps or a candle or something. You know, in case she wants to use the dildo in the bathtub or have mood lighting while she fucks herself. Or both.”

“You’re a perv.”

Rose ignored her.

“Did you order the dildos online, too?” Phoebe asked. Rose nodded. “You think everything will show up before Christmas Eve?”

“Of course. I even got free delivery.”

* * *

The first package arrived right on time.

Right on time for Rose’s mother, Beth, to answer the UPS man at the door. Which would have been fine if she hadn’t opened the box.

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When Rose came home to find the cardboard package with the tape already ripped off its lid, it was almost as traumatizing as that time in seventh grade she came home to find her mom reading her diary.

Rose didn't even take time to look at the box's contents. She marched to the living room where her mother was on the couch watching TV.

"When you told me I got a package in the mail, I didn't think you'd *opened* it." Rose glared at her mother.

"If it's any consolation, I wish I hadn't," Beth said, her gaze faltering as she looked at Rose. She turned her head to look intently at the TV screen instead. "I won't go through your stuff anymore," she promised. Rose didn't believe her. "I didn't know you were expecting anything, and I thought there might have been a mix-up."

"Well, just to warn you before you go on another ransacking rampage like an airport baggage inspector, I have another package coming soon."

Beth winced.

"It's soap!"

Beth shut her eyes and waved her hand dismissively. "I don't want to know, ok? I'm sorry. I'll make sure to leave your mail alone and put it in your room when it arrives."

Rose sighed. Her mother should have done that with this particular package. Who cared if she opened a box to find an innocent bath set? "Thanks," she said half-heartedly, and headed off to her room.

She called Phoebe immediately.

When the call picked up, Rose wasted no time with pleasantries. "Guess what I got in the mail and guess who opened it before I got home?"

"Gross," Phoebe mumbled.

"Yeah," Rose said. "I'm twenty-three. I really need to move out of here. You and I should get an apartment together next semester."

Phoebe scoffed on the other end of the line. "Yeah, right. Christopher could never afford a place on his own. Unless you want

to live with my brother and endure him hitting on you 24/7, that probably wouldn't work out. Plus, what would your mom do? You pay most of her bills, and you can't exactly leave her to fend for herself while she doesn't have a job. The guilty conscience would be worse than living with Christopher."

"At least he wouldn't open my packages."

"No, but if he knew you were ordering sex toys, he'd be offering to help you test them out as soon as they arrived. Not worth it."

"Good point."

"I know it is."

"Anyway." Rose braced her phone between her shoulder and her ear, freeing both of her hands to pull back the flaps on the box.

The cardboard was innocent enough on the outside, in that it was free of any information that might give away what the product was or the company who made it. The contents themselves were drowned in packing peanuts, which only showed that Beth had gone to extensive lengths to see what was inside. This only irked Rose more.

It took a solid thirty seconds of digging for her fingers to find both sharp plastic packages the dildos were encased in. When she finally freed them from the box, her eyes went as wide as she imagined her mother's had.

"Holy shit, Pho," she breathed into the phone. "These are way bigger than I thought they'd be."

"Pardon the pun, but can you expand? Are you saying 'holy shit, the size of this thing makes it even more hilarious for the prank,' or 'holy shit, fucking myself with this is going to be epic'?" Phoebe asked.

"Both?"

"Gross."

Moving to sit on the bed, Rose tossed one of the dildos back into the box where it landed with a thunk. She retrieved her phone from her shoulder with her free hand and kept her grip on the second package with the other.

The plastic around the dildo was translucent, giving Rose a

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preview of exactly how big and how detailed this thing was. She had severely underestimated the size of eight inches and had severely overestimated the size of all of her ex-boyfriends. The strip of paper in the background of the package showed some shirtless, muscled dude, and Rose was too afraid to read any of the text beside it. The dildo itself was hyper-realistic, more veiny than she thought actual dicks could be and thicker than was probably safe. If it wasn't missing the balls and redder than Phoebe's blush when Harley was around, it'd be a dead ringer for the real thing. A mutant, overgrown version of the real thing, but still.

"I'm so excited about this prank, Pho. You've got to see this thing."

"Send me pictures," Phoebe suggested. "I want to send them to Harley. I was telling her about your prank, by the way, and she loves it. She thinks you're going to get fired, but she also thinks it's going to be hilarious."

"So you and Harley are already at the point where you're discussing sex toys?" Rose asked. "Wow, Phoebe, you move even faster than I thought."

"Shut up."

"I'm kidding. How'd you get her number?"

"She gave it to me," Phoebe said. "I ran into her by the water cooler and we got to talking. Next thing you know, she's putting her number in my phone."

"Harley Dayton doesn't seem like the type to hang out by the water cooler."

"She was *fixing* the water cooler."

"God." Rose sighed. "I thought she only did computers. Is there anything that girl can't fix?"

"Nope." Phoebe boasted. "She's already doing a good job mending my broken heart, too."

Rose laughed. "Wow, that was probably the cheesiest thing I've ever heard anybody say. But I'm happy for you. When's the wedding?"

"We're eloping to Vegas in the spring. You can't come."

"Whatever," Rose scoffed. "I'm going to be right there beside

Elvis in that drive-through chapel when you're saying your vows and feeding Harley that same shitty line about fixing your broken heart that you just told me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Good."

