

Tuesday after school, Tiff followed her mother into the central bank where Jonathan had worked up until a few months ago. The austere setting had intimidated her as a younger child. Now the sterile cubicles and staid bank offices exuded as much warmth and charm as a prison.

They walked past the lobby where tellers deposited or withdrew money and entered the part of the bank reserved for administrative duties. A young receptionist with short, curly red hair sat behind a small desk. Her nameplate read Rebecca McDonald.

Her mother spoke to the young receptionist. “We have an appointment to see Mr. Jordan about Jonathan Langley. He used to work here until a few months ago.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened, and her voice tremored. “Yes, ma’am. You’re Doctor Gardner, right? I remember your picture on his desk.” Her shaky hand darted towards the office phone, but it knocked into a bud vase holding a pair of roses, one pink and one red.

Tiff’s hand shot out, catching the bud vase before it spilled water across the desk. The young receptionist jumped as Tiff moved. Ignoring Rebecca’s jitters, Tiff reset the bud vase in its place.

“Is something wrong?” her mother asked the receptionist.

“I’m sorry. We ended it a month ago. I told him...” She stopped abruptly and glanced at Tiff. Then she took a moment to compose herself. “I’ll let Mr. Jordan know you’re here to see him.”

Five minutes later, Mr. Jordan welcomed her mother into his office. Tiff waited in the reception area, texting with Rachel and Kennedy. Rebecca busied herself with something on her desk; she looked away whenever Tiff glanced at her.

The meeting lasted for about twenty minutes. Twice during that time, Tiff heard her

mother's raised voice, though the walls muffled her actual words.

At the end of their meeting, her mother emerged from the office, carrying a manila folder. She directed a withering glare at the young receptionist, but didn't say a word. Rebecca sniffled, then excused herself and wandered towards the restroom. Tiff followed her angry mother out of the bank.

During the drive home, an uncomfortable silence filled the car.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

Her mother's hands tensed on the steering wheel for a moment. "Jonathan wasn't laid off. They fired him for inappropriate conduct. He'd been having an affair with that little tramp." Her mother stared straight ahead. "From what that Mr. Jordan told me, Jonathan started to bother Rebecca when their relationship soured."

The car reached a traffic light, and her mother turned to face her. Tears shone in her mother's eyes, but her voice remained calm. "But he won't bother you any more, Tiffany. I promise."

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