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CHAPTER 1 – THE MOMENT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

It was a grey Friday afternoon in London, the kind where the sky is an indistinct shade of steel, pressing down on the city like an afterthought. The air carried the kind of stillness that signals the end of the week—emails sent, calendars checked, coffee cups half-drunk and forgotten on desks. I was sitting at mine, methodically ticking off the last few tasks on my list, grateful for the predictability of routine.

There was something satisfying about the finality of small completions—an inbox cleared, a report submitted, a quiet exhale knowing that, at least for now, there were no fires left to put out.

Then, the news broke.

It came as a whisper first, an overheard fragment of conversation that made the air in the office shift. A sudden change in leadership. An executive removed—no explanation, no warning. Just the rapid unraveling of stability in a place that had, moments before, felt immovable.

Hushed voices carried uncertainty across the floor like a slow-moving current. Some claimed it had been planned. Others swore it was abrupt. Either way, the effect was the same. You could feel the energy tighten, an invisible force pressing against your skin.

I tried to focus on my work, but it was like trying to hold onto water. The familiar routine I had counted on just moments ago now felt like a thin illusion stretched over something much deeper. My hands hovered over the keyboard, but my mind was already tracing the fallout behind closed doors.

Leadership changes didn't just happen overnight—not like this. This had been in motion long before today, which meant the company had known before we did. And if they could keep something that big under wraps, what else were they keeping?

Then came the call.

“Amna, the CFO wants to see you. Now.”

The words, though simple, landed like a stone in my stomach. The CFO? That wasn't routine. No one was summoned to the CFO's office casually and certainly not at the end of a Friday.

There was something unsettling about it—the precision, the urgency, the absence of explanation. My mind went straight to the worst-case scenario. Was I about to be let go? Was my role affected by this shake-up?

I stood up, smoothing the front of my blazer in a gesture that felt like an act of control, though my hands betrayed me with a slight tremor.

Around me, the office continued in its usual rhythm—people at their desks, fingers clacking against keyboards, conversations murmuring in the background. Yet I felt untethered, as if I were moving through the space as an outsider, a foreigner in my own environment.

The walk to the lift felt longer than it should have. I became hyperaware of the details I had ignored all day—the artificial glow of the overhead lights, the faint smell of burnt coffee lingering from the break room, the way the carpeted floor muted my footsteps.

My mind oscillated between forced rationality and creeping dread. *Maybe this was just a briefing. Maybe I was overthinking.*

But the other possibility—that this conversation would upend my career—refused to loosen its grip.

The mirrored walls reflected an image of me that I wasn't sure I recognised—poised on the outside, unraveling beneath the surface. My fingers clenched around my notebook, knuckles whitening against the leather cover. A small detail, but a telling one. I was holding on to something solid, something tangible, as if that could anchor me.

My reflection stared back, eyes slightly widened, a flicker of unease betraying the carefully composed expression I had trained myself to wear.

The logical part of my brain attempted to run defence. *Maybe it's nothing. Maybe they need your input on something routine. Maybe this is an opportunity, not a threat.*

But logic is a weak opponent against fear. Because fear isn't interested in probabilities—it is only interested in survival.

And survival means preparing for the worst.

What if I was about to be blindsided? What if this was one of those moments where a single decision made behind closed doors rewrote the trajectory of my career?

My breath came slower, measured, as I forced myself to stay composed.

The lift hummed as it ascended. It wasn't just the movement that made my stomach turn; it was the sense that, in the span of seconds, I was about to cross an invisible threshold into something irreversible.

By the time the doors opened with a soft chime, I had braced myself for impact.

Stepping onto the executive floor felt like stepping into a different reality.

Everything was muted here. The usual sounds of the office—the ringing phones, the steady hum of conversation—were absent. The air itself felt heavier, thicker with something intangible. Authority had a way of altering even the acoustics of a space.

The carpet softened the impact of my shoes, making my movements unnervingly silent.

I approached the assistant's desk and she glanced up, offering a polite, but unreadable nod before gesturing toward the closed door of the CFO's office. No unnecessary pleasantries. No indication of what awaited me inside.

My stomach coiled tighter as I took the final steps toward the door.

The door clicked shut behind me and suddenly, I was inside.