Rose tossed the dildo into the box with the other one. She was tired of looking at it. The more she stared, the creepier it became. She closed the box and slid it under her bed for the moment. She'd worry about wrapping the gift later when the soaps arrived.

"What'd you get Harley?" Rose asked. Phoebe had been stressing for weeks about finding the perfect gift, and it was nearing the time when she'd have to commit to a decision. There were only so many days left before the party.

"I got her this watch. It's supposed to be scary accurate and waterproof and indestructible and shit. It's got a compass and tells latitude and longitude, whatever that means. I have no idea how to work it, so I'm guessing Harley will like it."

"Sounds perfect to me," Rose told her. "It also sounds expensive."

"Yeah, well, when your Secret Santa is probably going to be your next girlfriend, you shouldn't be afraid to go all out."

Rose nodded. "I almost spent more on my gift than I should have," she said. "But I did get that deal, so it was worth it."

"Definitely. Good thing you're good with money, because you certainly won't be making any after you get fired for this stupid prank."

Rose rolled her eyes. "See, you keep stressing that point, but I still don't care. Getting fired doesn't sound that bad. This job sucks."

Phoebe sighed, defeated. "And it's gonna suck a lot more without my best friend there to keep me company."

"You could always quit."

"Yeah, right," Phoebe scoffed. "Some of us don't have our budget planned out so well that we only have to work part of the year."

"Sucks for you."

"Go fuck yourself."

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Rose glanced to the edge of her bed where she knew the box was tucked out of sight. "I might."

"Ugh." Phoebe gagged. "I didn't need to hear that. And you suck. I hope that girl's soap doesn't arrive in time and you're stuck wasting your money on it and giving her only the dildo."

"Yeah, right. Like that'll happen."

* * *

Phoebe Connor was a god.

Or at least had good connections with a couple of demons. Or maybe oracles? Rose's second package did not arrive in time for the party.

Telling Phoebe she was godlike was not Rose's proudest moment. Nor was admitting she was wrong. That was harder than wrapping a dildo in gift paper without the shape of the thing immediately giving away what it was. Rose ended up having to wrap the package in its box.

"I can't believe you didn't get her a replacement gift." Phoebe shook her head in astonishment.

"What was I supposed to do?" Rose asked. "Give her the half-used bar of soap I washed my ass with this morning?"

"I think it's funnier that it's just the dildo," Harley said.

"I think it's irresponsible," Phoebe said.

As honored as Rose was to witness their first squabble as an unofficial couple, a bigger part of her wanted to get to the party before it was too late. "Stop fighting and let's go get food. I don't want to arrive when the refreshments table has been picked clean. You know how much Mason loves snack cakes."

The acquisition of free food was something neither Harley nor Phoebe wished to delay. They called a truce and followed Rose across the office.

The break room was decorated for the holidays as cheaply as possible. A small felt Christmas tree sagged in the corner by the

coffee pot. A string of red and green lights was draped over the top of the door frame, and someone had gone through the effort of hand-crafting a string of identical paper snowflakes only to snip them apart from one another and tape them individually to the backs of the windows. It was festive. A little pathetic, but festive.

The room was packed, and Rose's line of sight bored through the crowd of bodies to focus solely on the snack table where Bailey was pouring himself punch. Mason stood beside him stuffing his face with Hostess Christmas Trees.

"Hey, Mason. Hi, Bailey."

"Rose!" Mason quickly covered his mouth and swallowed before speaking again. "Rose. Look at this cool tie Bailey got me." He grabbed the tie around his neck and showed it to Rose while he spun around slowly like a model. "He was my Secret Santa, too! What are the chances?"

Rose studied the tie carefully, looking for something that set it apart. It was just...blue. A standard, not particularly fashionable tie. Which was strange considering Bailey had the jawline of a Greek god and looked like he belonged on a Milan catwalk. Maybe he knew Mason didn't care as much about fashion as he did. Rose decided to let it go and lie. "Yeah. It looks...great."

Mason leaned closer and whispered, "It's got a flask on the back." He spun the tie around to expose a thin, elongated metal tube. Mason could easily store a few swigs of his famous moonshine in it. With this job, he'd need it. Bailey and Mason winked at Rose in sync.

"Now that is pretty cool," she admitted. "Are we really giving gifts already? I thought someone was supposed to give a speech or something."

"The boss is," Bailey told her with a shrug. "I just got too excited and couldn't resist."

"In that case." Harley handed her present over to Phoebe. "This is for you."

Phoebe looked like, well, a kid at Christmas. "Shut up." She gasped. "You drew my name?"

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Harley looked confused until Phoebe handed her own gift over. Harley laughed in disbelief.

“Phoebe Connor, I don’t believe it. I shouldn’t have taken my eyes off that bowl. I bet you dug through and picked out my name on purpose.”

“I’ll have you know I picked your name on the first try, thank you very much. You can ask Rose.”

“It’s true.” Rose snatched one of the last few snack cakes before Mason could grab it. She hoped Mason had spiked the punch with his new flask.

“Hey, Bailey?” Rose took a sip from the cup. The red slurry was disappointingly alcohol-free.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“You’re a manager, right? You know everyone here?”

