

Three weeks into the Fireball campaign, Wendy found herself arriving at The Buckeye Building before sunrise once again. The first couple of times Michael had asked her to meet early she'd protested, she didn't like the idea of giving up her free time for work, but Michael had insisted and Jon, sweet, supportive Jon, had doubled down saying it would go a long way to make her stand out. Once she caved on that it became another expectation. Michael had stopped texting her at night asking her to come in early, although he found plenty of other reasons to text her, now it was just expected of her. Yet another adjustment to show her commitment.

She'd decided on a dark blue dress today that went just past her knees. It was loose enough she didn't spend her entire drive over tugging at it, but she still didn't love the way it hugged her hips. The fabric whispered against her legs as she made her way down the empty hallway, her heels, she chose the black ones today, clicked in rhythm as she made her way to Michael's office. She could already see light spilling out of the office signaling he was already there and waiting for her. Her fingers dug at her hip as she walked, four swift strokes of her hand steadying her nerves.

She stopped at her desk just long enough to drop off her coat and check her reflection in her phone camera, yet another habit she'd picked up from modeling. She ran her fingers over the dark circles under her eyes. When this was all over she'd need a proper day at the spa. On top of the early mornings, Michael also had her working late most nights. She couldn't complain though, they were due to deliver their final pitch to Fireball in just over a week and everything had to be perfect. So far, everything had gone perfectly. It turned out that while Michael was demanding, he was also brilliant. Their late nights were mostly comprised of the two of them bouncing ideas off one another until something stuck. From there Michael would help mold it into something truly incredible. Their initial conversations with Fireball were positive. They loved the ideas Wendy presented, she grinned to herself her fingers tingling with excitement, she presented them, not Michael. In fact, he gave her credit for almost all of it. He was there to fire back when he felt like Fireball was overstepping or asking too much. In fact, if it wasn't for his bluntness or sexually charged comments he was a dream to work with. "Good morning," she whispered, standing in front of his office. Michael was hunched over his keyboard making him look like a much larger version of Quasimodo. His forehead was already slick with sweat despite the fact that it was below freezing outside. His cheeks lifted when he heard Wendy's voice, his eyes darting from the screen in front of him to Wendy. She stood frozen as his eyes traveled up her body, he didn't even try to hide the fact that he was checking her out. The worst part though was that Wendy had grown accustomed to it. She waited through it, like she had every morning for the past three weeks. Better to let him get it over with than waste twenty minutes being lectured about being a prude - a lesson she'd learned the hard way in her first week.

"There she is, America's top model." He slid back from the desk, the chair groaning in protest. Wendy stepped into the office, closing the door behind her as he rounded the desk. "I was just finishing up my executive summary for Marcus." He stopped directly in front of her, his bulk positioned between her and the door - a detail she'd stopped noticing weeks ago, just like she'd stopped questioning why her pulse quickened when he praised her work. The campaign was too

important to get derailed by oversensitivity. "He wants us to present the initial strategy this afternoon. Not just the pitch, but everything we have so far. I want you to be the presenter."

Wendy's eyes went wide, the words sent an unexpected thrill through her body. "M... me? But you always do the presentations." This was what mattered - not his occasional inappropriate comments or the way he stood too close. This was about her career, her chance to finally prove herself. The heat blooming in her chest was just excitement about the opportunity. Nothing more. She crossed her arms in front of her stomach, her fingers immediately finding her ring and spinning it. Michael watched the action. She'd done it in front of him a few times now, and while he hadn't asked what it was about he was beginning to get a pretty good idea. He reached out, placing his hand on her shoulder, his thumb gently stroking it. He felt Wendy tense, but otherwise, she didn't do anything to move his hand away. A good sign. "You'll do fine." He tried his best to sound reassuring, but honestly it was an emotion that was completely lost on him. "It's important people like Marcus see that you're the one leading this project. I'm just the pretty face." This drew a laugh from Wendy, crimson coloring her cheeks.

"Thanks Michael." Her voice was soft, genuine. She reached up touching his hand that was on her shoulder. The contact sent shockwaves through Michael and he felt his groin stir to life. "You've given me more opportunities in just a few weeks than others have in just as many years."

Michael let his hand fall from her shoulder, he had to show patience. He didn't want this one to flame out like Lisa did. "Don't sell yourself short, Wendy. This has been all you. Your brilliance and commitment to doing whatever is necessary to get things done speaks volumes."

Heat washed over Wendy. She hated the way he looked at her, but she couldn't ignore the words he was saying, the conviction in his voice when he said them. Her traitorous body responded: her chest tightened, her pulse quickened, her cheeks flushed. An aching that she had never associated with anything other than... She pushed the thought away wishing she would have stayed in bed with Jon instead. "So what do we need to do to impress Marcus?"

For the next two hours, they dove into the campaign strategy. Michael stood behind Wendy's chair as she clicked through slides. Michael made for the perfect sounding board. She would bounce ideas off of him and he would give detailed responses on how they could or couldn't work. She didn't even flinch as he paced the room before stopping directly behind her, they were in the zone. "The evolution theme resonates with their core demographic," she explained, pulling up market research, "but I'm worried the imagery feels..."

"Generic?" Michael finished her thought. "I thought the same thing, we need something more professional. I know you have ideas, show me."

Wendy pulled up her mock-ups - sleek professionals with hints of rebellion in their styling. "It's missing something. The transformation feels superficial."

"Because you're thinking linearly." Michael leaned closer, his cologne mixing with coffee on his breath. "What if instead of showing the end result, we capture the moment of change?" His fingers brushed hers as he took control of the mouse, his gut pressing into her back while he pulled up reference images. "That split second when someone decides to break free, to become more." His enthusiasm was infectious, and Wendy found herself leaning forward, caught up in his vision.

