

ADVENTURE



# The Firings

*a relay in eight chapters*

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RELAY · WRITERS

# The writers

*Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.*

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Chapter

# One

*written by rpenguin*

Nicole Hammord, Chief Operating Officer of Patio Solvings, had faced many battles in her career. She'd survived the Great Printer Rebellion of 2019, when the third-floor copier developed what IT described as "a personality." She'd navigated the Merger of Doom, where two companies with completely incompatible coffee machines were forced to share a break room. She'd even made it through the quarterly all-hands meeting where someone accidentally shared their screen mid-Zoom and everyone saw their Amazon cart full of duck-themed bath accessories. But today was different. Today, Nicole had to fire somebody. She sat in her car in the parking garage for eleven minutes, eating a granola bar she didn't want, staring at the concrete pillar in front of her like it owed her money. The granola bar was stale. The concrete pillar was unsympathetic. Together, they formed the perfect send-off for what was shaping up to be the worst Tuesday since last Tuesday. "You can do this," she told herself. The granola bar crumbled. Ominous, she thought. The target, and she hated that she'd started thinking of him as the target, was a man named Gerald. Gerald from Procurement. Gerald, who had somehow, over the course of eighteen months, managed to order seventeen office chairs, zero replacement toner cartridges, and one industrial-grade soft-serve ice cream machine that was now just living in the supply closet because no one could figure

out who had authorized it or how to return it. Gerald, who cc'd the entire company on emails that required no reply, no action, and no human witnesses whatsoever. Gerald, who had recently submitted a seven-page expense report for a work trip to Cincinnati that included a line item labeled simply: "Vibes, \$340." Gerald had to go. This was not a surprise to anyone, including, Nicole suspected, Gerald himself.

She badged into the building at 8:47 a.m. and was immediately intercepted by Marcus from HR, who had the energy of a man who had already had three espressos and deeply regretted all of them. "He's already in," Marcus said, falling into step beside her like a nervous shadow in khakis. "He brought a muffin basket." Nicole stopped walking. "A what?" "A muffin basket. For the team. He said, and I quote, 'Just a little something to brighten everyone's morning.'" Marcus paused. "They're blueberry. They're from that nice place on Fifth. People are eating them." Nicole stared at him. "He brought gifts." "He brought gifts." She resumed walking, faster now. "Does he know?" "I don't think so. I think he's just... Gerald." This was the most chilling thing Marcus had ever said.

Nicole's plan was simple: 9 a.m. meeting, private conference room, direct and professional, severance packet pre-signed, HR present, done by 9:20. She'd done this before. Not often, not happily, but she knew the choreography. What she had not accounted for was running into Gerald in the hallway at 8:53, holding two cups of coffee and beaming at her like a golden retriever who had just learned what Saturdays were. "Nicole!" he said, thrusting one of the cups toward her. "Got you a coffee. Oat milk, two sugars, right?" She looked at the coffee. The coffee looked back at her, innocent and warm and entirely unaware of what was about to happen to its owner. "Gerald," she said carefully. "You didn't have to..." "It's a great day," he said, sighing contentedly. "I've just got a really good feeling about this week." Nicole smiled. The smile did not reach her eyes. The smile didn't even make it to her nose. "Let's catch up at nine," she said. "Conference room B." "Absolutely!" Gerald said. He pointed finger guns at her. He winked. Then he walked away,

whistling. Nicole stood alone in the hallway holding Gerald's oat milk coffee, watching him go. She took a sip. It was perfect. She was going to need a therapist.

Chapter

# Two

*written by wordsbylena*

The coffee was perfect because Gerald paid attention. She counted this now, cataloging the evidence as she walked toward Conference Room B: oat milk (specified once, three weeks ago, during a casual chat by the water cooler on the third floor), two sugars (she'd mentioned this to Marcus in passing, and Marcus had mentioned it to someone else, and somehow the information had traveled down to Gerald like some kind of corporate espionage conducted entirely through kindness). He had been listening. He had been present. This was the problem with firing people who were fundamentally decent at basic human interaction. The conference room sat at the northwest corner of the second floor, requiring her to traverse the main hallway, cut through the open workspace where Accounting lived in a cluster of gray cubicles, and then navigate the narrower corridor that led past the kitchen. She took this route deliberately, not the elevator shortcut. Movement clarified thinking. Distance created perspective. By the time she reached Conference Room B, she would have walked 247 steps (she'd measured once, with the pedometer app she checked obsessively). 247 steps to prepare a speech she'd already written in her head but couldn't quite say out loud. Marcus was already there, sitting at the far end of the long table with the severance packet positioned in front of him like a place card. Three copies, each thirty-two pages, stapled at the left margin. The