“Pretty much.”

“Can you show me who Vivian Tracey is? I drew her name and I have no idea what she looks like.”

“Oh, sure.” He stood on his tiptoes for a moment and looked around before pointing to a woman hovering near the front of the room. “She’s over there. Curly brown hair. Cute gray blazer. Kinda tallish. It looks like she’s talking to Jana.”

Rose spotted her immediately. “You’re a saint, Bailey.”

“No problem.”

The crowd was denser now, and navigating through was harder than the first time. Especially with a drink in her hand. Vivian was hard to lose sight of, though. Rose had seen her swanning around but didn’t know what department she worked for.

Up close, Vivian was intimidating. She was not much older than Rose. Her eyes were a piercing green, and her hair was layered in a stylish cut with auburn highlights. Her tailored blazer and matching skirt graced an athletic figure and told Rose this woman put as much thought into her work appearance as Bailey did. She looked beautiful, crisp, and professional.

She also looked like the type who would rat Rose out after she

found out what her gift was. Rose figured it was best not to linger in her presence for very long. She adjusted her plan. No hanging around for a hearty laugh together. Approach, hand over the present, say “Happy holidays,” and back away. She’d be gone before Vivian could remember her face.

By now Vivian and Jana were watching her dithering on their periphery. They looked curious yet impatient, as if she had interrupted an important conversation. It was too late to back out now.

“Hi. I’m your Secret Santa,” Rose said, putting on her best fake smile. She held out her gift.

Vivian took the package tentatively and shot Rose her own polite smile. “Thank you.”

“Happy holidays.” Rose retreated rapidly.

“You too,” Vivian said, before turning back to her conversation and letting Rose slip away.

Mission accomplished. Rose quickly made her way back to her friends.

“What did you get Vivian?” Bailey asked when she returned.

Rose was still riding the high of her own joke. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this since you’re technically one of my higher-ups,” she said. “But I trust you. Get this.” She laughed. “I got her an even better gag gift than you got Mason. I gave her a dildo.”

The color drained from Bailey’s face. Mason looked pale, too.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” Bailey said in a hushed voice.

“Nope.”

“Rose,” Mason whispered, “Vivian Tracey is the president of this entire company.”

Rose looked to Mason, then to Bailey, waiting for one of them to burst into laughter and tell her they had teamed up to prank her. Neither of them delivered the punchline.

Rose tapped Phoebe on the shoulder. “Does Vivian Tracey really run this company?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Rose swallowed. Hard. “I just hand-delivered a dildo to her.”

You're Fired

Phoebe's eyes bugged out of her head. "You drew *Vivian's* name?"

Rose nodded.

Harley patted her on the shoulder. "It was nice knowing you."

"I have to get that present back." Rose began to head for the front of the room when an authoritarian voice rang out. It was Vivian's.

"Hey, everyone!"

"Too late." Mason grabbed her. "She's started her holiday speech."

Rose froze. She had until Vivian finished her speech to figure out if she was going for fight or flight.

"I know this year hasn't been easy and we've seen more than a few of our friends and coworkers lose their jobs," Vivian told the hushed room. "But I say we take a moment to be thankful this holiday season that we're still here. The company has scraped through another year and that's all thanks to you guys."

"Run," Harley told Rose. "You've got two good legs. Use 'em. Slip out of here while no one's looking. Go type up your letter of resignation at your desk, collect your shit, and get out. Vivian will kill you if she catches you."

"Vivian's going to kill everyone if she opens that box," Phoebe said. "We're never going to have a Christmas party again. Go get your stupid gift back from her!"

In the face of such contradictory advice Rose had to admit running sounded better. Saving *herself* sounded better. But—always a but—she couldn't let the rest of her office go down with her. Phoebe was right. If Vivian found out any of Rose's friends knew what she was up to and didn't stop her, they would all be out of their jobs. She had to get that package back.

She pushed her way through the crowd just as Vivian was finishing up.

"You all deserve a little break. So go ahead and have fun. Eat the food, exchange your gifts, and enjoy each other's company. I'll see you all back in the office after the party." Vivian raised her cup in toast.

Halfway across the room, Rose saw Vivian tearing open the gift

wrap. She cursed under her breath, sped up and stomped on more than a few toes trying to maneuver her way through the crowd faster.

By the time she'd squeezed through the lid was off the box and Vivian's hand was firmly gripping something in the middle of the sea of packing peanuts. The pupils of her eyes grew wide enough to be mistaken for eight balls.

It was too late. Far, far too late.

"What'd you get?" Rose overheard Jana ask.

Before Vivian could respond, Rose burst in between them. "It's just a gag gift. I left the real present at home this morning by accident. Silly me." Rose slapped her forehead to underline her stupidity. "I'm such a mess."

Jana eyed Rose suspiciously, obviously trying to place her. Vivian eyed her, obviously trying to decide what to do with her dead body after she killed her.

Rose tried her best to smooth over the situation. "You know what?" she continued to lie. "I think I'll go home on my lunch break, get the real present, and then bring it to your office later. How does that sound?"

The snake-like speed at which Vivian replaced the scowl on her face with a wide, wicked smile scared Rose even more than her earlier death glare.