"Like a chrysalis cracking open," she breathed, ideas flowing faster now. "We show them mid-transformation, that electric moment when-

"When potential becomes power." Michael's hand settled on her shoulder, a squeeze matching his excitement. "That's exactly it. See? This is why we work so well together. You have the instinct, you just need a little push sometimes to... come out of your shell." He gave her shoulder another squeeze, her skin was soft, he could feel the tension in her shoulders, could almost hear the moan escape her lips as he applied pressure. "You're not afraid to push boundaries. to think outside of the box." His hands left her shoulders, he didn't want to scare her away. "Some people make promises they can't keep. But you..." His eyes caught hers through the reflection on the screen. "You understand the value of... commitment."

A flush crept up Wendy's neck, goosebumps spreading across her shoulders from his contact just moments ago. They worked well together, she couldn't deny that she'd felt more valued in the last month than any other time maybe in her entire life. They worked like this until voices began filtering in from the hallway, other employees arriving for the day. Wendy stood up and stretched, surprised to find her body stiff from sitting so long.

"Morning beautiful." Jon appeared in the doorway, he decided to wear a brown sweater today with a pair of blue jeans. The look made her smile, it was almost the same thing he'd worn for their first date. "Thought I'd catch you here." His smile seemed genuine, but she couldn't help but notice how fast his eyes shifted to Michael and then to her hands. It made her uneasy, but she wasn't sure why.

"Want to grab lunch today? Feel like we haven't really talked lately."

"That sounds great. I miss you." Wendy walked toward the door to give her husband a proper hello, but Michael cleared his throat stopping her in her tracks. "You sure that's a good idea? We have a lot to go over before that meeting with Marcus. You don't want to come across as unprepared, do you?"

Wendy closed her eyes, her shoulders sagging as she took in Michael's response. He was right. This was her first big presentation, she had to make sure everything went right. "Rain check?" she asked, locking eyes with him through her long lashes.

"Sure, of course. The numbers come first, right?" Jon's attempt at lightness fell flat. He lingered a moment longer before disappearing down the hall.

Michael waited until Jon's footsteps faded. "You know, I've been meaning to ask - "How does someone like Jon land a bombshell like you?" Michael asked, closing the door behind them with a soft click that seemed to seal them in their own private world.

She inhaled sharply, her gaze meeting his. "That's my husband you're talking about." She kept her tone light. Michael had a knack for saying something offensive without really meaning to. "Besides, some people care more about just good looks."

She watched as Michael's scowl turned into a smile, but his eyes didn't seem to get the memo. They started dark, angry almost. "Of course, I don't mean any disrespect toward the guy," he lied, walking back over to Wendy. "I'm just not sure he understands people like us."

Wendy couldn't hold back the laugh. "You're putting me in the same category as you?"

"You know what I mean," Michael laughed. "Jon only understands the numbers, not the people. I bet he keeps a spreadsheet about the things you like in the bedroom."

Wendy's face turned three different shades of red. Michael still wore that cocky smile, but she dipped her eyes too embarrassed to meet his gaze. "That's highly inappropriate." Wendy stood up, attributing the heat that flushed over her body to her anger. Trying to ignore the memory of Jon's actions after the Christmas party and how he seemed to fail to read her body's cues. "If we're not going to talk about the Fireball account anymore then I'm going to head back to my desk. "Relax, sweetheart. I'm just giving you a hard time. You're going to need thicker skin if you're going to survive with the bigwigs at Fireball." He moved closer, his bulk forcing her to step back toward his desk. "Besides, I'm just stating facts. Jon's smart, knows his numbers. But he'll never make it higher than he is now. Just another senior account manager, a dime a dozen. Not like what you're capable of becoming."

"First of all, don't call me sweetheart." the fire was back in her voice. Her annoyance beginning to over take her professional demeanor. "And Jon isn't a dime a dozen, he's a genius with the numbers. Even Marcus sees that." Michaels mocking chuckle was annoying, she wanted to slap the grin off his face. "You've got claws, that's good, because-

"And I can take a joke," she interrupted poking her finger into his chest unsure where this bout of self-confidence came from.

Michael barely even flinched. He kept his smile plastered on his face, even when she was jabbing him in the chest. "That's good to hear," he replied, with a calmness that unsettled her. "I'm sure the Fireball execs will love the story about how you gave your boss an invitation to... what were the words you used?" He paused placing his fingers to his chin like he had to think about it. "Oh yeah, make my wildest fantasy come true."

The blood rushed from Wendy's face so fast she felt dizzy. That note - her playful attempt at spicing things up with Jon - now twisted into something darker in Michael's hands. She silently cursed Ava for ever suggesting it. Wendy's fingers rubbed together at a frantic pace. "You... you wouldn't." She tried to match his playful tone, to pretend this was just another one of their professional power plays, but uncertainty crept into her voice.

"Relax," Michael's voice softened as he watched the color drain from Wendy's face. "Your secret's safe with me." His hand found her shoulder again, steadying her as she swayed slightly. "I would never do anything to damage your career. You're far too valuable." The word 'valuable' sent an unexpected chill down her spine. "I just need to know you're committed to... our partnership."

An unwelcomed shiver danced across her skin at his words, the same warmth she'd felt during their creative session crept over her. She should be angry at his implied threat, but instead found herself oddly reassured. He was right - they were doing incredible work together. And if he occasionally said inappropriate things or stood too close, wasn't that a small price to pay for finally being recognized? For having someone see her potential? Still, she couldn't quite explain the way her body responded to his presence, the confusing mix of discomfort, the way her body would react to his praise. It was all very confusing to her. "We should finish the presentation," she said instead, focusing on the familiar comfort of work.

Michael's approving smile followed her back to her seat, and she threw herself into the slides, grateful for the distraction from her conflicting emotions. The sooner they impressed Marcus, the sooner everything else would make sense again.

