

Three Years Forgotten, Why Go Crazy When I Say Goodbye?

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The assistant didn't dare waste a second and immediately hurried off, only to return with the news that their target hadn't arrived yet. He quickly relayed this update to Julian Sinclair.

Julian scoffed at the report. For someone to be this late, they clearly had quite the ego.

Meanwhile, word of his arrival had spread, and several attendees approached him with business cards in hand. Many were current partners of Sinclair Group. This was a business setting, after all, and no matter how much Julian looked down on them privately, he still had to keep up appearances.

Within moments, he was surrounded by a crowd, leaving him no time to dwell on anything else.

On the other side of the city, the reason Willow Horgan hadn't arrived yet was that her car had broken down. She had been stranded on the side of the road for half an hour. She had initially thought it would be a quick fix, but the issue still hadn't been resolved.

Arthur Vance had arranged both the car and the driver. When he found out she was attending the Global Bio-Innovation Summit, he had insisted on handling the logistics. At first, Willow had declined, feeling it was unnecessary. She could easily catch a cab and didn't want to tie up company resources.

But Arthur had been adamant, arguing that it was standard protocol. Given her executive level, having a dedicated driver for conferences not only facilitated her work but also upheld the firm's prestigious image.

There was an even more crucial reason Arthur hadn't mentioned: if Silas Thorne ever found out Willow had gone to a summit alone without a company car, he would have been furious. Silas had already given strict orders that all of her travel, meals, and accommodations were to be arranged at the absolute highest standard.

Since Arthur had put it that way, Willow couldn't really argue. She just hadn't expected to run into car trouble along the way.

The driver, a middle-aged man, kept apologizing profusely. Terrified of losing his job, he practically begged her not to report the incident to the company, looking as though he might burst into tears at any moment.

Willow's heart softened, and she promised not to say a word to the office. However, with the summit about to start, waiting around was no longer an option. She suggested that she grab a cab while he stayed behind to wait for a tow.

The honest, hardworking man didn't dare object. As long as she didn't file a complaint, he was willing to agree to anything. In the end, Willow hailed a taxi from the curb.

Fortunately, traffic was light at this hour. When she finally arrived, she was just in time for the opening remarks.

Guided by the event staff, Willow quickly located her seat. Because she was representing Merit Biotech, the organizers had initially planned a formal welcome for her, but she had politely declined. Since she was already running late, she didn't want to disrupt the schedule. She preferred to just follow the agenda; she never cared much for flashy ceremonies anyway.

The organizers were pleasantly surprised by how easygoing she was. Struck by her radiant complexion and elegance, they chatted with her for a moment longer. Before walking away, the staff member gave her a brief rundown of the upcoming schedule.

However, when Willow heard the lineup for the keynote speeches, she froze. She had just heard a name she absolutely despised.

"Who did you just say?" she asked, thinking she must have misheard. After all, that name hadn't been on the initial guest list provided to her. If she had known he would be here, she might have skipped the event entirely.

The staff member assumed she wanted to network with the prominent CEO, just like everyone else had been doing all morning. They gladly repeated, "The CEO of Sinclair Group, Julian Sinclair."

As soon as the words left their mouth, the emcee's voice boomed from the stage: "Please welcome Mr. Sinclair to the podium."

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A moment later, Willow watched Julian step onto the stage.

He wore a high-end, custom-tailored suit paired with a matching tie and sleek cufflinks. His hair was impeccably styled, making it obvious he had put considerable effort into his appearance today.

Sure enough, the second he appeared, enthusiastic applause and excited murmurs rippled through the crowd. Willow didn't need to guess—she knew they were all fooled by his polished exterior. After all, she had once fallen for the exact same illusion.

But once you truly interacted with him and learned what kind of man he really was, you realized it was all a complete sham. He was nothing but an empty shell. In fact, the sheer disgust he evoked was enough to make his supposedly handsome face completely repulsive.

That was exactly how Willow felt right now. Her intense loathing for him made his voice and face utterly unbearable. It was a visceral reaction, and she instantly furrowed her brows.

Throughout Julian's entire keynote speech, she kept her head down, a permanent scowl on her face. She flipped through the informational brochures on the table just to distract herself.

While Julian was speaking, he noticed that the VIP from Merit Biotech had finally arrived. However, since she kept her head lowered the entire time, he couldn't get a look at her face.