"Yes," Vivian said sweetly. "I would *love* to see you in my office later."

Rose swallowed hard and tried her best to keep her cool.

It didn't work.

Chapter 2

ROSE ALWAYS THOUGHT SHE'D GO out with a bang. She'd party as hardy as possible until it was time to face the consequences of her actions. In this case, meeting Vivian in her office that afternoon to arrange her own funeral. Except the office party wasn't where she wanted to chew off the foot she'd already put in her mouth. It was far preferable not to be in the same room as Vivian when she didn't have to be. Instead, she went back to her desk and contemplated her demise.

She could still run, as Harley had wisely suggested. She could slip out of the office while everyone was at the party, go home, wait for the angry phone call—the one she wouldn't answer—delete the voicemail message telling her she'd lost her job, and just not show up at the office ever again. It could be that simple. The Risk Analysis class she took last semester would advise her to run and minimize her chances of paying the consequences. Of course, it would also remind her that she couldn't afford it. Her wallet was banking on the exact amount of time she'd need to work with Gio to come up with her funds for the rest of the semester. There were still twenty-eight days left on the clock. One hundred working hours. Four more weeks. She'd be skipping out on a crucial chunk of change.

Rose opened and closed a few desk drawers. She didn't really have anything to pack. The most personal thing she kept at her desk was a pack of gum; she stuffed stick after stick into her mouth until the

package was empty and tossed it, along with the wad of wrappers, into the trash can in the corner.

Now there was nothing to show she had ever been here. No evidence to leave behind.

They could keep their shitty computer, the spinning chair, the drawer full of office supplies she now contemplated pocketing. She'd given the boss a dildo, so a pad or two of sticky notes seemed like a fair trade, right?

Phoebe's side of the cubicle was much more personal. Her purse sat by her chair. There was a framed picture of her and Christopher on the desk. And a Post-it note with Garth's name, a heart around it, and then a big, angry, red X on top of that, stuck to the wall. Phoebe cared about this job. She had settled in and become comfortable. She had something going for her here and if Rose ruined that by dragging Phoebe into this mess or leaving her without a partner to help her with work, she'd never forgive herself.

Phoebe was right. She had to face Vivian and take the brunt of the blame by herself. She couldn't let Vivian come looking for her and risk having Phoebe or any of the others be the ones she let her anger out on. Besides, it was cowardly to run.

"You're still alive?" Phoebe came up behind her. "You ran off. Harley and I placed bets on which town park Vivian was going to bury you in." Behind the jokey bravado her eyes were full of worry.

"Put me down for five dollars on 'tosses my body in the dumpster.' I haven't talked to her yet. I mean, I *did*, but only long enough for her to tell me to meet her in her office once the party is over. I think it goes without saying that she opened her present before I got to her."

Phoebe sunk into her chair. "Well, I've got more bad news for you," she said. "Party's over."

Rose groaned. "Thanks, Pho. What would I ever do without you?"

"Probably give your boss two dildos instead of one."

"You're probably right." Rose shook her head. "I should've given her mine, as well. I'm never going to be able to look at it after this, let alone use it. Vivian's more likely to do something with it than I am."

You're Fired

"I don't think she could use both at the same time," Phoebe told her. "She's already got a stick up her ass."

"Well, maybe she can replace it with the dildo. Sounds more sanitary."

"Yeah, I'm sure she's calling you into her office to thank you for helping her hygienically shove things up her ass."

"God, what if she shoves it up *my* ass?"

"That's probably more pleasant than what she's actually going to do to you"

Rose slumped, banging her forehead against her desk for probably the last time ever. It was a poignant moment. Her jaw smacked nervously on her gum. "I'm fucked."

"Again, that would be better than what she's actually going to do to you."

"You're not helping, Phoebe."

"I tried to help you two weeks ago when you told me you were buying a dildo as a Secret Santa gift," Phoebe argued, pulling her chair up to her desk and starting up her computer. "But did you listen to me? No."

"If the party's over, I should probably be making my way to her office now. I'm putting it off, though."

"It shouldn't be too bad," Phoebe reasoned. "The worst she can do is fire you. Well, actually, she could charge you with sexual harassment, and I wouldn't really blame her if she did because she definitely has a case. Though I doubt this company has enough money to handle a lawsuit, so if she does that she'd probably be out of a job too, which I'm sure she doesn't want. I'd imagine the worst that'll happen is that she fires you."

"Yeah, you're right. I saw this coming, so I shouldn't be that afraid." Rose stood up and slid her chair back under her desk. It was now or never. "Better get going before she comes looking for me."

Phoebe nodded, then stood and wrapped her arms around her. "Good luck."

Rose buried her head in Phoebe's shoulder. Her voice came out muffled against the collar of her button-up. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. You're gonna do fine. But just in case, should I start putting your stuff up on eBay to help pay for the funeral?"

Rose pulled away from Phoebe with a fake glare. "Some friend you are. Speaking of my stuff, I told Vivian I had her real present, but, uh, I don't. The soap didn't come on time. Should I give her something anyway?"

"Wouldn't hurt." Phoebe shrugged. "Probably won't help either, but it's worth a shot."

"God, what do I give her, though?" Rose panicked, searching her desk for something usable. Her hands met metal and she held the tool up in the air. "Think she could use a stapler?"