Jon sat in his office, a few doors down from Michael's, staring at his closed door allowing his imagination to run away from him. He heard Wendy's muffled laugh dance down the hall causing him to grip his pen a little too tight.

"She's doing great." Marcus's voice cut through his haze forcing him to break his gaze away from the door and focus on his mentor. The older man leaned against the doorframe, coffee mug in hand, studying Jon's expression. "Wendy's really coming into her own with this campaign."

"I wouldn't know. We've barely talked since she took it on." He turned back to the spreadsheet on his monitor, the cursor blinking mockingly at the top of his sheet. He closed the program grateful for Marcus's distraction. "Michael occupies all her time. By the time she gets home she's exhausted." Jon took off his glasses rubbing his temples. "76 percent of people report burnout from their job. If she's not careful..."

The office door clicked shut. Jon looked up, his brows pressed together as Marcus walked toward him. "Everything alright at home, Jon?" He settled into the chair across from Jon resting his right ankle over his left leg.

Jon hesitated, the sound of another laugh making his stomach twist. "I trust her, I do it's just..." He saw Marcus's eyebrows raise hoping he'd step in and say something. He didn't. "Why's it have to be with Michael. You know he's the reason Lisa quit, right?" He felt his pulse start to rise. Images of his last failed relationship flashing through his mind.

"You know I'm not allowed to talk about Lisa." Marcus's face was stern. He was always so by the book, didn't let things rattle him. It was what Jon admired most about him.

"I know. I try with Michael, I really do. But it's obvious he doesn't like me." Jon shook his head determined not to derail everything he'd built. "Sometimes I wonder if he only picked Wendy for this project because he's pissed that I disagreed with him over the quarterly report. But the numbers-"

Marcus cut him off. He wasn't interested in hashing out the numbers again. "Is this really about Michael or something else?"

Jon chewed on his lip not wanting to admit how right Marcus had been. "She's not Olivia," Marcus said after another few seconds of awkward silence.

"I know, but Michael..." He took a deep breath exhaling through his nose. "Why does every meeting between them have to be behind closed doors? It's not normal." He was louder than he meant to be. The anger and jealousy he worked so hard to keep bottled up was starting to seep out. He needed to make an appointment with his therapist. He'd help Jon work through it.

"I know Michael can be... a lot sometimes." Marcus paused, searching for his words. "But I've seen their work, it's good. It's damn good." He took a sip of his coffee, studying Jon's expression to make sure he heard what he was going to say next. "You need to talk to Wendy. Let her know how you're feeling. You can't let

past scars affect your current relationships. Take it from someone who's been married for over 25 years."

"I know, I just... She's already working so hard. I don't want to add to the stress. I'm already being accused of not being supportive." He let out a nervous laugh. He just wanted things to go back to normal, before the Christmas party. "I asked her if she wanted to grab lunch today." He looked up at the ceiling, shaking his head.

"Then Michael reminded her about some presentation. You should have seen how deflated she got. He acts like he owns her."

"I've been keeping an eye on the situation," Marcus admitted. "But Jon - you can't let what happened with Olivia cloud your judgment. That kind of suspicion can destroy a marriage."

Jon nodded, guilt churning in his stomach. Here he was, falling into old patterns while Wendy was achieving everything she'd worked for. "I need to trust her," he said, more to himself than Marcus. "She's brilliant at this. I can't let my baggage overshadow her success."

"Trust, but verify," Marcus said quietly. "Watch, but don't accuse. Sometimes our instincts pick up on things our conscious mind doesn't want to see." He stood, straightening his tie. "She has a presentation to the executive team this afternoon. I'll keep an eye on her-make sure she isn't feeling overwhelmed."

As Marcus left, another laugh wafted through the door. Jon's imagination painted the scene - Michael's bulk forcing Wendy back against his desk. He shook his head violently. This was exactly what had happened with Olivia. He'd let his fears spiral until innocent meetings became torrid affairs in his mind. By the time he'd realized his mistake, she was gone.

"I cannot keep doing this," he whispered to himself, though his eyes remained fixed on the door. He had to trust Wendy enough to let her shine, even if it meant sharing that light with someone else.

Even if that someone was Michael.

He opened the drawer of his desk, jostling things around, before finding what he was looking for. The old business card was faded a little, but the number was readable. He really needed to give Dr. Carson a call to let him know he was reverting to some of his old, jealous traits so they could subvert them before he accused Wendy of something he didn't mean.

The fridge in the breakroom didn't have much in it for food, but it did have several bottles of water. Her stomach growled as she grabbed a bottle. Her and Michael had worked straight through lunch, but their presentation for Marcus was done. That was the most important thing. She closed the door with a frustrated grunt. She needed to start packing lunch.

"Hey stranger!" Ava's voice rang out behind her. "I was ready to put out a missing persons report on you. I haven't seen you at your desk all week."

Wendy turned, and saw Ava leaning against the counter, a sandwich in her hand.

"Sorry, I've been swamped." She managed a tired smile, her eyes fixing on the food in her hand. "The Fireball campaign is at a critical stage." She winced at her words. She sounded like Michael. He'd said the same thing to her when he started asking her to come in earlier. "I miss our lunch breaks."

Ava held up the other half of her sandwich. The lettuce and tomato hung just over the edge of the bread, the bacon thick and crispy making Wendy's mouth water. "How's it been working with... him?" She couldn't help but roll her eyes at the thought of working so closely with Michael.

The sandwich tasted even better than it looked. The crunch of the bacon and lettuce echoed in Wendy's ears as she closed her eyes savoring the taste. Ava let out a soft giggle causing Wendy to blush. "Sorry, I haven't eaten all day and we worked through lunch," she said, holding her hand to her mouth as she spoke. "It really hasn't been too bad." She took another bite, settling next to Ava as she spoke. "He really is good at this kind of stuff." She surprised herself with that sentence. Was she seriously defending Michael? And to Ava of all people? Her finger drummed against the cabinet. Four quick taps as if she was ensuring she wasn't in a dream. She felt like she was in the twilight zone, and judging by the way Ava was looking at her so did she. "I mean, he's still Michael of course," she added to sound more... What? Reluctant? Convincing?