Yet, even from a distance, he could tell she was a stunning woman. She possessed a quiet, elegant aura. At first glance, she actually reminded him a little bit of Willow.

Interesting. She looked so soft and delicate, yet her reputation suggested a spine of steel. He was already itching to meet her properly. But he was stuck on stage, unable to do anything but watch from afar.

Around eleven o'clock, the formal portion of the summit concluded. The three-hour event wrapped up its scheduled presentations, transitioning into an open networking session where attendees could freely mingle.

Because Julian had completely stolen the spotlight during his speech, a swarm of people immediately rushed over to him. Trapped in the crowd, he instructed his assistant to go introduce himself to the Merit VP first, promising to join them shortly.

The assistant did as told. Being a new hire, he didn't recognize Willow and had no idea about her history with Sinclair Group. He simply approached her with a standard, polite greeting and conveyed Julian's request for a meeting.

At first, Willow thought he was just another attendee looking to network. She didn't think much of it and responded with the same warm professionalism she showed everyone else.

But the second he mentioned he was representing Julian Sinclair, her expression darkened.

She didn't mean to be rude, and she certainly wasn't targeting the poor assistant. Willow knew he was just doing his job and following orders, but she simply couldn't control her reaction.

Swallowing back her disgust, she kept her tone as level as possible. "I'm sorry, but I won't be meeting with him."

By the time Julian managed to escape the crowd and make his way over, Willow was already gone.

Unaware of this, he sauntered over with his usual arrogant swagger, asking his assistant coldly, "Where is she? Didn't I tell you to have her wait here?"

The assistant trembled slightly. "She... she already left."

"If she left, go find her and bring her back. The venue isn't that big. How hard can it be to track one person down?"

When the assistant remained rooted to the spot, Julian's temper flared. "What? Did you not understand me? Do I need to teach you how to do a simple search?"

"Mr. Sinclair," the assistant stammered, terrified of his boss's wrath and unable to hide the truth any longer. "She... she said she wouldn't meet with you."

"She won't meet with me? What is that supposed to mean?" For a moment, Julian couldn't process the words. Or perhaps he had, but his ego simply refused to accept it.

"It means she flat-out rejected your invitation, sir," the assistant clarified, risking his job just to get the facts across. He had no other choice.

There was something else he didn't dare mention. He had gotten the distinct impression that the VP from Merit Biotech utterly despised his boss. But given his junior position, keeping that observation to himself was a matter of survival.

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Julian was taken aback. "Did you make it perfectly clear who I am?" he demanded.

"I did."

"And she saw me giving my keynote speech on stage, right?"

"She should have. She had already arrived by then."

"So, let me get this straight," Julian enunciated every word, dissecting the situation. "She knew exactly who I am. She knew I came here specifically to meet with her today. She even watched my speech. And after all that, she still said no?" He couldn't believe it. He had extended a rare olive branch, and she had completely humiliated him by brushing him off.

"Where is she?" he snapped.

"She left, sir."

"Which way?"

"That way."

Following the assistant's pointed finger, Julian immediately strode off. He was determined to see exactly who this infuriating woman thought she was.

After rushing down the hall, he finally caught sight of her figure, separated by a set of glass doors. He was still inside the lobby, while she was outside on the curb, hailing a cab.

Julian picked up his pace, pushing through the revolving doors. He was seconds away from catching up to her, but before he could close the distance, she slipped into the taxi and it pulled away.

Unwilling to let it go, he shouted after the vehicle, "Stop the car!"

Inside the cab, Willow hadn't noticed him. The driver glanced in the rearview mirror. "Miss, I think someone on the sidewalk is yelling for you. Should I pull over?"

"Is there?" Willow turned her head. Spotting Julian standing in the brisk wind, she immediately frowned. "Keep driving. I don't know him."

Julian watched the taxi speed off into traffic, so furious he practically spun in a circle. If he had only suspected it before, he was absolutely certain now: this woman was avoiding him on purpose. He racked his brain, completely baffled. When the hell had he ever offended her?

A gust of chilly air washed over him, cooling his temper slightly. Thinking back to the glimpse he had gotten of her silhouette, he found it bizarre how much she reminded him of Willow.

Julian let out a cold laugh, thinking he was losing his mind. This was the second time today he had connected the Merit VP to his ex-wife. But he knew it was utterly impossible. He knew Willow inside and out. She didn't have a fraction of the capability required to secure a Vice President role at a titan like Merit Biotech.