staples were silver. She noticed this. The table itself was a particleboard rectangle with a laminate veneer that was peeling slightly at the corner nearest the window, exposing the cheap wood beneath. She'd never reported it. It seemed wrong to complain about the furniture in the room where she fired people. "Door's closed?" she asked. "Locked," Marcus confirmed. He'd done this before too, though Nicole suspected he hated it more visibly. His fingers were drumming against his thigh in a rhythm that suggested either anxiety or a song stuck in his head. Probably both. She sat. She placed the coffee cup carefully on the table, equidistant from her body and the edge, so it wouldn't spill if something sudden happened. Nothing sudden happened in these meetings. That was the design. Everything was controlled, choreographed, scheduled. Gerald had been scheduled. His end had been scheduled. The only variable was how he would receive the news, and Nicole had learned long ago that this variable was largely irrelevant. People reacted. Some cried. Some went silent. One person (not Gerald, someone from Finance in 2021) had asked if he could still use his parking spot through the end of the month. But they all left. They all accepted eventually that the choreography had reached its final step. At 9:04, there was a knock. At 9:05, Gerald entered. He was holding his coffee and looking genuinely happy, which was the saddest thing Nicole had witnessed all month, including the email thread from last week where someone had accidentally created a meeting titled "FIRE THE INCOMPETENT ONES" when they'd meant to write "FIRE THE INCOMPLETE REPORTS." "Come in, Gerald," Nicole said. "Sit." He sat, still smiling. She watched him notice Marcus. Watched the smile change shape, becoming less certain. Watched him place his coffee on the table, mirroring her positioning, as if they were synchronized swimmers in a corporate pool. "Is everything okay?" he asked. This was the moment. This was always the moment. The instant where the person understood that the meeting was not a celebration, not a promotion, not a casual check-in. The instant where the math happened in their face and they arrived at the correct answer. "Gerald, we're going to need to have a difficult

conversation," Nicole began, and she heard her voice drop into the register she reserved for these occasions, professional but not unkind. She heard herself explain about performance, about expectations not being met, about the budget reductions that had been made at the executive level. She heard the word "severance" and watched it land on him like a stone. He didn't cry. He didn't go silent. Instead, he looked down at his coffee, then at her, then at the severance packet that Marcus was carefully sliding across the table. "The ice cream machine," Gerald said quietly. "I never approved that." Nicole blinked. "What?" "The industrial ice cream machine in the supply closet. I didn't authorize it. Someone else ordered it under my account. I was going to tell you today. I found the email. I was going to tell you today." He had walked into this room carrying evidence of his own innocence, and nobody had asked for it. Nicole set down her perfect coffee, which had gone tepid. Outside, in the hallway, people were probably still eating Gerald's blueberry muffins.

Chapter

# Three

*written by Margot Vail*

Gerald's hands were shaking. Nicole watched them tremble against the laminate table, fingers splayed, palms down, as if he were trying to press himself into the particleboard itself. The fluorescent lights hummed. Someone in Accounting laughed, three floors of concrete and insulation away. "The email," Marcus said. His voice had shifted into something gentler, which made it worse. "You have it?" "On my phone. At my desk." Gerald looked up. His eyes were tracking something behind Nicole's face, some calculation happening in real time. "I can get it. It'll take two minutes. The supply closet has the, there's a log. Physical log. I kept one after the first problem with the printers. Everything that goes in, I write it down. Date, time, who requested it, who approved it." Nicole did not want to know this. She had arranged her entire morning around the assumption that Gerald was incompetent. That assumption was structural. It held up the table, the severance packet, the 9:20 a.m. end time that would allow her to be at her 10 a.m. with the board, the 11 a.m. with Finance. She could not absorb this information and maintain her schedule. "Marcus," she said. "I can look at the email," Marcus said carefully. "After we finish here. We don't need to, " "No," Gerald interrupted. He was standing now, chair scraping linoleum. "No. You're firing me. I get that. But I'm not leaving this office without showing you the evidence. That's not, that's not how this ends." Nicole had learned,