Ava nodded but didn't respond right away. She looked over Wendy as if there may be some sort of visible clues to Michael's harassment. When things had gone south with Lisa she seemed more jumpy than normal, and she was never able to look Ava in the eye. So far, Wendy didn't exhibit any of that, although the isolation was a concern. "Has he..." She paused, considering her next words. "I mean, is he being... you know, professional?"

"He's mentoring me," Wendy said, that familiar warmth flooding her chest at the thought of their morning breakthroughs. She set the half eaten sandwich on the counter catching Ava's concerned look. "Do you know how rare it is to find someone who actually sees your potential and not just this?" She gestured toward her chest, the evangelical tone in her voice making Ava's eyes widen.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it." She reached out touching Wendy's arm. "I just know Michael can be... well, a creep." She let out a soft laugh, but Wendy's face remained deadpan, unwilling to join in on the laughter.

"Michael has his flaws, but so does everyone else. I didn't expect that to change when I took the assignment." Wendy took a step back, breaking contact with Ava and letting her hand fall. "He's giving me chances no one ever has."

Ava's face softened, unsure of why her friend was suddenly getting so defensive.

"I just worry about you. You seem... different lately."

"Different good, though, right?" Wendy stood up straight, Michael's lessons flooding back - shoulders squared, chin lifted, own your space. The words felt too much like her days modeling but the power behind them was intoxicating.

"Everyone else just sees Jon's wife or the former model. Michael actually hears my ideas and challenges me." The overhead fluorescent light flickered. "I'm presenting to the executive team today. Me, not Michael. When's the last time anyone else cared about me enough to give me that kind of opportunity?"

"Wendy," she hadn't seen it before. The hurt in Wendy's eyes, in her voice. They'd always spent their afternoons laughing and telling stories about their spouses. She thought Wendy was happy in that role. Sure, she knew that Wendy felt overlooked but, this felt... it was even worse than she imagined. "You know I'm in your corner, right? And Jon-" She reached for Wendy's hand again but she pulled away. "He's so proud of you. We all see how brilliant you are. Michael isn't the only one who-

"There's my star presenter." Michael stood in the doorway behind Wendy, his presence somehow larger in the confined space. Wendy felt her body respond - not just straightening but almost leaning toward him, like a flower tracking the sun. Ava watched dumbstruck, why did she care so much about what Michael thought? "I was just grabbing a quick bite before the presentation," Wendy explained although Michael hadn't asked. She drifted toward him, as if she'd forgotten she was in the middle of a conversation with her friend. *What the hell is happening?* Ava thought to herself as Michael gave her a look of pure smugness. "The executive team is gathering." His hand found the small of her back, the touch simultaneously comforting and possessive. "Ready to show them what you're capable of? To let them see the Wendy that I see?"

Wendy nodded, already falling into step beside him. She turned as they were walking out the door catching Ava's worried expression but pushed it aside. Her friend didn't understand. She was more than happy continuing to work as a Marketing Specialist where all she had to do was take orders. Wendy wanted more for herself, and Michael was giving it to her.

"Wendy-" Ava called after her, but Michael was already steering her toward the conference room, his hand steady against her back. She reached for her phone, wanting to document just how low his hand was. Surely Marcus would be able to use that. But by the time she fished it out of her purse, Michael was already guiding Wendy into the conference room and closing the door.

"You've got this," he murmured, close enough that his breath stirred her hair as the door closed behind them. "Time to show them you're worth investing in. That you follow through on your... commitments." His fingers pressed slightly harder into her back making her breath catch. "You won't let me down, will you?"

All Wendy could do was nod, not trusting her own voice at the moment. That confused mix of pride and shame was back, washing over her like a baptism. Ava stood in the break room doorway, watching as Michael steered her friend toward the conference room. The half-eaten sandwich sat forgotten on the counter, still warm - a small thing, barely worth noticing really. But it nagged at her like a loose thread that, if pulled, might unravel something she wasn't ready to see.

Wendy was reviewing her notes as Michael got the presentation set up on the large TV. He'd opened the blinds in the room to let the sun in and watched as Wendy stood in front of the window, looking down at the busy Columbus streets beneath her. He knew that look well, she was envisioning it: the power, the success. He could see the fire in her eyes weeks ago when he told her about the project. The same fire he was going to use to burn it all down in a beautiful, triumphant blaze of glory. She looked down at her flashcards, then back out over the horizon.

He watched her as she spun her wedding ring absentmindedly on her finger. He'd seen her do that a few times now, some kind of nervous tic. He'd ask her about it one day, but for now, he was content to catalog it as a weapon to use later.

Wendy's head shot up, her fingers closing into small fists. "Steve, and Brian are coming?"

"Of course." Michael gave her a confident smile and walked toward her. He'd planned for this, knew she'd freak out at the mention of their attendance. It was

almost too easy. "You didn't think the CEO and CFO would attend an executive meeting?" He placed his hands on her shoulders, he'd broken through the touch barrier effortlessly, locking eyes with her. "You're going to do great. They're going to be blown away by your presentation, and I'll be right here in case anything goes wrong."

She gave a reassuring smile, butterflies fluttering inside her stomach. *Nerves, it's just nerves, nothing else*, she told herself as Michael exited the room and she adjusted her stance.

Michael heard whispered voices as he approached Marcus's office. He looked around the hallway to ensure no one was watching and did his best to press against the wall. He wasn't the world's most agile man, but the attempt would have to do.

