

Performance Review

by Lenora Vale

She came to his office to resign. He had a counteroffer.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

Performance Review

The meeting request arrived at 5:47 PM on a Friday.

Re: Q3 Performance Review — Elena Marsh. Please come to the 14th floor at 6:15 PM.

Elena looked at it for a moment. 6:15 on a Friday, after the floor had emptied. From Daniel Crane's calendar. Her pulse did something she told it firmly to stop doing.

She and Daniel Crane had been doing a very specific kind of nothing for seven months. Nothing that looked like everything in the way a meeting agenda can look like small talk and be something else entirely. Nothing that consisted of his hand resting at her lower back when they moved through a doorway, always brief enough to be accidental and always long enough not to be. Nothing that was made of the way he listened to her in quarterly reviews — not through her, the way some of the senior partners did, but at her, with the particular focused attention of a man who was paying close attention to something he was choosing not to act on.

Elena Marsh, thirty-three, strategic analyst, was not an idiot. She knew what was being not-done.

She also knew that Daniel Crane ran the division with a precision that generated 22% above-target returns and a reputation for being completely ungiven to impulse, which was the thing that made her wonder why his hand was always at her back when no one was watching.

At 6:14 she took the lift to fourteen.

The floor was empty, as expected. The good offices up here had glass walls and long views of the city, which was just beginning its evening shift — the lights coming on, the traffic below settling into its slower register. His door was open.

He was at his desk with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled and the particular posture of someone who had been working for twelve hours and

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had decided to stop performing about it. He looked up when she appeared in the doorway.

"Close it," he said. "Please."

She closed the door. Sat down across from him. The city behind him was doing its light show.

"Q3 performance review," she said.

"Yes." He folded his hands on the desk. "Your work this quarter was excellent. I wanted to say that directly."

"That's the whole meeting?"

"No." He looked at her steadily. "I need to say something else, and I need to say it in a way that gives you every possible out, because this is a line I have been very deliberately not crossing for seven months and I need to know whether the reason I haven't crossed it is the right reason or the wrong one."

Elena looked at him.

"The right reason," he continued, "would be professional ethics and the appropriate management of a power differential. The wrong reason would be that I've been waiting for you to leave the division."

A silence that had several floors in it.

"I've accepted the lateral move to the Singapore office," she said. "The offer came through Wednesday. I signed Thursday."

He looked at her. Something shifted in his face — not surprise, because she suspected he knew about the Singapore offer. More like a calculation completing.

"So the power differential—" he started.

"Is sixty days from resolved," she said.

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"Elena." He said her name the way he said her name in presentations when he was citing her work to the room — with a precision that meant *this is the important part*.

"Daniel," she said back. Same register.

He stood up. She stood up. The desk was between them and neither of them moved around it yet, just stood there with seven months of not-done hanging in the air-conditioned air.

"Sixty days," he said.

"Or now," she said, "and sixty days of knowing what we're waiting for."

The pause was very short.

He came around the desk.

He kissed her against the glass wall, which was the kind of irony she was going to appreciate more later, the city fourteen floors below doing its indifferent evening business. He kissed her with seven months of controlled restraint metabolising into something unhurried but absolute — no tentativeness, no question, just the long-delayed arrival of a thing that had been decided a long time ago.

"I've been thinking about this since April," she said.

"March," he said.

She laughed, and the laugh turned into a sound of a different kind when his mouth moved to her throat and his hands moved with the same decisive precision he brought to everything, which she had privately theorised about and was now discovering was theory proven.

The city could see them. She found she didn't care. There was no one on the floor, the building was half-empty, and she had been professional for seven months and she was done.

"The desk or the sofa," he said, against her collar.

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"The desk," she said. "The sofa is for people who planned this."

The laugh that came out of him was real and unguarded and she filed it away as one of the better sounds she'd heard.

He lifted her onto the desk — her desk equivalent, the meeting table along the south wall — and she put her hands in his hair and felt seven months of professional nothing unravel into something significantly more honest. He was thorough in the way he was thorough about everything, and he paid the same quality of attention, and she stopped thinking about metrics and Singapore and the appropriate management of power differentials and thought about nothing except his mouth and his hands and her own name in his voice.

She said his. The second time she said it the quality shifted — lower, something private in it that wasn't for the boardroom — and he pressed his forehead to her temple and breathed her name back, and it was nothing like a performance review.

Afterwards: the city still going, the desk somewhat chaotic, her hair significantly less professional than it had been at 6:14.

"Singapore," he said.

"Singapore," she confirmed.

"I'll be in the Singapore office in January."

She turned to look at him. "The board approved the expansion?"

"Wednesday." A pause. The almost-smile she had catalogued extensively from the wrong side of a boardroom table. "Same day as your offer."

She looked at him for a long moment. "You planned this."

"No. I found out about the expansion and realised the differential would resolve and then everything else was your decision."

"But you knew."

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"I hoped," he said, which was the most honest thing she'd heard from a man in years.

She kissed him again, which was a position statement.

"My performance review," she said.

"Excellent," he said. "As noted."

"Any areas for improvement?"

He looked at her with that look — measured, attentive, something warm underneath it.

"None identified," he said. "Will revisit in Singapore."

Outside, the city didn't care. Inside, it was the best Friday she'd had in seven months.