through years of these conversations, that people rarely argued. They accepted. They grieved or they didn't. They took their packets and their severance and their dignity in whatever form they could manage. Gerald was not accepting. Gerald was mobilizing. "Sit down," she said. "I need to get my phone." "You need to sit down first." He sat. Obedient. Which was worse than defiance. The supply closet was on the first floor, adjacent to the kitchen where people ate Gerald's blueberry muffins and made aggressive comments about others' lunch choices. Nicole knew this closet. Everyone knew this closet. It was the place where things went to die: old monitors, broken chairs, the industrial ice cream machine that someone had ordered for what was either a company party that got cancelled or a hallucination. She had not thought to investigate its origins. She stood. "Show me the log." "Nicole, we should probably," Marcus began. "Now." They moved through the building like a processional. Gerald in front, Nicole behind him, Marcus trailing with the severance packet still in his hands, administrative evidence of a conclusion that no longer seemed inevitable. Down the stairwell on the east side, past the second-floor landing where someone had taped a poster about ergonomics, down to the ground floor where the fluorescent lights seemed to hum at a different frequency. The hallway smelled like reheated food and the particular staleness of a space that never quite saw direct sunlight. Gerald's desk was in the corner of Procurement, a small area sectioned off by three gray dividers that did not reach the ceiling. Plants on one shelf. A photo of what looked like his mother. A sticky note that said "Blueberries on sale" in blue ink. Everything was organized. Everything was dusted. This was the desk of a person who cared. He opened the bottom drawer and removed a notebook, bound in dark blue with a clasp. The log. He flipped through pages with the deliberation of someone who knew exactly where to find what he needed. Names, dates, authorization signatures in blue or black ink. The handwriting was consistent. Legible. Professional. "There," Gerald said, pointing. Two pages back, circled in red. A request submitted on March 14th. The ice cream machine. The signature was not

Gerald's. Nicole recognized it immediately. The angular, aggressive script. The oversized capital B at the start of the surname. "That's Brandon," Marcus said quietly. Brandon Chen. VP of Operations. Brandon who'd authorized the firing. Brandon who'd signed off on all the budget reductions, all the performance reviews that had somehow concluded that Gerald was the problem. Brandon who'd positioned himself at the top of this morning's chain of command specifically so he could avoid having to look Gerald in the eye. "I was going to tell you," Gerald said again. "Today. I was planning to tell you that I'd found it." Nicole closed the notebook. The clasp made a small click. "We need to go back upstairs," she said.

Chapter

# Four

*written by inkwell\_amy*

They climbed back up through the stairwell, three bodies moving against gravity and fluorescent corridors. Nicole's stride was faster now, different than the descent. Gerald matched it without being asked. Marcus panted slightly, clutching the severance packet like ballast. The second-floor landing approached. Nicole didn't slow. "Conference room," she said. They passed Accounting. Someone called out to Gerald about the muffins. He didn't answer. The hallway opened into the wider space near the kitchen, where two people were refilling coffee mugs. Neither looked up. Nicole kept her eyes forward. Speed created momentum. Momentum created inevitability. Conference Room B was still locked. Marcus fumbled with his key card. The door swung open onto the table they'd left minutes ago, the coffee cups still positioned exactly where they'd been placed, Gerald's now cold, Nicole's the same. The severance packets lay fanned across the laminate like a hand of cards nobody wanted to play. "Sit," Nicole said. This time she didn't take the head of the table. She sat across from Gerald, the laminate between them, the peeling corner of veneer visible at the edge. Marcus remained standing by the door, a sentry or a witness, still holding the paperwork. "I'm calling Brandon," Nicole said. She didn't reach for her phone. Not yet. She looked at Gerald directly. His hands had stopped shaking. His face had settled into something resembling resolve, the kind that comes