"...you have to do something. We can't let this happen again, especially to Wendy." Ava's voice could barely be called a whisper. Her emotions spilling out of her as she pleaded her case to Marcus.

"I'm documenting everything," Marcus murmured. Michael had to strain to hear him as he pressed closer to the cracked office door. "But we need concrete evidence. HR won't act on suspicions alone, not with someone as important as Michael."

"We have to do something..."

An idea flashed in Michael's head and he dug into the front pocket of his pants, pulling out his phone. He couldn't see much, but if he angled it just right into the opening of the door... perfect. On the small screen, he watched Ava leaning across Marcus's desk, leaning in close to Marcus to try to conceal their conversation. Of course, from this angle the conversation looked much more... intimate. He laughed to himself as Marcus gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze and offered her a tissue. Or was he brushing her hair out of her face and tenderly wiping away a tear? It was so hard to tell from this perspective really. And Michael knew better than anyone context, or in this situation lack thereof, was king.

So they were collecting dirt on him, were they? Well, two could play at that game. He examined the video on his phone. With a couple of edits and some shifting lighting this could go from seemingly innocent to an HR nightmare. He laughed to himself as he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Michael pocketed his phone and cleared his throat, giving ample time for them to react before he made his appearance known. Ava straightened instantly, putting professional distance between herself and Marcus, giving him one last pleading look before exiting his office.

"The presentation's ready when you are," Michael announced as Ava opened the door. He allowed himself a hint of knowing amusement as she studied his face before pushing past him.

"I'll be right there."

Michael nodded, already composing the narrative in his mind as he practically skipped to the other executives' offices. Sometimes the best weapons were the ones they never see coming.

The conference room door opened just as Michael was taking his seat at the table. Jon entered behind Marcus, he held a binder of paper in his arms, no doubt filled to the brim with various data points. Michael's expression darkened momentarily, his gaze darting to Wendy before he softened his expression.

"Sorry Jon, this is an executive meeting. I don't think you're in the right place." Michael's voice carried that familiar authoritative tone that Jon had tried to steer clear of.

"Actually, I invited him," Marcus countered smoothly. "Thought he could help us understand the numbers a little better." His eyes met Michael's, a subtle challenge in his steady gaze. "Given the scope of this campaign, we need all our experts." Wendy watched the exchange from her position at the end of the table. She could tell there was history between those two, but she wasn't about to ask what it was. Jon caught her eye as he settled into his seat across from her, mouthing a silent "good luck. I love you." The simple gesture calming her racing pulse.

The mahogany conference table stretched before Wendy like a runway, each face turned toward her holding different expectations. She stood at the far end, Michael's bulk an imposing presence to her right, while Brian Fletcher, their CEO, commanded the head of the table to her left. Her thumb pressed against her ring, but she forced her hand down. Not here. Not now.

Across from her, Steve Lawrence, the CFO, looked down at his iPad. She couldn't see what was on it, but she imagined graphs and data sets. All the stuff she saw Jon pouring over every night. Next to him, Marcus sat with his usual composed demeanor, though his eyes seemed to catch every subtle interaction. It felt like he was watching her a bit closer than usual, and she didn't know why. Was he expecting her to fail? She pushed the thought away; she needed to focus. Then there was Jon, his presence both comforting and nerve-wracking. Marcus had invited him to "help with the financial projections," but his encouraging smile steadied her racing heart. She took a deep breath as the presentation came to life on the screen. This was it, her big moment. Her gaze found Michael instinctively - not seeking approval, but drawing on that raw energy he seemed to radiate. She returned his smile, straightening her back and squaring her shoulders. She was ready.

"As you can see from the mock-ups," Wendy clicked to the next slide, her voice growing stronger with each word, "Evolve Your Fire speaks to both our existing base and our aspirational market." The familiar images filled the screen - young professionals with that hint of rebellion in their eyes, the phoenix imagery subtly woven throughout. "We're not asking consumers to choose between sophisticated and spirited. We're showing them they can embrace both."

Steve leaned forward, his interest evident. "And the demographic overlap?"

Wendy's fingers tightened around her clicker. Michael had told her he would ask that. "Our research shows 68% of our current consumers are within five years of entering professional careers. They're not abandoning their bold choices - they're evolving them." She caught Jon's proud smile and felt a surge of confidence.

"They want a brand that evolves with them."

"But these projections," Jon's voice cut through her momentum, analytical and precise as he flipped through a couple of sheets in his binder. "The growth curve assumes a 23% retention rate in urban markets, but historical data suggests premium spirits typically see closer to 15% when attempting to bridge market

segments." He adjusted his glasses, handing a sheet of paper to Steve. "We could be overestimating our reach by nearly 40%."

The room shifted. Wendy's fingers twitched toward her ring but she forced them still. She'd prepared for questions, but not from Jon. Was he really going to be the reason she failed? Her chest felt tight and she had trouble focusing as everyone in the room waited for her response.

"Actually," Michael rose, his presence expanding to fill the space behind her, "those numbers don't account for our phased rollout strategy." His voice carried a hint of disdain like he was spewing venom directly at Jon. She saw Jon shrink back, watched the paper being dismissed, and something shifted inside her. Jon, her brilliant, analytical husband who'd always been her anchor, suddenly seemed smaller. Not just physically, but in presence. He was just looking to inform, to ensure everyone was on the same page, but Michael showed dominance. Wanted everyone in the room to know his opinion was all that mattered. It should have made Wendy recoil, but as much as she hated to admit it, it had the opposite effect.

Warmth spread through her body, starting low in her belly and spreading through her. She wanted to believe it was just relief from Michael saving her, but she knew it was more. "We're not just throwing premium pricing at college bars and hoping it sticks. Right, Wendy?"

