

Chapter 23

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The morning after, I walked into Evelyn's office, anxiety tightening my chest so much that I could feel the sweat dripping down my back. My thoughts were running wild, making it hard to even focus on the conversation happening in front of me between Evelyn and Grace. As Grace set down a platter of charcuterie, my gaze was glued to the cornichons as I tried to push my nerves away. They chatted about Lisbon's summer offerings, but my mind was far from the conversation, trapped in the upcoming conversation I needed to have with Evelyn.

Once Grace stepped out of the room, I turned toward Evelyn. "We need to talk," I said, my voice edged with both urgency and a hint of unease. Evelyn's response was a laugh, lighthearted as ever, "Honestly, it feels like that's all we ever do." I pressed on, focusing on the matter at hand. "About Vivant, I mean."

"OK," Evelyn replied, giving me her full attention. "Talk." I could feel my heart racing, but I steadied myself as I dived into my request. "I need some sort of timeline for when this book might be released," I said, waiting for her to give me something to work with. "Please," I added mentally, hoping she'd understand the pressure I was under.

Evelyn's tone remained calm as she listened, yet I could feel the growing frustration inside me. "I'm listening," she finally said, waiting for me to elaborate. "If you don't tell me when this book could realistically be sold, I could lose my job. This could be years away—or even decades," I explained. It wasn't just about my career; it was about survival, and I needed clarity.

Evelyn, ever the sharp one, quipped, "You certainly have high hopes for my lifespan." I couldn't hide my exasperation. "Evelyn, I either need a firm date or I need to promise Vivant an excerpt for the June issue." I crossed my arms, steeling myself for her

response, my patience on the edge.

After some thought, she finally replied with a nod. "OK. You can give them an excerpt—whatever part you want—for the June issue. But only if you stop pushing for a timeline." My moment of triumph was fleeting. I didn't let the joy show on my face because I knew this was only part of the bigger negotiation. I wasn't done yet. I couldn't rest until I had everything I needed to secure my position.

The weight of the moment hit me. Evelyn needed something from me, something important, even if I wasn't sure exactly what it was. I wasn't just an employee. I had leverage, and I had to use it just as she would if she were in my position. And now, the real test was about to begin. I gathered my courage, prepared to take control of the situation the way Evelyn would.

"You need to sit for a photo shoot. For the cover," I demanded. The room fell into a heavy silence as I met her eyes, unflinching. "No," she replied instantly, her response sharp and firm.

"It's nonnegotiable," I pressed, feeling the weight of the moment. She tried to argue, but I stood my ground. "Everything is negotiable. Haven't you gotten enough already? I've agreed to the excerpt."

"You and I both know how valuable fresh images of you would be for this," I continued, my voice steady. Still, she refused. "I said no."

This was it. I had to push harder, just like Evelyn would. "You agree to the cover photo, or I'm out." I could see her sitting straighter now, taken aback.

"Excuse me?" Evelyn asked, her voice low with disbelief. I held her gaze and wasn't afraid to stand my ground. "You want me to write your life story. I want to write your life story. But these are my terms," I said firmly. "I'm not going to lose my job for you. I keep my job by delivering a feature with a cover. So either you give me a timeline, or you agree to this photo shoot. Those are your choices."

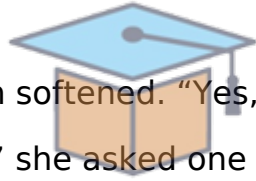
Evelyn studied me carefully. For the first time, I saw a flicker of respect in her eyes, maybe even admiration. "You're having fun with this, aren't you?" she said, a wry smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"I'm just protecting my interests," I said, finally letting a small smile slip through.

"Yes, but you're also good at it. And I think you're delighting in it just a little bit," Evelyn teased, her smile growing. "I'm learning from the best," I said with a shrug, my smile widening.

Evelyn's expression softened. "Yes, you are." She paused, scrunching her nose in thought. "A cover?" she asked one last time, her resistance finally cracking.

"A cover," I repeated, standing firm in my decision. It was my turn to win this battle, and I had no intention of backing down.



Summary