Besides, he hadn't heard a word about her finding employment since leaving the company. For all he knew, she was currently sitting in a cheap apartment, desperately firing off resumes just to make ends meet.

Thanks to the disastrous morning at the summit, Julian returned to the office in a foul mood. The very first thing he did upon stepping into his suite was summon Vivienne Sinclair. "When is the official project kickoff meeting with Merit Biotech?"

Vivienne could easily read his stormy expression. Not daring to pry, she answered truthfully, "Next Monday."

"How are the materials coming along?"

"They're all prepared."

"Good. I'll be attending that meeting with your team."

The project kickoff was a highly formal rendezvous between the client and the contractor, meant to discuss progress, troubleshoot current issues, and map out future strategies. It was a mandatory event for all key personnel involved.

Julian refused to believe she could dodge a meeting this crucial. When they finally sat face-to-face, he was going to demand answers. He wanted to know exactly why she kept throwing his goodwill back in his face.

Seeing his intense demeanor, Vivienne put two and two together. She remembered him mentioning his plan to corner the mysterious VP this morning. Now he was back, practically radiating anger and demanding meeting schedules. It wasn't hard to guess what had happened. "Did that woman do something to piss you off?"

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When Julian didn't answer, her suspicions were confirmed. Vivienne immediately seized the opportunity. "I told you she was bad news! She's incompetent and completely full of

herself. She treated me like garbage when I reached out, and now she's doing the exact same thing to you. Who does she think she is?"

Julian was already agitated, and her grating complaints only made his headache worse. Refusing to entertain her tirade, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it in heavy silence.

Fired up by her own indignation, Vivienne completely missed the warning signs in his expression. "If you ask me, we need to play hardball with someone like her. We should use this kickoff meeting to formally complain to Merit about her unprofessional behavior. Let her whole company see what a nightmare she is."

Ideally, she could expose the woman's awful attitude right in front of Mr. Thorne. If Silas Thorne got angry enough to fire the VP on the spot, that would be perfect. Then Vivienne would never have to deal with her again, finally putting an end to the endless stream of document revisions.

Vivienne was deep in her vindictive fantasy when Julian abruptly cut her off. His tone was sharp and laced with obvious impatience. "Enough. Get out."

Though clearly annoyed by his dismissal, Vivienne didn't dare argue. She knew Julian's temper well enough. When he was in a good mood, she could get away with pushing boundaries. But when he was brooding like this, he wouldn't spare anyone's feelings. It was best to just give him a wide berth.

Giving herself a graceful exit, she smiled tightly. "I'll head out then so you can work. Let me know if you need anything."

Marching back to her own office, she immediately fired off an email to Leo Yardley, ordering him to finalize all project materials for her to present at the upcoming meeting.

The only reason she was resorting to email was that she had blocked Leo's phone number and messaging apps in a fit of rage after he had challenged her authority. But since she still desperately needed him to do the actual work, email was their only line of communication.

With those tasks delegated, Vivienne began plotting her next move. Just thinking about the opportunity to publicly humiliate that insufferable VP next Monday filled her with gleeful anticipation.

Growing up as the pampered Sinclair ward, she had never been subjected to such indignity. Being constantly rejected and treated with ice-cold disdain was something she hadn't experienced since she was a small child.

In a way, she almost wanted to thank the woman for giving her a taste of real adversity for the first time in over twenty years. But that lesson wasn't going to come cheap. Vivienne fully intended to pay her back ten times over.

Although Vivienne hadn't met her yet, she had already built a vivid picture in her mind. The VP was undoubtedly some frumpy, overweight, middle-aged woman with a terrible complexion, a neglectful husband, and kids who couldn't stand her. She was probably just a miserable outcast trying to compensate for her tragic personal life by wielding power at work.

Vivienne knew exactly how to handle women like that—Willow was the perfect example. Men were entirely visual creatures. A woman didn't actually need to work hard; she just had to look stunning and know exactly when to play the damsel in distress. The men would practically trip over themselves to solve every problem for her.

It didn't matter how competent Willow was or how many deals she closed. In the end, Vivienne had effortlessly crushed her under her designer heel.

Thinking of Willow made her smirk with immense satisfaction. It had been quite a while since she last saw her. Who knew what dark corner she was crawling in right now? Maybe if she had some free time, she'd reach out. After all, they were old friends, and it was only polite to check in on an old friend's spectacular downfall.