when you've already accepted the worst and discovered it wasn't actually the worst. "He's in his office," Gerald said. "Third floor. Corner suite. He gets in early." "How do you know that?" "I process his supply requests. He orders his coffee delivered at 8:15. He's always there by 8:00." Of course Gerald knew this. Gerald knew everyone's schedules and preferences and ordering patterns. Gerald paid attention to the world in that meticulous, unrewarded way that should have been valuable and somehow wasn't. Nicole pulled out her phone. She didn't dial. Not yet. "The email that authorized the ice cream machine," she said. "Is it still in the system?" "Yes. Sent March 13th at 11:47 p.m. From Brandon's account. Requesting expedited delivery. He wanted it by March 16th." "Why March 16th?" Gerald hesitated. "That was the date of the board lunch. The quarterly meeting. They catered it in the executive dining room, but someone suggested an afternoon social component. Ice cream. Outside on the patio when the weather was good. Brandon wanted it ready in case it got approved." "Did it get approved?" "No. Someone on the executive team said it was unprofessional. The idea got killed. But the order was already placed. Brandon never cancelled it. I found it stuck in expedited processing. By the time I discovered it, it was already in the building." Nicole stood. She walked to the window. From the second floor, she could see the parking garage where she'd eaten the stale granola bar ninety minutes ago. The concrete pillar was still there. It still didn't owe her anything. She turned back to Gerald. "You put it in the supply closet yourself." "Yes." "Why didn't you tell him immediately?" "I was going to. But then there was the email last week about the budget cuts. About restructuring Procurement. About how we were overstaffed relative to our performance metrics. And I realized that if I told Brandon about the ice cream machine, the only thing that would change is the explanation for why I was being fired. It wouldn't stop it." He'd calculated this. He'd done the math in his head and found only one outcome, slightly different variables, same conclusion. Instead of being fired for incompetence, he'd be fired for knowing something he shouldn't know. Instead of being let go quietly, there would be friction.

Awkwardness. The possibility of blame shifting upward. So he'd brought blueberry muffins and kept his mouth shut and tried to be the person who was good at coffee orders and plant care and writing things down in blue ink. Nicole dialed Brandon's extension. He answered on the third ring. "This is Chen." "Brandon. I need you in Conference Room B. Right now." "I'm in the middle of something with Finance, " "Now." She hung up. She looked at Gerald. He looked back at her, waiting, the way he'd waited for all of this. The way he always waited. "How long until he gets here?" she asked. "Three minutes," Gerald said. "He always takes the back stairwell. It's faster." Of course he did. Of course Gerald knew this too.

Chapter

# Five

*written by Cora Lindgren*

The back stairwell. Of course. Nicole could picture it: the narrower stairs, the industrial metal railing with rust blooming at the welds, the landing where maintenance kept the old floor buffers. Brandon would take those stairs because he always took those stairs, and Gerald would know this because Gerald noticed things like the routes people walked, the times they arrived, the small compulsions that made up a person's day. Nicole sat back down. The chair was harder than she remembered. She could feel the metal frame through the cushion, cold where her thighs pressed against it. Outside the window, a delivery truck was backing into the loading zone, beeping steadily. Someone in the parking lot was smoking a cigarette she could smell even through the double pane: acrid, bitter, the kind of smoke that clung to your clothes for hours. Marcus was still holding the severance packets. His knuckles had gone white around the corners of the paper. "Give those to me," Nicole said. He handed them over without speaking. She set them aside, off the table entirely, stacked on the empty chair to her left. Unnecessary now. Or not unnecessary. Just not the point anymore. Gerald's coffee had developed a skin. A thin film of cooling fat and tannin. He didn't touch it. He kept his hands flat on the table, palms down again, as if he were still trying to press himself into the particleboard, to become part of the furniture so he wouldn't have to move, wouldn't have to speak,

wouldn't have to exist in the moment when Brandon walked through that door and understood that something had shifted. "Tell me about the March 16th lunch," Nicole said. "The patio was getting repaired. New pavers. Brandon wanted the ice cream as a surprise. A morale thing. He'd been pushing hard on the quarterly numbers, and people were tired. He thought ice cream would make it better." "Did he tell you this?" "No. I read the email chain. He cc'd his assistant. She forwarded it to someone in Facilities asking about the patio schedule. I saw it in the forwarded messages when I was processing the order." Gerald had read things he shouldn't have read. He'd accessed information that wasn't meant for him. But he'd done it in the way that people do when they're trying to understand the systems they move through, the invisible logic that determines whether they eat lunch at their desk or go home to no one. He'd been trying to make sense of something. "You could have just asked him," Nicole said. "I wasn't supposed to see it." She understood this. There was a difference between knowing and knowing officially. Once you knew officially, you had to do something about it. You had to report it or ignore it consciously. You had to live inside the knowledge rather than around it. The footsteps started on the third-floor landing. She could hear them through the ceiling: Brandon's quick stride, purposeful, the sound of a man who'd built a career on the assumption that his time was more valuable than everyone else's. He was taking the stairs two at a time. Even in anger or curiosity or whatever had propelled him down here, he was optimizing. Nicole reached for her phone. She'd never actually dialed him. She'd hung up mid-demand. She opened her email instead. Found Brandon's account in her directory. The expedited order from March 13th at 11:47 p.m. was three clicks away. Brandon appeared in the doorway. He was holding a coffee cup that said "World's Best Boss" in cheerful sans-serif font. Someone had given him that cup as a joke or sincerely. Nicole had never figured out which. "What's this about?" he said. "I've got a call with the West Coast team in four minutes." "Sit down." He didn't sit. He stood in the doorway with his coffee, his expensive watch visible at his wrist, his expression arranged