"That stapler doesn't even work," Phoebe pointed out.

"Of course not." Rose slammed it back down. "All right." She braced herself, hovering in the entryway of the cubicle. "Forget the gift. I've got to go. Make sure I look fabulous at my funeral."

"You got it, girl. Love you."

"Love you, too."

* * *

Vivian's office shouldn't have been hard to find, considering it was the nicest room in the building, but it was. After wandering around the maze of the main office Rose found herself by the tech support station asking Mason where to go. He knew exactly where Vivian's office was (apparently not even the president had working equipment), but the whole time he was giving Rose directions there was a sadness in his eyes and a sympathy in his voice that made Rose feel patronized, as if Phoebe had stuck a *dead woman walking* sign to her back when she hugged her good-bye. It didn't help calm her down.

When she found Vivian's office, the first thing she noticed was that the door was surrounded by glass windows. That was good.

You're Fired

Vivian could hardly murder her without someone witnessing it from the outside. The second thing she noticed was that Jana was in Vivian's office with her and they were both poring over a file, their heads almost touching.

She barely had time to sit down outside Vivian's office before Jana came out. She gave Rose a knowing look. Then, smirking, she shook her head and left, calling back over her shoulder, "Nice gift. Wish you had been my Secret Santa."

Rose was left sitting there, speechless, wondering why Vivian had told Jana about the gag gift. If it was such a joke, then why was she here worrying herself sick?

She swallowed her gum and entered the office, shutting the door behind her.

Vivian hadn't moved from behind her desk. She was preoccupied with something on it, and it took her a moment to notice that Rose had come in. When she saw her, her face didn't soften, and given the way she was scowling, that was not a good sign.

Rose swallowed again.

Vivian straightened her jaw. "Sit." She didn't even need to gesture to the chair. Rose slowly sank into the seat in front of Vivian's desk and waited for a trap, like the chair to strap her down and electrocute her. She shifted uncomfortably.

Vivian finally looked up after Rose had stewed for several minutes.

"I must admit, Ms. Walsh," she said. "This *is* the most creative way any of my employees has ever told me to go fuck myself."

Rose didn't expect Vivian to start off with a joke, but she knew better than to assume this was going to be a light-hearted conversation, especially considering Vivian had already figured out her name and who she was sometime in the past hour since the party. She might have been joking around, but she wasn't messing around, and Rose would rather get straight to the point and get this meeting over with as soon as possible.

"Look, I'm really sorry," she said. "It wasn't like that. I honestly did get you a real gift, I just ordered it late and it didn't arrive on

time. I had no idea you were the president of the company, and I just wanted to have some fun. The gag idea was stupid and I'm sorry. I won't pull it again."

Vivian smiled wickedly. "No, you won't." Vivian hardened her features. "But believe it or not, I'm glad you pulled this little stunt on me rather than someone else. This is a lawsuit waiting to happen."

"I don't want that," Rose said, knowing she couldn't afford a good lawyer. "I'd rather just be fired."

Vivian toyed with her pen for a moment, clicking the end repeatedly until the tip poked out, then disappeared back into its sheath of plastic. She seemed to be scrutinizing Rose's level of honesty carefully. Rose didn't expect her next words.

"Who said I was going to fire you?"

She scrunched her brow. "Aren't you?"

"I was," Vivian admitted. "But someone suggested I keep you around."

Rose choked on the lump in her throat, and it wasn't the gum climbing its way back up from her stomach, it was emotion.

"Phoebe?" If Phoebe had risked her job to approach Vivian at that party and ask her to go easy, then Rose owed her one. She couldn't ask for a better friend.

"No."

Or a shittier friend.

"Who then?" Had Harley done it? Mason? She was too scared to mention their names.

"Jana. She's the vice president of the company. You're lucky she got to me before you did, or we wouldn't be having this conversation right now. You'd already be out the front door."

"Oh. What does she have to do with this?"

"I was ready to fire you on the spot, but Jana is the one who pulled up your files." Vivian lifted a manila folder from her desk and held it up for Rose to see. "This says you're an Applied Mathematics major. You any good with numbers?"

"That's usually what math entails, yes."

You're Fired

“Ever done any accounting?”

Rose bit back a “more than you” and settled on, “I’ve dabbled.”

“Good. That means you’ll do fine with your new assignment.”

“New assignment?” Rose asked. “You mean I’m really not getting fired?”

“Not yet,” Vivian said. “We need someone to double check a few financial reports for us, and someone with your skills shouldn’t be doing data entry. If you can prove yourself useful, I might forgive your little misstep.”

This was going much better than Rose had planned. Too well. There had to be a catch. “Let me get this straight. I gave you a dildo, and you gave me a promotion?”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Vivian said. “But I am giving you a new office.”

“Where is it?”

Vivian pointed to the corner of the room where Rose noticed an open door and an adjacent room so small it didn’t deserve the title of office. “That’s a storage closet,” she said.

“Yep.”

“There’s not even a desk in there.”

“We’ll work something out.”

“So my punishment is basically a time out?”

Vivian nodded. “Seems fitting, doesn’t it? Juvenile stunt, juvenile punishment.”

Rose was in no place to argue. “All right. When do I start?”