Meanwhile, Willow was sitting in her office reviewing documents when she suddenly let out a violent string of sneezes. She was positive she wasn't coming down with a cold. Given her luck today, she figured someone out there must be thoroughly cursing her name.

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Her mind immediately flashed back to her run-in with Julian at the summit that morning. The man was like a bad penny, turning up everywhere she went. Just thinking about him made her skin crawl. She couldn't take it anymore—she needed to check in with Jade Yates about the progress of her divorce.

After clocking out, Willow called Jade, carefully ensuring first that the case wasn't interfering with her friend's new job at Sterling & Faircrest Law Group.

Jade had only been focused on two things lately: prepping for her new role at the firm and handling Willow's divorce. Unfortunately, there hadn't been much movement on the latter. Jade hadn't anticipated just how shameless Julian could be.

She didn't sugarcoat the situation for Willow. "Julian's legal team submitted their response. They explicitly stated that he refuses the divorce, claiming your marriage isn't

irreparably broken and that reconciliation is still possible. He insists he's willing to work on things. They even provided so-called evidence and formally agreed to court-mandated mediation."

Willow wasn't particularly shocked. Knowing exactly what kind of degenerate he was, she didn't have a strong reaction to his manipulative tactics. Whether it meant spinning lies or forging evidence, Julian always had a trick up his tailored sleeve.

She was only worried about Jade. "Does this make the case significantly harder? Will this drag you down?"

"Not at all, and it's not even that difficult to counter. It just means the process will drag out longer. If he can submit evidence, so can we. His entire defense hinges on the claim that the marriage is salvageable. You think tearing that argument to shreds will be hard?"

"I don't care how long it takes," Willow said with absolute resolve. "As long as I can finally be divorced from him, I'll wait out the clock."

"Good," Jade reassured her. "Then you can relax. I'll handle all the procedural filings and gather the evidence. But I have to warn you—based on the way he's playing this, the actual hearings are going to be vicious. He's going to drag this through the mud. Are you prepared for that?"

"There's nothing he can do that I can't handle." Willow gave a faint, cynical smile, appreciating Jade's concern but feeling completely unfazed. "I've already survived his most disgusting, bottom-feeding behavior. This is nothing. Plus, this fight is actually for a good cause—I'm fighting for my freedom."

"That's a relief to hear. Don't worry, I'm going to win this case for you."

"Just don't burn yourself out," Willow said softly. "Focus on settling into your new job first. The divorce can simmer on the back burner for a bit."

"All the onboarding paperwork is done. I'm just waiting for my official start date now."

"That fast? Did everything go smoothly?"

"Incredibly smooth." It had been so effortless that Jade almost felt as if the position had been tailor-made specifically for her. She dismissed the thought as impossible, attributing it to sheer, dumb luck. After the terrible losing streak she had been on, she figured the universe owed her a win.

Before she officially started, she wanted to take a quick trip. With all the chaos lately, her nerves had been strung tight, and she needed to decompress while she had a few free days.

"Willow, I want to take a mini-vacation. Do you have any time off?"

"When?"

"Next week."

Willow thought for a moment. "Next week is out. I have a massive project kickoff meeting on Monday. Can it wait until I get through this crazy patch at work?"

"That works," Jade conceded. "I'll just do a quick road trip nearby for now. Once your schedule clears up, we can plan something bigger."

Just as they wrapped up their conversation, Willow's phone buzzed. It was Leo Yardley. He hadn't reached out in a while, so a sudden call usually meant trouble. Making a quick excuse to Jade, Willow retreated to her bedroom to take it.

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The moment she answered, Leo's familiar voice came through the speaker. "Chief, are you busy? Is this a good time?"

Even though she was no longer with Sinclair Group, he still used her old nickname out of habit. Willow thought about correcting him but noticed a strange heaviness in his tone, so she let it slide. "I'm free. What's going on?"

"Nothing really," Leo sounded incredibly deflated on the other end of the line. "It's just been a while, and I wanted to check in."

He didn't spell it out, but Willow could read between the lines. "How are things at home? Daisy must have started kindergarten by now, right? And how are your parents and Janet holding up?"

"Everyone's doing great. Actually," Leo's voice finally brightened a fraction, "Daisy was just talking about you the other day. She wanted to know when you're coming over to visit."

