

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her mouth and nose. She has dark hair pulled back and is wearing dark, glossy red lipstick. Her skin tone is light, and the lighting is dramatic, casting shadows on one side of her face.

A HARD DAY'S WORK

Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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“Female bosses are the worst,” Ann says before carefully allowing a tiny lettuce leaf into her mouth. She chews it as if eating is a forbidden activity.

“I disagree.” Kenneth draws his lips into that leery look I despise. He fixes his gaze on me. His eyes are the colour of weak tea. “I’m sure Jo and I are on the same page.”

After I first told him I’m exclusively into women, he didn’t know what to do with that information for a few weeks. He would stare at me in silence for minutes and shake his head in disbelief, as if he couldn’t figure out the physical practicalities of two women in bed together. I much preferred his ignorance over the delusional camaraderie he now believes we share.

I take a big bite out of my sandwich because I refuse to acknowledge Kenneth’s insinuation. Ann arches up her eyebrows and shoots me a quizzical look. Silence is not going to get me off the hook this time.

I chew slowly, making sure she understands how much tastier my cheese sandwich is than her salad without dressing.

“Amanda has some issues.” For starters, she’s straight, I say only to myself. “But I’ve seen worse.” I know that by stating this I’m essentially siding with Kenneth, but I can’t agree with Ann on this one.

“Shht,” Kenneth says before I can continue. “She’s coming.” He sits up straight in his chair, all but adjusting his tie.

“Hey team.” Clearly, one of Amanda’s issues is that she addresses us as *team*, as if we’re taking part in a self-improvement seminar. “Do you mind if I join?”

“Of course not,” Ann is quick to say. The fake smile on her face hurts my eyes.

Amanda unpacks her green salad. I spot a few drops of dressing. At least Ann is winning that particular battle.

“You ladies should eat more.” Kenneth shuffles in his seat. Unlike him, I can keep my cool in Amanda’s presence. “If that were my lunch,” he points at Ann and Amanda’s flimsy salads, “I’d pass out after three.”

Amanda zones in on his pastrami sandwich. I detect a glimmer of disgust in her eyes, but I can’t be sure. I might just be projecting. “After you’re finished with that, you should have enough energy to finish the Haynes report I’ve been waiting for.”

I catch a glimpse of Ann’s triumphant grin before she stretches her mouth into a semi-indifferent pout again.

Kenneth’s cheeks flush the tell-tale crimson red they always do when Amanda chastises him.

“Did you have a nice weekend, Amanda?” I quickly change the subject because I can’t help but feel sorry for him. I also want to grab the opportunity to find out more about Amanda’s personal life.

“Doug was away so I came into the office on Saturday to catch up on e-mails.” She pauses to check if she has our full attention. Amanda likes it that way. “And yesterday I ran a half-marathon.”

Silence ensues. It’s a hard one to follow. I know Ann has been training for the company’s annual 5K race taking place in two months. Kenneth—despite his love for unhealthy food—is so skinny his body seems only made up of flesh and bone with no room for fat or muscle tissue.

“How about you, Jo? Did you paint the town red?” Amanda’s green eyes rest on me.

I don’t know how I got the reputation of being a party animal. Maybe it’s because I’m the youngest on the team, or because I’m single—or because I’m a lesbian. “My doubles partner and I got severely beaten in our tennis club’s championship.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you played.” Amanda’s face lights up. It’s common knowledge her two great loves in life—apart from work—are running and tennis. “Which club do you belong to?”

“Hennessy’s. It’s in Surrey.” I only joined a month ago. I’m more a martial arts kind of person, but it was a strategic decision which is paying off already. I can practically feel Ann roll her eyes behind my back. I expect her to give me the cold shoulder for at least a day as punishment for fraternising with the enemy.

“We should—” The loud ring of her cellphone interrupts Amanda. “I’m sorry, I have to take this.”

Uninterested in what’s left of my sandwich, I lean back in my chair. Amanda rises from her seat and, as if it was only her in the break room, turns on her heels and leaves.