“Now,” Vivian said, rising from her chair. “While you go get your things from your old station, I’ll round up that desk for you.”

“So we’re done here? Just like that?” Rose released her grip on Vivian’s desk, which she hadn’t even realized she was holding. She also didn’t realize how strained her knuckles had been until they ached as they detached. She stretched her hands out by her sides to bring back the blood flow.

“Not quite.”

Rose braced herself for more stipulations on her new job, but

Vivian did nothing except pull open a desk drawer and hand Rose a neatly-wrapped package from inside it.

“Your Secret Santa said they couldn’t find you at the party. I told them I would give this to you.”

Rose took the gift like it was a bomb. The crinkling of the wrapper as the present exchanged hands startled her like the hissing of a fuse. She looked briefly for a tag, searching for something to let her know this was a genuine present and not some counter-prank Vivian had whipped up right before she’d come into the office, but there was none.

It didn’t take Rose long to realize she was being paranoid. Vivian thought too highly of herself to sink to Rose’s level and start some kind of prank war with her, but Rose wasn’t about to ask her boss who the gift was from and confirm it. It didn’t really matter who it was from, anyway. It wasn’t like Rose would know the person.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

A beat passed where Rose stood in front of Vivian awkwardly, waiting to be dismissed or given another set of instructions, but nothing came. Vivian shuffled the papers around on her desk, closing the cover on the front of Rose’s file and tucking it away in the cabinet behind her. When she spun back around in her chair, she seemed surprised to see Rose still standing there.

“Do you need something? Would you like your dildo back as well?” Vivian’s tone was mocking, and Rose didn’t bother humoring her. With a very intentional eye roll, she made her way to the door.

“Try to save the attitude for someone else,” Vivian said as she turned the handle.

Rose paused with her hand tight around the brass of the knob. It would be simple to flick her wrist, open the door, and leave without saying a word, but Rose wasn’t the type to surrender the last laugh.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got enough of it to go around.”

* * *

You're Fired

Rose wasn't about to leave her old cubicle without telling Phoebe what had happened.

When she went back to her desk, Phoebe was not the only one waiting for her.

Mason, Bailey, and Harley were there too, all smushed into the cubicle that barely had enough room for two. Mason and Bailey were practically holding hands they were standing so close, and Harley looked as if she wanted to be sitting in Phoebe's lap.

"You're alive?" Phoebe asked.

"Somehow, yeah," Rose said.

"It's a Christmas miracle!" Phoebe said. "If you'd been gone thirty seconds longer, I'd have had all your worldly goods on eBay." Phoebe closed a tab on her PC.

"Look on the bright side," Bailey said. "We all make more money than Rose now. Tell us, what's it like not to have a job anymore?"

All eyes were on her, waiting for the story of how Vivian kicked her off the payroll. Rose shrugged. "Don't know. I've still got my job."

Everyone was silent until Phoebe spit out, "What?"

"She didn't fire me."

"Jesus!" Harley said. "How the hell did you get yourself out of this one, Walsh? What were you doing in there, blowing her?"

"No, she wanted me to use the dildo instead of my mouth."

Phoebe's jaw hung open.

"That was a joke."

A sigh of relief rocked the cubicle.

Harley still looked a little more impressed than before. "How'd you swing it then if you didn't get into her pants? There's no way it's not company policy to fire someone after they give you a dildo on the clock."

Everyone looked like they wanted an answer just as much as Harley did, and Rose didn't hesitate to tell them.

"She gave me drudge work as punishment. Also, I have a new office. Her storage closet."

Rose should have expected the outburst of laughter, especially from Phoebe.

“I never thought I’d see Rose Walsh back in the closet,” Phoebe said. “When is she going to let you come out again?”

“Who knows? It’s a good thing I’m quitting in a month, because I don’t think I could stand to be cramped in there for much longer than that. And the worst part isn’t even the storage closet. It’s that I have to work right next to *Vivian*. She’s about as much fun as you think she is.”

“It doesn’t look all bad. What’s with the present?” Bailey asked, gesturing to the gift at her side. Rose had already forgotten about it.

“Oh, Vivian gave it to me,” she said absentmindedly. Normally she was all about gifts, but normally she was also able to give people lists of what she wanted before they bought her anything. This was from a stranger who had no idea what she liked. It was probably a pair of socks with dancing snowmen on them.

“Vivian was your Secret Santa?” Mason asked.

“Oh, no. I just ran from the party before my Secret Santa could find me. They gave this to Vivian to pass on to me.”

“Well, open it,” Mason demanded. “It’s Christmas, after all. And what better way to celebrate not getting fired than with presents?”

Rose humored him by tearing into the wrapping paper with less enthusiasm than she normally would. She wadded the snowflake-sprinkled paper into a ball and tossed it into the garbage bin before really looking at the gift in her hands.

“This...this is the exact same bath soap set I ordered for Vivian, only this person got theirs in the mail on time. Glad to know *that* idea was original. And now I have two of these. Looks like it’s bubble baths only for me from now on. Good-bye, shower.”

“Better than a dildo,” Harley said.

This time Rose agreed. She kind of didn’t want to see a sex toy ever again.

Or at least until she got another girlfriend.