Back when Willow managed the Seattle branch, she had built deep bonds with her team—not just as colleagues, but as a part of their extended families.

"Tell her I miss her too, and I'll come see her as soon as things settle down."

With family issues ruled out, Willow deduced the problem had to be work-related. The frantic clicking of a mouse in the background of the call only confirmed her suspicion. "Are you having trouble at the office?"

Silence stretched across the line. After a long pause, Leo finally sighed. "It's not that I'm having trouble. It's just... I'm so burnt out. There's no point to any of this anymore."

"Is Vivienne making your life miserable?" That was Willow's immediate guess.

"Not really," Leo said, a touch of arrogant defiance returning to his voice. "She doesn't have the brains to actually bully us. A woman who doesn't even know the basics of gene editing and has zero project management skills can't touch us."

Leo made no effort to hide his absolute contempt for Vivienne. "All she knows how to do is throw tantrums, tattle to the higher-ups, and crack the whip behind our backs. Beyond that, she's completely useless."

Willow knew exactly what kind of person Vivienne was, so she didn't bother digging into that angle. She was only concerned about Leo. "Then what's eating at you? Are you just exhausted?"

"Not that either. Honestly, we worked way harder when you were running the show." Leo managed a faint chuckle. "Remember when a new project would launch? We'd pull three all-nighters in a row. We didn't even have time to commute, so we just crashed on the office couches."

The chuckle faded, leaving a heavy silence. "But even though we were exhausted, we were happy. We were a team. We were all pushing in the same direction, fighting for the same goal. The work actually mattered. Now? We're just zombies. Every day we're forced to do mindless, soul-crushing busywork that goes against everything we believe in."

"Chief, I'll be honest. The old crew got together for dinner a while back. All we talked about was you and the good old days. Everyone misses you."

Willow understood completely. The morale was utterly destroyed. It was partly her fault—she had left so abruptly that she hadn't secured their positions properly. She had been too naive, underestimating the emotional toll her sudden departure would take on her team.

"I'm sorry. I should have made sure you guys were taken care of before I left."

"Chief, don't say that." Leo flat-out rejected her apology. "With the bloodbath going on back then, fighting to get our bonuses paid out was a miracle in itself. I didn't call to lay a guilt trip on you. I'm just sick to death of Vivienne breathing down my neck over this project deadline and needed to vent. Honestly, just talking to you makes me feel a hundred times better."

"Well, if you say you're okay, then I believe you," Willow replied, naturally falling back into her old leadership rhythm. "You're the anchor for that team, Leo. Make sure you check in on the others when they're struggling. For now, just remember you still have jobs and the paychecks are still clearing. Just hang in there a little longer."

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She didn't specify exactly what they were waiting for, but Willow had a master plan forming in her mind. Once she solidified her power at Merit Biotech and built a track record of undeniable success, she fully intended to extend an olive branch to her old team—provided they were willing to jump ship.

She kept the details to herself, and Leo didn't press. They chatted for a few more minutes before he had to get back to his late-night grind, and they ended the call.

After hanging up, Willow's mind was turbulent. She had built that team from the ground up. They had bled for her during the hardest campaigns and celebrated the sweetest victories by her side. Hearing them so beaten down and suffocated tore at her heart.

But there was nothing she could actively do for them right now. Her only option was to execute this current project flawlessly, rack up the wins, and earn the leverage she needed to start demanding favors.

Monday morning arrived in a flash.

The project kickoff was scheduled for ten o'clock. Sinclair Group was sending all of their key personnel, while Merit Biotech's delegation was spearheaded by Willow, alongside a select group of internal stakeholders.

Over at Sinclair Group, the entire team was already assembled in the ground floor lobby, waiting for Julian. Ten minutes passed, and he was still nowhere to be seen. Growing anxious, Vivienne finally marched upstairs to fetch him.

She had assumed he was tied up on an urgent call or reviewing last-minute contracts. But when she pushed open his office doors, she found his laptop closed and the phone silent. Instead, Julian was staring intently at two pairs of cufflinks, lost in deep contemplation.

Noticing her entrance, Julian immediately spoke up. "Perfect timing. Tell me, which set of cufflinks works better with this suit?"

Vivienne honestly thought she was hallucinating. It was just a meeting. Sure, Merit Biotech was an industry titan, but Sinclair Group was hardly small change. Even if they were the vendor in this dynamic, there was no need to act this subservient. Agonizing over cufflinks?