She caught the gleam in Michael's eye - not just support, but dominance, ownership. Still, it helped to steady her. "Exactly. Traditional premium spirits start at the top and work down. We're building from our base up." She clicked to the next slide, grateful for Michael's save even as her heart ached at Jon's chastened expression. "Which brings us to our rollout strategy."

The regional map filled the screen, and Wendy felt her confidence return. This was her element - the human side of marketing that went beyond pure numbers. "We're starting with a targeted launch across Kentucky, Tennessee, and of course right here in the great state of Ohio. These markets share our brand's DNA - bold spirit meets sophisticated taste." Her voice grew stronger as she detailed their grassroots approach, the local influencer partnerships, the careful blend of premium positioning and authentic connection.

Steve's approving nods spurred her on, driving her to the end of the presentation, along with a round of enthusiastic applause from the executive team. Marcus cleared his throat. "Excellent work, Michael. You've really brought out the best in Wendy."

Something dangerous flashed behind Michael's eyes before he smiled. "It was all Wendy. She's been the one putting in the work and coming up with the ideas." He gestured toward her with practiced humility. "I'm just the pretty face on the team." Laughter rippled through the room, but Wendy barely heard it. Michael's words sent an unexpected thrill through her. Her stomach flipped, her nipples growing hard - he wasn't just acknowledging her work, he was ensuring everyone else did too. The same man who demanded everyone's respect and attention was stepping back, letting her shine.

"Seriously impressive work," Brian said, his attention fully on Wendy now. "Keep this up, and you'll have my job one day." The other executives chuckled, but his eyes held hers. "We don't often see this level of strategic thinking from someone at your level."

As the room cleared, three distinct energies remained: Jon's uncertain smile as he slunk out the door head hung low, Michael's possessive presence at her shoulder, and Marcus's calculating gaze taking in every detail. Wendy stood suspended between them all, wondering if this was what success felt like - this dizzying mix of triumph and tension, professional pride and personal conflict.

The conference room emptied slowly, handshakes and congratulations blending into a euphoric haze. Wendy's body hummed with residual adrenaline as she gathered her presentation materials, still riding the high of their success. Her pulse fluttered like a trapped bird, every inch of her alive in sensation.

"Did you see Steve's face?" She turned to Michael, eyes bright with triumph.

"When I showed those engagement projections? I thought he was going to fall out of his chair!"

Michael crossed the room to the small bar cart, crystal decanter catching the late afternoon sun. "I think this calls for a celebration, don't you?" The amber liquid caught the light as he poured. "To our commitment to your rising success."

Wendy accepted the glass without hesitation, too caught up in the moment to register the deliberate phrasing of Michael's words or the way he only took a quick sip before setting his drink down. He brought his hands to arms, his touch dancing over her skin as he praised her performance. The slow motion in which he moved his fingers felt like electricity on her skin adding to the blissful sensation running through her.

"God, and when Brian started talking about my future potential?" Wendy's hands shook with excitement as she took a long drink. She felt the heat of the alcohol travel down her throat adding a sense of calm to her over-stimulated body. "I never thought - I mean, the CEO complimented me." She let out a small laugh, giddy with accomplishment.

"The way their eyes lit up at your 'Evolve Your Fire' idea..." Michael's voice carried that hint of pride that made her chest tighten. "Not many people can handle that level of scrutiny from the executive team their first time out."

Heat pooled in her core at his words. This was what she'd always wanted - to be seen for her mind, her capabilities. To be taken seriously.

"We were amazing in there." The whiskey's warmth spread through her limbs. Or maybe that was just the lingering high of success.

"Not we, Wendy." Michael stepped closer, his presence overwhelming her senses. His fingers brushed hers as he took her glass, setting it aside on the conference table next to his. "This was all you. Your brilliance. Your transformation."

Her pulse thundered in her ears as he closed the distance between them. She could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell the whiskey on his breath. This was wrong. She should run. But her legs wouldn't move, her body betraying her as his gaze dropped to her lips.

"The way you handled their questions," he murmured, close enough now that she could feel each word against her skin. "Even when Jon tried to undermine you with those numbers..." He saw something flash in her eyes, letting the implication hang.

"But you showed them all what you're capable of." His fingers closed around her arms, drawing her closer. Or maybe she was drawing closer to him? She wasn't

sure; everything was moving too fast. "You had them eating out of the palm of your hand - you're finally becoming who you were meant to be."

Her breath caught, chest rising and falling rapidly as he leaned closer. This was Michael - Michael who repulsed her, who she'd been told over and over again to avoid. Yet here she was, eyes fluttering closed as his breath ghosted across her lips. This was wrong. She loved Jon. *Even as Jon tried to undermine you?*

Michael's words replayed in her head. Was that what happened? Was Jon trying to diminish her moment? She couldn't think straight. Between the lack of food, the alcohol, Michael's reassurances, the way he stepped in and saved her. Her lips parted, she could hear her heart pounding in resistance in her ears.

"Has anyone seen Michael?" Marcus's voice echoed down the hallway, footsteps growing closer. "I have some questions about-"

The words shattered the moment. Wendy spun toward the door, her world spinning upside down. She nearly collided with Marcus as he appeared in the doorway, catching herself on his arm.

"Wendy?" Marcus steadied her with a hand on her arm, his gaze taking in her flushed cheeks, the slight tremor in her hands. "Everything alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Fine! Everything's fine." Her voice came out breathless, unsteady. "Just- just celebrating the presentation. But I forgot I needed to beat Jon home and make dinner." The concerned look on Marcus's face let her know the lie didn't get past him, but she rushed out the door before he could question it.

"You were right about the campaign," Michael's voice carried that same seductive power from their presentation. "Sometimes evolution requires us to reach beyond our comfort zone."

The double meaning in his words made her stomach flip. She couldn't look at him, couldn't bear to see that knowing smile or let Marcus read the guilt she knew was written across her face. Her heels struck a desperate rhythm against the tile as she fled.