“Well, anyway. I’m supposed to leave. Vivian wants me in her

You're Fired

closet pronto. But I couldn't leave without telling you guys what happened first. I didn't want you all worrying about me all day."

"We appreciate it," Bailey told her.

"I'm going to miss you." Phoebe pouted. "What if my new cubemate sucks?"

"They probably will," Rose said. "It's hard to live up to my standards."

Phoebe pulled something off the wall, a piece of paper she wadded up and threw at Rose's nose.

Rose dodged the incoming projectile by catching it. When she unfolded it, she noted it was Garth's cell number. She did her best friend a favor and balled it up again before putting it in her pocket. She'd throw it away when she got home. Phoebe didn't need it anymore.

Chapter 3

VIVIAN'S IDEA OF A DESK was nothing more than a fold-up TV tray, and Rose plus the table took up all the space in the storage closet. An hour into her first full day of work by Vivian's side and her legs were already cramped. There wasn't even enough space to fit a desktop in the room. Vivian had handed her a small laptop to work on that looked suspiciously nice, meaning it was probably Vivian's personal property rather than anything given to her by the company. Rose was afraid she'd break it.

It was such a foreign feeling to have a working computer for once that she almost didn't know what to do with herself. It made work so much smoother, she could almost forget about the leg cramp. Too bad her job was boring as hell.

Rose found data entry less than thrilling, but at least she and Phoebe had a specific goal in mind when they set out on a day's work. Vivian had instructed Rose to sift through some financial reports, but she hadn't told Rose what she was supposed to be looking for. By noon, Rose was starting to think that she wasn't looking for anything. She was being sent on a wild goose chase, most likely Vivian's idea of a practical joke.

Until Rose found it.

Rose didn't even have to move an inch in order to poke her head out of the closet doorway. "Yo, I found something."

Vivian's face was buried in her ledgers. When she looked up, her

brow was furrowed and her hair was almost as messy as Phoebe's on Monday morning after a weekend of drinking. She was haggard, and Rose wasn't about to improve her mood.

"Already?" she asked.

"If you think you can underestimate me, you've got a lot to learn. You've also got a problem."

Vivian rose from her desk, taking off her glasses and tossing them on top of her files. She was just barely able to squeeze into the closet with Rose. If Rose wasn't already claustrophobic, she was quickly developing symptoms.

"Look," Rose said, pointing at the screen.

"At what?" Vivian leaned down beside her until their heads were only inches apart. Whatever perfume she was wearing, it was much nicer than anything Rose owned. She let herself bask in the luxury of it for a moment.

"This is the number the board reported giving you at the start of the year. This is the number you actually got."

"That's...significantly less." That was putting it mildly. Vivian's eyes were frantically scouring the page, but Rose couldn't help but note how calm she was. "What else did you find?"

"There's only so much I can do with one branch's files. If our financial report was out of line with the company's, who knows if any of the other offices are getting their money either."

Vivian nodded silently, then walked back into her office. "Could you come here for a moment?"

Rose was happy to stretch her legs.

Vivian took a seat behind her desk while Rose stood to get her blood flowing again.

"I did what you told me to," Rose said. "So does this mean I get to keep my job?"

"Yes," Vivian stated clearly. "You still have a job here." She spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully and avoiding Rose's eye like she wasn't confident in what she was about to say. "Not only that, but I'm giving you a promotion."

“A promotion?”

“Yes. I would like for you to be my personal assistant.”

That was far from a promotion in Rose’s mind. “Your personal assistant?” Rose laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding. What do you want me to do, get you coffee? How do you take it? Black, two sugars, hold the dildo?”

Vivian didn’t laugh. Rose tried to stop her own laughter.

“It’s a temporary position,” Vivian explained. “And a fake one. Next week I have a business meeting with Gene Giovanni, the owner of the company, in New York. I need an excuse to bring you along with me so you can look through some of the company files.”

“And we’re getting these files how?” Rose asked.

“Because I know where they are.”

“That sounds very vague and very illegal.”

“And it’s legal to embezzle funds?”

Vivian had a point. She also had a sound reason to investigate the company. Rose didn’t. “Look, if you want to do that, I don’t really care, but I don’t want to be a part of it. I’m quitting to go back to school in a few weeks, and I don’t want to get wrapped up in this. I looked at the numbers like you wanted me to, I apologized for the gag gift, and I just want to go back to data entry for the next few weeks so I can pay for my tuition.”

Vivian sighed in frustration. “I don’t like saying this, but I need someone like you with me who can look over the numbers as quickly as you just did. I can’t do that on my own.”

“Sucks for you,” Rose said.

“I can give you a bonus.”

“With what money? I saw your annual projections, remember.”

“The money Gene gives us when I call him out for screwing us over.”

“So the money you aren’t guaranteed to get.”

“Rose,” Vivian pleaded. “You’re my only option, and I don’t know when I’m going to get another chance like this. Don’t those numbers

intrigue you? Do you not care what happens to everyone else working here? There's nothing I can do to get you to come along?"

Guilt trip. Ouch. Of course Rose didn't want to see her friends out of work because of corporate greed. Of course she was fascinated by the numbers. Of course being Vivian's only hope inflated her ego. But there was only one thing she could think of that would actually convince her to go. "Give my mom my job when I quit. She used to be a secretary, and she's been out of work ever since the company she worked for went out of business. She's qualified."