Besides, this was completely out of character for Julian. He had been raised with silver spoons and billionaire trust funds, entirely used to the world revolving around him. Why on earth would he willingly lower himself to impress someone else?

But if he wasn't trying to suck up to the client, what could possibly explain this bizarre behavior?

When Vivienne just stood there in stunned silence, Julian lost his patience. "Which one looks better?" he demanded.

Irritated, and completely unable to tell the difference between the two pieces of jewelry anyway, she pointed randomly. "That one."

Julian stared at her selection for a few seconds before shaking his head. "No, this one's too dull. The other pair is sharper."

Without another word, he slid the second pair into his French cuffs.

Vivienne was seething but didn't dare snap at him. She cursed him out mentally—if he already knew which one he wanted, why the hell did he bother asking her in the first place? What a colossal waste of time.

At the same time, she noticed that beyond the agonizing over his suit and accessories, his hair had been meticulously styled. He was putting more effort into his appearance today than he ever had on their dates.

Thoroughly creeped out, she tested the waters. "Julian, you seem incredibly invested in this project."

"Is that a problem?" Julian shot back.

"No, that's not what I meant," Vivienne scrambled to clarify. "You just... you seem completely different today."

Julian ignored her. He gave himself one final, critical look in the mirror. Satisfied that every detail was perfect, he commanded, "Let's go."

Vivienne was right—he cared intensely about how he looked today. Because in just a short while, he was finally going to meet her.

Their first real, face-to-face encounter.

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After perfecting his look, Julian took his sweet time walking down to the lobby. Vivienne trailed behind him, boiling with resentment but keeping her mouth shut.

The car ride over was suffocatingly tense. With Julian in the vehicle, no one dared to speak unless spoken to, resulting in a few brief, clipped exchanges where he asked a question and an employee gave a terrified answer. Half an hour later, the convoy pulled up to the gleaming headquarters of Merit Biotech.

The moment Julian stepped out of the car, he practically broke into a sprint. He strode through the lobby with an aggressive, relentless pace, making it painfully obvious just how desperate he was to get upstairs.

Thinking he was stressed about being late, Vivienne tried to soothe him. "Julian, there's no need to rush. We're half an hour early. We have plenty of time."

"Right," Julian muttered, though his long strides didn't slow for a fraction of a second. Left with no choice, the rest of the Sinclair team had to power-walk just to keep up.

Deep down, Julian knew exactly why he was acting like a madman. Having been denied twice already, his obsession and curiosity had skyrocketed to dangerous levels.

The infuriating tease was finally within his grasp. He was going to find her, rip off her arrogant mask, and crush her beneath his heel.

The group quickly reached the designated boardroom. Because they were so early, the only people present were Clarence Vance and a few junior staff members from Merit.

Julian's predatory gaze swept the room. Not spotting the elusive figure, his brow darkened. "Where is your Project Lead?"

Clarence offered a sickeningly obsequious smile and immediately jumped in. "You mean Director Horgan? She's just tying up a few loose ends. She'll be here shortly."

Hearing the surname "Horgan," both Julian and Vivienne tensed. Vivienne was the first to react. "Didn't you say her name was Ms. Vaughn?"

Clarence had indeed made that mistake back when Willow first joined Merit. Back then, he had looked down on her so completely that he never bothered attending her meetings, and hadn't even bothered to learn her actual name.

"Ah, my apologies. That was my mistake," Clarence chuckled nervously.

But Vivienne wasn't about to let him off the hook. Used to tearing into her own staff, she sneered, "How do you mess up your own boss's name? Are you completely incompetent?"

The entire room fell dead silent, all eyes snapping toward her—including Julian's. Feeling a sudden flush of embarrassment, Vivienne swallowed the rest of her insults.

Once she cooled down, she realized she had overreacted. There were millions of people with the last name Horgan. What were the chances it was actually Willow? Besides, anyone sitting in a VP chair at a place like Merit was undoubtedly some greasy, overweight middle-aged woman. Willow didn't have the brains for a job like this.

An awkward silence settled over the boardroom. With the star of the show still missing, all they could do was wait.

On the other side of the floor, Willow didn't actually have any pressing matters. She was deliberately waiting until the very last minute to make her entrance. First, she couldn't stomach looking at them any longer than absolutely necessary. Second, she was the client now. When dealing with scum like them, she fully intended to throw her weight around.