“Tennis, huh?” Ann shoves a dry stick of celery into her mouth. “That’s a new one.”

“What can I say,” I joke. “I’m a woman of many talents.”

“Is that what it’s called these days?” A vacant look—the one he gets whenever Amanda leaves the room—has taken over Kenneth’s face.

“Just because she has a non-existent personal life, doesn’t mean she has to sit here and declare how dedicated to her job she is. If I had a husband who’s never around and no children, I’d have time to *catch up on e-mails* in the weekend as well.” Ann’s too busy being pissed at Amanda to direct more of her frustration at me.

Kenneth rolls the tin foil his lunch was packed in into a ball and tries to fling it in the waste basket in the corner. He misses. Without saying a word, he gets up and leaves.

“How’s that 5K coming along, Ann?” I can’t keep a mild sneer out of my voice.

“Just fine.” She shoots up out of her chair and crosses to the sink to rinse off the plastic container her salad came in.

I wait until she leaves to close the lunch box Amanda carelessly left on the table. I put it in the fridge while humming the *Happy Days* theme tune.

* * *

Every day, at five on the dot, Ann and Kenneth rise from their desk and finish their work day. They have spouses to consider and children who need to be fed before bed. I usually linger on in the office the three of us share, enjoying the solitude and silence their absence brings. It also allows me the opportunity, every time I hear Amanda’s footsteps clatter on the hallway floor outside, to imagine she’ll walk in and say, “At last, they’ve gone,” before hurling herself at me.

But Amanda is straight and she’s my boss. I can pretend to play tennis all I want, she’ll never be interested in me *that way*. It doesn’t stop me from dreaming.

“You’re on your own, Jo,” Kenneth says and closes the door of our office behind him.

“Leave it open,” I yell behind him—just like every night—but he lets it bang shut with the most annoying thud possible.

I push myself out of my chair but my toes catch behind the foot of my desk. My hip crashes into it, sending a half-empty coffee cup to the floor, its tepid contents spilling over my sweater.

“Fuck,” I scream at no one but myself. I quickly grab a tissue from the box on Ann’s desk and try to stop the stain from soaking all the way into the delicate fabric of my sweater. It doesn’t help so I dash out of the office to the break room, which is closer than the wash room. I hoist my sweater over my head before yanking a tea towel off its hook and dousing it in water.

Engrossed in removing the stain from my sweater, I don’t hear the footsteps approach from behind.

“Is it casual Friday already?” Amanda’s voice beams.

Thank god I’m wearing a tank top, I think as I turn around. To my surprise, Amanda’s eyes appear glued to my arms. Countless upper cuts and hooks a week haven’t missed their effect.

“I didn’t finish my lunch,” she mumbles, completely out of character.

While she hides behind the refrigerator door, I stifle a chuckle. Instead of cursing Kenneth and his stupid game of slamming the door shut every night, I secretly thank him for landing me in this situation.

When Amanda re-emerges she has put herself together again. “You must have quite a serve with biceps like that.”

This time, I’m the one nearly blushing. “I get by.”

“What happened?” She nods in the direction of my sweater.

“Office clumsiness.” Flustered, I hold my palms up, dropping the tea towel to the floor. It really isn’t my day.

She scoots closer and crouches down to pick it up. As she hands it back to me, the tips of our fingers lightly touch. She redirects her attention to my sweater.

“You may want to use some vinegar on that when you get home.” I hadn’t pegged her for someone with detailed knowledge on removing stains. “Doug is terribly clumsy. It seems all I do is run after him and clean up his mess.”

The mention of her husband’s name zaps me back into reality. I doubt Amanda is the sort of woman who does a lot of running around for her husband—the mysterious Doug whose name gets dropped occasionally, but who never shows up for office parties or other work-related social events. I want to quiz her about him, but the circumstances don’t strike me as ideal. It’s also none of my business.

“Thanks for the tip.” I smile and glance at my sweater, which I fear might now be ruined.

“Here’s another one,” she says as she heads for the door. “You should wear short sleeves more often.”

I have to keep my jaw from dropping. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear she was flirting.