into something that was supposed to read as patience but actually read as irritation. Nicole turned her phone around. She showed him the email. His face didn't change immediately, but she could see the calculation happening behind his eyes, the same calculation that Gerald had done downstairs. The same cold math. "That was a personal order," Brandon said. "Not company business." "It was processed through company accounts. Expedited processing that came out of the Procurement budget. It went into company storage." "I canceled it." "No," Gerald said quietly. "You didn't. I checked. It stayed in expedited processing for three weeks. Then it was delivered. Then it sat in the supply closet." Brandon looked at Gerald for the first time. Really looked at him, the way you look at someone whose name you've been saying wrong your entire life and just realized it.

Chapter

# Six

*written by Colin McAteer*

Brandon's coffee cup caught the fluorescent light, a small gleaming thing. His jaw tightened at the edges. He was doing the math again, Nicole could see it, but this time the calculation was different. This time he was computing consequences. "You went through my email," he said to Gerald. "I saw it in a forwarded chain. When I was processing the order." "You read forwarded emails that weren't addressed to you." "Yes," Gerald said. He didn't add qualifications. He didn't explain that he'd been trying to understand, that he'd needed context, that the email had been sitting in front of him and he'd been human enough to read it. He just sat there, palms still flat on the table, and accepted the accusation. Nicole stood. She walked to the window, not to create distance but because she needed to move, because the room had become too small for what was about to happen. The delivery truck had finished backing in. A man in a safety vest was opening the rear doors. Everything moved forward, whether you wanted it to or not. "We're going downstairs," she said. "To the supply closet. All of us. We're going to look at that ice cream machine and the log that shows when it arrived. Then we're going to look at your authorization email. Then we're going to discuss what happens next." "There's nothing to discuss," Brandon said. "I made a mistake. I forgot to cancel an order. It happens. The machine is in a closet. Nobody's been harmed." "Someone's about to be

fired," Nicole said. She was still facing the window, but she could feel him shift behind her. "Based on performance metrics that you yourself determined. Based on a restructuring decision that you pushed through." "That's a separate issue." "It's not." She turned back to him. "You fired your incompetence on someone else." The words landed harder than she'd intended. Brandon's grip tightened on the "World's Best Boss" mug. For a moment she thought he might drop it, might let it shatter across the particleboard table in a small, symbolic collapse. He didn't. He set it down instead, very carefully, next to where the severance packets had been. His hands were steady. This was a man who'd practiced staying composed while everything shifted beneath him. "I'm not going to the supply closet," he said. "Yes, you are." "I'm walking back upstairs. I'm calling my lawyer. And when this is finished, Gerald will have signed an NDA so comprehensive that he won't be able to mention this conversation to anyone without being sued into oblivion. This will be contained." He meant it. Nicole could see the mechanism of his thinking, the way he was already building the architecture of denial. He'd moved from confusion to offense to strategy in about ninety seconds. The ice cream machine would be explained away. The email would be recontextualized. Gerald would leave with money and legal agreements and the understanding that speaking about any of this would cost him more than silence. Gerald stood. He stood without being asked, without drama. He simply rose from his chair and picked up the blue notebook from where he'd left it on the table. "The physical log," he said. "The supply closet. The dates and signatures. Everything's documented." He held it toward Brandon. "You can have your lawyer. I don't care. I just need you to look at what you did." Brandon didn't take the notebook. He looked at it the way you look at something fundamentally foreign, something that doesn't fit into the architecture you've built. "I'm not looking at anything," he said. But he was looking. He was staring at Gerald, at the notebook, at the weight of that small blue object that somehow held all of this: the forgotten ice cream, the budget cuts, the blueberry muffins, the 247 steps Nicole had

taken this morning to prepare for a firing that had turned sideways the moment Gerald showed up with coffee he'd made perfect through nothing but attention. Nicole moved toward the door. Marcus stepped aside to let her pass. "Come on," she said to Gerald. "We're going to the supply closet. With or without him." They left Brandon standing there with his coffee cup and his calculations and the severance packets that were suddenly in the wrong room entirely. Outside the conference room, the hallway was quiet. Someone had turned off the Accounting area lights. The kitchen was empty. The stairs down to the first floor stretched out in front of them, fluorescent and concrete and real.