Marcus watched her retreat, trying to piece together what he'd just walked into. Behind him, Michael began gathering the presentation materials as if nothing happened. But there was something in the way she ran out of the room, in the way he called after her - something that made Marcus reach for his phone, adding another entry to his growing documentation.

What terrified Wendy most wasn't how close she'd come to crossing a line - it was that for one dizzying moment, caught up in the intoxicating mix of success and Michael's validation, she'd wanted to.

She needed to find Jon. Needed his steady presence to wash away this confusion. Needed to remember who she was before Michael had started reshaping her into something she didn't recognize.

Jon's car was already in the driveway when Wendy pulled up. Her hands trembled as she unlocked the door, stepping into their small foyer where Jon's shoes were already neatly placed in the shoe rack. Even as she tossed her keys into the small bowl that sat next to the door, she could feel Michael's touch on her arms. Could smell the whiskey on his breath. How could she have been so stupid? So caught

up in the moment that she almost let him... She rubbed her thighs together feeling the guilt of her near indiscretion as she walked inside.

"You're home early." Jon's voice carried from the kitchen, the hum of the dishwasher announcing that he was already cleaning. Her chest ached and she wasn't sure if it was from residual pride or the fact that she nearly blew up her marriage. She turned the corner to see Jon standing by the granite counter they'd picked out together last spring, still in his work clothes, holding a bottle of cheap wine. He had a nervous smile on his face. Oblivious to what nearly transpired with Michael. Probably oblivious to the role he played in it as well. Why did he have to be in the meeting at all? Why did he always have to... That wasn't fair. He was just trying to be a team player. To make sure everyone was on the same page about the data. "I thought we could celebrate your big..."

She didn't let him finish. She didn't deserve his praise. She had to make it up to him. To be better, more present. No more early mornings. No more late nights. The project was going well. They had all the foundation in place she could start working from her desk again. Her body was on his in an instant, her mouth crashing against his. The wine bottle slipped from his grasp, shattering on the floor. "I need to..."

"We'll get it later," she whispered running her hands across her face, grabbing his glasses and placing them on the counter. she didn't want anything to take them out of this moment. She needed to feel his warmth, his connection. Her tongue pushed past his lips, letting him know she wouldn't be denied.

"But the glass," he protested causing her to groan in frustration. Why couldn't he see how much she needed this? Why did he always have to be so in his head?

"I'll clean it up later," she protested against his lips, fingers already working on his shirt buttons. "Don't talk," she mumbled running her free hand through his shaggy hair. She loved the way Jon's body felt against hers. Like they were equals, so different from Michael's overwhelming presence. The comparison sent an unwelcome surge of heat through her core, making her press harder against her husband, desperate to drive out thoughts of another man's touch.

Her desperate energy caught Jon off guard, but his hands found her waist instinctively - gentle, always so gentle. She tugged on his hair, bringing their kiss deeper. She didn't want gentle, she didn't deserve it. She wished Jon would spin her around and press her against the counter. To rip open her shirt and punish her. Her teeth bit down on his lip hoping he'd get the message. She needed something to match the confused passion coursing through her veins.

"Wendy," he gasped as she pushed him back against the kitchen counter, she could practically hear him trying to process her behavior. The whiskey on her breath, the tremor in her hands, the way she wouldn't quite meet his eyes. She could hear Michael's taunts from earlier as her hands ran across his bare chest *I bet he keeps a spreadsheet about the things you like in the bedroom.*

Her fingers trailed down the front of his body finding the button of his pants. She could feel his hardness straining against it. The heat from it making her moan into his mouth. Her body felt like it was burning from the inside. The heat she'd felt earlier magnified by ten. The liquid in her veins like pure magma.

"I need you," she whispered, and it wasn't a lie - she did need Jon, needed his steadiness to wash away the afternoon's confusion. Needed to prove to herself that what she'd felt in that conference room was just professional excitement

mixed with whiskey, nothing more. Her hands shook as she pushed down his slacks, feeling him spring free. She wrapped her hand around his shaft and heard him suck in air. The sounds he made always turned her on, let her know she was doing what he liked.

Without releasing her hold on him she spun around, wrapping her arms around his head and bringing his lips to her neck. "Unzip me." The words came out hard and demanding, a voice of someone used to being obeyed, but Jon didn't seem to notice as he drew her zipper down. The dress crumbled at her feet leaving her in her black cheekies and matching bra.

His lips pressed against her neck, tender kisses that made her stroke him a little faster. She didn't want loving kisses, she didn't deserve them. Her fingers tightened in his hair, urging him closer. Needing more.

"I love you," Jon's breath against her skin felt cool, and the sincerity in his voice nearly broke her. She turned in his arms, claiming his mouth in another desperate kiss. His hands skimmed her sides, his light touch tickling her, but even as she grinded into him.

"Take me right here," she insisted hoping he'd get the hint, her nails raking down his back. She felt him hesitate, felt him trying to understand this new urgency. She grabbed his hand putting it on her butt as she spun around against the cold granite. "I need you to..." But she couldn't finish the sentence, blushing at how silly she must look to him right now.

The kitchen counter bit into her lower back as she hopped onto it, hooking her heels around Jon's hips. His kisses grew more urgent, still not what she needed, but better. His manhood pressed against the front of her underwear making her moan with need as she pulled him into her with her ankles.

Jon's hands settled on her hips. His touch was hesitant, like he knew something was off but he couldn't quite figure out what. She placed her hand between them capturing his shaft in her hand as she began to pump him before wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

"Wendy..." His voice held a question she didn't want to answer. She silenced him with another kiss, rougher than their usual intimacy. Her fingers dug into his flesh as she ground against him, feeling him hard and ready through the thin fabric of her underwear. The friction sent sparks of pleasure through her core, but something was missing. She needed more - needed him to take her, to claim her.

