

Exit Interview

“What else can I get for you?” the waitress asked as she cleared their lunch plates. They both ordered a cappuccino.

Caroline’s eyes followed the waitress a moment as she walked away expertly balancing their used plates on her forearm before looking back across the table at Eugene.

It was her turn to speak—to formally wind down their light conversation about his exciting promotion and how he was looking forward to his new role and how much he appreciated all the countless hours she had spent with him to help groom him while he was under her direct supervision.

She managed a pleasant smile. He smiled back, waiting expectantly. She knew she had to say *something* or the silence would become awkward, and she'd just spent the better part of two years deftly avoiding any semblance of ‘awkward.’

Pursing her lips, she imperceptibly drew in a deep breath through her nose and held it. She wasn't quite ready—she needed more time. She let out the breath, "So... have you met with your new staff?"

He had a habit of looking elsewhere when he spoke which gave her the opportunity to let her eyes take in his features without him noticing—something at which she had also become quite adept over the past two years. *Has it really been two years..?*

As he talked on, her thoughts drifted. She couldn't pinpoint the *exact* moment it began, but it was shortly after he had been reprimanded by a senior executive. He had come to her office all upset and she had been caught off guard. The whole situation frankly irritated her. He was becoming perceived as a ‘problem’ and the fact that her superiors were stepping around her to address it reflected badly on her, and she placed the blame squarely on him.

Her initial impulse was to fire him, but as time passed, she found herself growing oddly protective of him. After all, even though he was young and inexperienced, wasn't it *she* who had chosen

him above all other candidates because she thought he was capable? *Was she that bad a judge of character?*

No. She would prove to them she could lead. She would take him under her wing and make him her "personal development project." She would challenge herself as much as she would challenge him, and they would both grow in the process.

And for several months her plan progressed nicely, until...that moment.

She was driving home from work with the radio playing softly in the background, her eyes focused on nothing in particular—she was on autopilot. And yet to this day, she can clearly recall the debate that took place in her mind: *Should she—shouldn't she? The pros—the cons.* If it remained entirely in her head, she reasoned, no one would get hurt—*right?*

That was the moment everything changed—the moment she permitted her thoughts to cross the line, to indulge in a little fantasy, to think about him...*differently.*

It had meant to be fun. It was meant to be brief—a one-act play performed in the theatre of her mind that would run hot for a few weeks and then fade away.

But the joke was on her—the play never closed. It ran continuously, night after night, day after day. Sitting here now across from him, nearly two years later, the desire to let her mind slip into a world where there are no husbands, no wives, no age difference, no consequences, and no guilt, burned as strongly as the day she conceived of it. The irony of it all—his leaving her now would actually deliver welcomed relief from her near-daily distraction...

She suddenly became aware that their conversation had again lulled and was approaching that 'awkward' moment. She could put it off no longer.

"Well—," she sat forward, "I suppose this is officially the *last* time I'll be addressing you as your boss."

Her eyes involuntarily dropped shyly, and then, as always, she was able to steel her emotions and step into her well-practiced role.

She lifted her eyes—her protective walls up and firmly intact, "And I *do* have two things I would like to share with you." He locked his eyes on hers, eagerly awaiting her 'pearls of wisdom'—even now.

"First," she began, "I want you to know how very pleased I am with all that you have accomplished." She recounted how he had really stepped up to her challenge to demonstrate his *own* leadership style, and how that was what had gotten him the promotion, and how she was happy to have had a hand in helping him grow into his potential. Standard safe stuff.

She paused to gather her thoughts and in that moment the waitress returned with the cappuccinos. Setting the cups down before them, Eugene struck up a conversation with her, noting that her accent was familiar and inquiring about her country of origin.

As he chatted with the waitress, Caroline observed him in silence, weighing in her mind one final time: *Should she—shouldn't she? The pros—the cons.* How could she *not* let him know that although they never once exchanged anything more than a fleeting glance that his very *existence* made her feel alive and giddy; that she spent countless hours with him not so much to coach him, but to simply *be* with him; that on the more intense days, when her longing consumed her, she reveled in the sweet, sick, stomach-twisting emotions she hadn't felt since college...

The waitress walked off and Caroline remained still, staring across at Eugene, watching him absently stir his cappuccino, unaware of her gaze.

He tapped the foam from his spoon and gently set it down beside his cup, and when his eyes lifted and met hers, every ounce of her two years of bottled emotion came brimming to the surface, ready to burst forth the instant she parted her lips...

"And second..?" he asked, picking up their conversation where it had left off.

She held steady his gaze. *This was it—this was the moment.* Her heart began to pound. She would speak the words and he would know—and she would know—and everything would forever change from this moment forward...

He waited for her to respond, then canted his head slightly, unsure of how to interpret her silence.

At this sweet, boyish, puppylike gesture Caroline's eyes softened into a tender caressing smile.

Eugene returned a tentative smile.

She considered him a moment longer and then, at last, she spoke.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten the second point..."

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