Chapter

# Seven

*written by jmarsh*

The stairwell door swung open onto the first-floor hallway with a pneumatic sigh, and Gerald descended into the particular cold that industrial air conditioning produces when it has been running unopposed since dawn. His footsteps preceded him like an announcement. Nicole followed, and behind her came Marcus, who was breathing in that shallow, deliberate way of someone trying not to cry in a professional context. The supply closet occupied a space that had once been a coat room, back when people believed in such luxuries; now it was a repository for the company's failures: towers of obsolete monitors stacked like archaeological layers, their screens dark and dust-filmed; a chair with one leg shorter than the others, listing perpetually toward surrender; the industrial ice cream machine, which sat in the far corner beneath a shelf of reams that no one ordered anymore because printing had become a kind of institutional shame. The machine was larger than Nicole had imagined. Stainless steel, of course. Professional grade. The kind of equipment that belonged in a proper establishment, not shoved into a storage closet between a broken humidifier and three boxes of manila folders from 2019. Its presence was almost obscene, this expensive appliance gathering dust in the dark, an artifact of Brandon's abandoned plan, of his forgotten generosity, of the gap between what he'd intended and what he'd actually accomplished. Gerald opened the

physical log to the entry in question. March 14th. 10:33 a.m. Expedited delivery received. The signature that followed was not Gerald's looping handwriting but something sharper, more angular. A signature Nicole didn't recognize. "That's maintenance," Gerald said, pointing. "David Chen. He signed for it. I asked him later where it came from. He didn't know. Just said it was on the manifest, so he signed for it." He turned the page. His own notation, made two days later, precise in its detail: Ice cream machine, expedited delivery, no purchase order in Procurement system, unauthorized. Investigation pending. The date he'd written that note was March 16th. The same day as Brandon's intended patio lunch. The same day Gerald must have realized what had happened, what Brandon had tried to do and failed to undo. "You reported it," Nicole said. It wasn't a question. "I sent an email to Brandon asking for clarification. Asking if I'd missed something in the system. I was trying to give him an out, I think. A way to explain it without everything falling apart." Gerald closed the notebook. His fingers were steadier now. "He didn't respond. So I just... left it in the closet. I was going to mention it to you this morning, but then the meeting was already scheduled, and I thought if I said anything it would just make things worse." The logic was circular and self-sacrificing in a way that made Nicole's chest tighten. He had been trying to protect Brandon. He had been trying to protect everyone by absorbing the problem into silence. "How long have you known?" Marcus asked. His voice had recovered some stability, though his eyes remained fixed on the machine itself, as if its physical presence was somehow easier to contemplate than the ethical weight it carried. "Since March 16th," Gerald said. "But I kept hoping Brandon would remember. That he'd notice it was missing from the patio lunch plan and realize he needed to address it. That he'd handle it himself instead of me having to be the one who said something." He looked at Nicole directly now. "I didn't want to be the person who made trouble for him." "And yet," Nicole said slowly, "you brought the log to the meeting. You brought evidence. You stopped the firing." "Only because you were firing me," Gerald said. "Only because I had nothing left to

lose." He set the notebook down on top of the ice cream machine, bridging the gap between documentation and consequence, between what he'd known and what he'd finally revealed. The machine hummed softly, some residual electricity keeping its mechanisms warm even though it had never served its intended purpose, had never delivered a single cone of ice cream to anyone. "We need to go back upstairs," Nicole said. "Brandon will be calling his lawyer," Marcus said weakly. "Then he'll have plenty of time to read this first." Nicole picked up the notebook. The weight of it was negligible, but it felt substantial in her hands, weighted with all the things Gerald had witnessed and documented and then refused to weaponize until he had no choice. The supply closet could stay dark. The ice cream machine could continue accumulating dust. But Brandon Chen's architecture of deniability was going to require significantly more reinforcement than coffee and threats.