Vivian eyed Rose, a hint of surprise in her eyes. Her shoulders seemed to relax almost instantly. "Is that it? You'll go?"

Rose didn't have to think long. If this did end in Rose's mom taking over her job and finally being able to support herself, Rose couldn't turn it down. Plus, it wasn't like she wouldn't have fun hacking into Gio Corp.'s financial reports.

"I get a free trip to New York? All inclusive?"

Vivian nodded. Her face was a tense mask of annoyance.

"Can't pass that up." Rose ignored the glower. "Sounds a hell of a lot better than going home and telling my mom I got fired, so I guess I'm in."

"Good," Vivian said. "We'll be leaving soon. I'll call you with the flight details once I arrange them."

"I don't remember giving you my number," Rose said.

Vivian stared at her until Rose remembered the papers on the desk.

"My file. Right. Never mind."

Vivian nodded once, firmly, but kept up her quiet routine. A woman of few words was not the kind of person Rose usually liked to hang out with, especially when she didn't even take the time to laugh at her jokes. Things were already awkward between them. Rose had a feeling this trip to New York with Vivian was going to be about as relaxing as visiting Garth's gym with Phoebe. She didn't know how she was going to tolerate sitting next to her for hours on a plane flight and then having to spend who knows how long traveling with

her in New York. She was already dreading this trip and she needed time to think, to sort it all out in her head.

* * *

The first thing Rose saw when she walked in the front door was her mom on the couch, with a laundry basket resting in Rose's regular seat.

"You're home early."

"Not really," Rose said. "It's five."

"Already?" Beth asked.

"Time flies when you're having fun?"

"I wouldn't call watching soap operas and doing laundry fun."

Rose plopped down on the couch and caught a glance of some medical drama playing out on the screen. Not her cup of tea.

"How was work?" Beth asked.

Rose hadn't mentioned the Christmas party or her punishment, but now that she had some good news she had no qualms about sharing it with her mom, even if she had to leave out a few of the sketchier details. "I got a promotion. Where's the remote?"

"You got a promotion?"

Beth looked surprised. Rose was only slightly offended.

"Yep," she bragged, patting the cushions around her. "The president wants me to be her assistant. We're flying out to New York next week for a business meeting."

"Really?" Now Beth was more than surprised, she was impressed. She made no mention of the remote, though. Apparently, it wasn't nearly as important to her as it was to Rose. "You went from doing data entry with Phoebe to assisting the president of the entire company?"

"No, the President of the United States," Rose deadpanned.

Beth looked a little less impressed after that. She rolled her eyes and scooted over as Rose continued her search beneath her ass.

"Now I don't know if you're lying to me so you can skip work and go to New York next week or if I should actually congratulate you on your promotion."

You're Fired

“Like I have the money to take a trip to New York on my own,” Rose said. “I did get the promotion. You don’t have to believe me if you don’t want to, but that doesn’t change the fact that I am going to New York with my boss next week.” Beth still looked suspicious. Rose would have let her think whatever she wanted if she wasn’t afraid she’d never hear the end of it if her mom really thought she was skipping work. “Trust me, I wish I was going alone. It’s not exactly going to be a vacation. My boss is a stuck-up bitch.”

“How very nice of you to say.”

“Just telling it like it is. It’s not like she can hear me. I can’t get fired or anything.”

“You can if she overhears you talking like that at work.”

“She won’t. I’m on my best behavior for the last few weeks I’m there. Plus, if this trip goes well, there’s another perk.”

“What is it?” Beth asked.

Rose failed to hold back a smile. “My boss says she’ll give you my job.”

Beth’s eyes went wide. “You got me a job?”

“Yep. As long as everything goes well. It’s not the greatest place to work, and it doesn’t pay a ton, but it’s better than nothing. You’ll get to work with Phoebe, too.”

“Rose, I don’t know what to say. Do I need to go in for an interview? Do I need to meet this woman?”

“Trust me, it’s better if you don’t meet Vivian. And no. I put in a good word for you, and that was enough. She owed me a favor.”

“Do I want to ask what you did for her to deserve that favor?”

“Probably best if you didn’t,” Rose said.

Beth nodded. “I don’t know how to thank you, Rose.”

“No need to thank me, Mom. I’m just helping out.” Rose gave up on finding the remote. “Apparently I’m not meant to watch TV, so I guess I’ll go pack instead.” When she stood from the couch, Rose immediately saw the remote. It had been in the one place she hadn’t looked. Under her *own* ass. Oh well. The remote had won and she

was too frustrated with it to want it now. She let it be and stretched out her legs again.

“When do you leave?” Beth asked.

“I don’t know exactly. I’ll tell you when my boss calls me with the details.”

“Well, how long are you going to be gone?”

“I don’t know exactly. I’ll tell you when my boss calls me with the details.”

“You sound very prepared.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“I sure hope so,” Beth said. “Speaking of prepared, I hope you didn’t need that second package you had coming in the mail. I put it in the bathroom. I forgot to tell you about it. It really was soap, thank God.”

Of course. A day late. That was just Rose’s luck.

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BY SHAYA CRABTREE

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