"Please," she whispered, not sure what she was asking for. Her body felt like it was burning up, need and guilt and shame all twisted together into something desperate and raw. She guided his hand between her legs, showing him how much she wanted him. How much she needed this to be different than their usual lovemaking.

Jon's fingers slipped beneath the fabric of her underwear, finding her wet and ready. He groaned against her mouth, as Wendy spread her legs to accommodate him more.

"Please, Jon," she begged, her voice trembling with need. "I need you inside me." She arched into him lifting her hips to help get her point across.

He peeled her panties down her leg, leaving them dangling on her ankle as he pressed his length against her volcanic core. "You're so..."

She didn't let him finish, she didn't want to talk, she wanted him to take her. Her hips rocked against him with a need like he'd never seen coating his member with

her juices. "Ahhhhh," the breath Wendy had been holding released from her lungs as his cock found purchase and slide into her with a single thrust. Her walls sealed around him, her legs wrapping tighter around his waist as she pulled him deeper. Jon's body moved against hers, his thrusts slow and steady. Wendy met his rhythm, her body arching into his. Her hands gripped the edge of the granite as she met his thrusts. She could feel every inch of him, filling her, taking her. But it wasn't enough. She needed more.

She squeezed her eyes shut, focusing on the way his body felt when it met hers, the sound of their flesh slapping together. But behind her closed lids she saw Michael's knowing smile. Her eyes shot open, her arms wrapping around Jon's neck hoping to find the leverage she needed to push him deeper.

"Yessss, Oh God, baby. You feel so good. So fucking good." Jon's hands gripped her ass, his fingers digging into her soft flesh. He was beginning to work up a sweat as his mouth sought hers out. As their tongues clashed Wendy's eyes drifted shut. Her pussy contracted around him as once again flashes of Michael appeared behind her eyes. She felt the phantom heat of his bulk pressing against her, felt the power roll off of him in waves. Wendy felt the first hint of her orgasm start to build. Her lids snapped back open, desperately wanting to be in this moment with Jon. But the images of Michael refused to fade, his presence in her mind only intensifying the sensations coursing through her body. She felt a pang of guilt, but the pleasure was too overwhelming to resist.

Jon could feel Wendy's body responding, he wasn't sure what had gotten into her but he wasn't going to complain. If this was what success looked like on her, maybe his fears about Michael had been misplaced. Still, something nagged at him, but the way her hips were grinding into him, the way her body seemed to suck him into her, made him unable to put his finger on it.

"Mmmmmfff, don't stop," Wendy's pleading drove him deeper, harder than he usually allowed himself to be. He wanted to give her what she wanted, but that wasn't possible. He wasn't wearing protection, it was the wrong time of the month, they'd need at least a 50% increase in combined income before a baby made sense. He'd run the numbers a dozen times.

"Right there, fuck... just like that." Wendy's nails dug into Jon's flesh as her body began to betray her. Her head rolled back, neck exposed to him, begging him to claim her. The images of Michael had stopped, but she could still feel his presence like a ghost in the room. It helped to drive her forward, to lose control. She wanted to prove to him that Jon was more than enough that their connection was real.

"Uggh," Jon was doing his best to hold it together. Wendy wasn't usually much of a talker, but she seemed to be doing it more and more. Perhaps the confidence she was finding at work was carrying over here. "I can't hold out much longer, baby."

"I'm so close," she warned through ragged breaths, her body arching off the counter to meet Jon's needy thrusts. "Please don't stop." Her mind felt foggy, drunk on the mixture of guilt and pleasure coursing through her. She knew she should tell him to pull out, to be careful, but she needed this - needed to feel completely possessed, consequences be damned. Her legs wrapped tighter around his waist, ankles locking behind his back as she drew him deeper. She bit down on her inside of her cheek as Jon's lean frame slammed into her. She could feel herself teetering on the edge.

"Yes, yes. Oh God. Oh.... fuuuuuck," her orgasm hit like a tsunami which should have filled her with elation and joy. Instead it filled her with shock and fear. The images of Michael were back. His body replacing Jon's as he drilled her into submission. Her mind told her she should be repulsed, but instead, her toes curled, her orgasm had already taken hold, and there was nothing she could do about it now. Electricity shot across her skin, drawing a moan from deep in her throat as her body spasmed around Jon.

Her walls pulsed around him, each contraction drawing him deeper as her orgasm crashed through her in waves. The image of Michael was burned into her now, her guilt only intensifying the pleasure coursing through her trembling body. She could hear herself begging, pleading with Jon to fill her, to claim her completely.

"Don't stop, baby. I want it," she whimpered, her ankles locked tight behind his back. "I need to feel you..." But even as the words left her lips, she felt Jon tense, felt him start to withdraw. His mind winning the battle between need and practicality.

"Wendy, we can't-" Jon's voice strained as he pulled free of her grasp. Warmth spread across her thigh as her husband shuddered. Each rope that hit her skin felt like judgement, burning her skin. She had wanted him, needed him, to finish inside her. The sudden emptiness felt like punishment. She blinked her eyes open, all traces of Michael gone from her mind replaced with overwhelming guilt.

"We've got to be more careful." Jon's breath was shallow and raspy, his touch a reminder of what she couldn't have. She felt herself nod, leaning against his shoulder in hopes his familiar scent would ground her. She didn't know which was worse - that she'd imagined Michael while making love to her husband, or that she felt disappointed rather than relieved by Jon's responsible choice.

His tender kisses on her neck caused her to blink away tears. She didn't deserve his love, not after what had almost happened in the office. What had happened in her mind. She watched as Jon cleaned himself up with a nearby dish towel before pulling up his pants. The wine bottle lay shattered at their feet, red liquid seeping between the cracks of their kitchen tile like blood. "We should clean up this mess," Jon whispered in her ear stepping away to grab a broom.