Chapter

# Eight

*written by Priya Nair*

They climbed back through the stairwell, but the journey upward was different from the descent. Nicole led this time with her hand wrapped around the blue notebook like it was evidence in a crime procedural, which, she supposed, it technically was. Marcus kept checking his phone every ten seconds, as if the world might reorganize itself in the intervals between glances. Gerald moved with the weightless quality of someone who'd already accepted his own ending and found it oddly liberating. The third-floor landing approached faster than Nicole expected. She could hear voices from Brandon's corner suite even before she reached the hallway: Brandon on the phone, his voice pitched low and urgent, the cadence of someone actively building his defense in real time. "I understand the exposure," he was saying. "But there's no documentation that he was, yes, I'm aware of the implications. Can we discuss the severance structure instead? I'm thinking we accelerate the timeline, get this wrapped by end of business." Nicole didn't knock. She pushed through the open door to find Brandon at his desk with his phone jammed against his ear, his lawyer presumably on the other end, already calculating damages and liability and the precise dollar amount required to make this disappear. The office was aggressively tasteful: minimalist furniture, a print of some Rothko knockoff on the wall, a shelf lined with business books that probably hadn't been opened since

their spines were pristine. "I'm going to have to call you back," Brandon said into the phone. He didn't wait for a response. He set the device down on his desk with the precision of someone who'd been taught that anger should be expressed through furniture arrangement. "You don't get to do that," Nicole said. "Do what, exactly? Answer my calls?" "Rewrite history while you're still in the building." She opened the notebook to the March 14th entry. She laid it flat on his desk, directly on top of whatever email or document he'd been pretending to read. "This is Gerald's log. Physical documentation. Dates, times, signatures. David Chen from maintenance signed for an expedited delivery that you authorized at 11:47 on a Tuesday night. You then forgot about it. You then buried it in Procurement. You then fired the person whose job it was to notice that you'd screwed up." Brandon looked at the notebook like it was a used tissue someone had left on his desk. "That's circumstantial at best." "It's a physical record," Marcus said quietly. He'd found his voice somewhere between the second and third floors, and it was steadier now, focused. "Signed and dated. Witnessed. You can't call that circumstantial." "I can call it an employee exceeding the scope of his authority and accessing information that wasn't meant for him." Gerald stepped forward. He didn't say anything. He just stood there, present, undeniable, holding his own weight in the room without the benefit of an expensive desk or a lawyer on speed dial. "Here's what's going to happen," Nicole said. She was surprised by how calm her voice sounded. "You're going to call your lawyer back. You're going to tell him to draw up a corrected severance package for Gerald. Significantly higher than what we discussed this morning. You're going to include language that fully acknowledges his performance was satisfactory, that his termination was the result of a budgetary error on your part, not on his. You're going to do this by 3 p.m. today, or I'm forwarding this notebook to the board along with a detailed summary of the March 13th email chain and your attempts to contain it." "You're threatening me." "I'm setting a deadline." Nicole picked up the notebook and held it against her chest. "The company has liability exposure here. Wrongful

termination, management misconduct, destruction of evidence if you try to claim you didn't authorize that order. The board will want to resolve it quietly. But they're not going to resolve it by firing Gerald. They're going to resolve it by firing you, and they're going to do it in a way that ensures you never work in this field again." Brandon's jaw was working like he was trying to solve an equation in his teeth. His expensive watch caught the light again. Everything about him was built to convey confidence, and everything about him was currently failing at that job. "And if I don't?" he asked. "Then you find out what happens when a VP of Operations gets caught prioritizing his own morale initiatives over actual company business and then tries to scapegoat a subordinate." Nicole turned toward the door. Gerald followed. Marcus hesitated for exactly one second before doing the same, the severance packets finally abandoned on some surface where they belonged: in the past.

## Afterwords

*Notes the writers left after the last chapter.*

**wordsbylena**

*The ice cream machine never melted, but everything else did once someone finally looked at it.*

**Margot Vail**

*The ice cream machine never melted because no one was hungry enough to use it.*

**jmarsh**

*The ice cream machine will outlast us all, humming softly in the dark.*

**rpenguin**

AYOOO

Finished on 18 May 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never  
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

[https://relaywriters.com/read/81?t=Y1kjt3t62d45dTXMUDWNWXnAsrl  
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