She had been mildly surprised when her colleagues informed her that Julian was in the building, but it didn't change her strategy. Dealing with one repulsive parasite versus two made absolutely no difference to her.

Right as the clock neared ten, Willow gathered her files to head over. Suddenly, Arthur Vance appeared in her doorway.

Assuming he needed her for something else, Willow said apologetically, "Arthur, I'm just about to step into a meeting. If it's urgent, it'll have to wait until I get back."

"I know," Arthur replied, his tone bright and breezy. He didn't look like a man with a crisis. "I'm actually here for the kickoff. Mind if I tag along?"

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"Of course not," Willow said, caught off guard. "But won't this tie you up from your actual work?"

A standard project kickoff only required her presence. It definitely didn't warrant an executive assistant of Arthur's caliber. Whenever Arthur showed up, it meant he was acting as Silas Thorne's proxy.

"My schedule is wide open," Arthur grinned. In reality, even if he had been swamped, he would have dropped everything. Silas Thorne had explicitly ordered him to clear his calendar for this exact meeting.

Truthfully, Silas had originally planned to attend the kickoff himself and had already reviewed all the prep work. But for some mysterious reason, he had abruptly pivoted that morning and dispatched Arthur instead.

Arthur knew better than to pry, and Silas certainly wasn't about to confess. Just as Silas would never admit to anyone that he was currently pacing his office like a caged tiger.

Silas had initially wanted to go just to stand by Willow's side and offer her moral support during her first major project lead. But when he received intel that Julian Sinclair was in the building, he had instantly canceled his appearance. Silas knew his own limits. He simply didn't have the restraint to watch Willow interact with that scumbag in the same room. He was terrified he might lose control and rip the man apart with his bare hands.

While Silas was busy wrestling with his murderous impulses upstairs, Willow and Arthur strolled into the boardroom. Julian and Vivienne were sitting rigidly in their chairs, fully prepared to act like arrogant aristocrats. But the second they saw who had just walked through the door, they froze.

Vivienne was the first to shoot out of her chair. "What the hell are you doing here? Do you have any idea what kind of meeting this is?"

Before Willow could even open her mouth, Arthur stepped smoothly in front of her. "She is the Director for this project—Willow Horgan. I believe you're already well acquainted, so I'll skip the formal introductions."

"That's impossible!" Vivienne gasped in horror. She whipped her head toward Clarence, who gave a pathetic nod confirming the nightmare. Her face twisted into an ugly grimace, completely abandoning any pretense of corporate professionalism.

Julian, sitting beside her, managed to maintain his composure, though his mind was reeling. Willow was incompetent, wasn't she? How on earth had she scammed her way into a job like this? Let alone climbed to such a high executive level?

But as he pieced together the strange events of the past few weeks, the horrifying truth clicked into place.

No wonder the woman's silhouette and elegant aura had seemed so painfully familiar.

No wonder his repeated requests for a meeting had been brutally shot down.

It was her. It had been her the whole time.

He just hadn't expected her to be such a brilliant actress. She had been playing this high-stakes game right under his nose for months, and he hadn't suspected a thing.

Slowly, Julian stood up and closed the distance between them. He didn't say a word, simply locking his predatory gaze onto her face.

Willow stared right back. Her eyes were devoid of any emotion—an impenetrable wall of absolute, icy indifference.

They faced off in the dead silence of the room, and Willow didn't flinch for a second.

She was no longer the broken woman who had to cower and gaze up at him in terror. She held the same power, the same status. Now, she could look him dead in the eye and treat him like the dirt on her shoe.

Finally, Julian broke the standoff. "I never imagined we'd run into each other here."

"It's a big world," Willow replied smoothly. "There are a lot of things you lack the capacity to imagine."

Julian studied her with renewed, twisted fascination. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a sleek business card and offered it to her. "We may be well acquainted, but let's observe the formalities. Julian Sinclair."

Willow didn't acknowledge his words and completely ignored the outstretched card. She turned her back on him, walked to the head of the table, and commanded the room, "Let's get started."

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As she turned, the faint, intoxicating scent of her perfume drifted past him. Julian smiled faintly, tucking the rejected business card back into his pocket without a word.

Vivienne watched the entire exchange from the sidelines, practically vibrating with rage. She was already struggling to accept that Willow was running this project, but seeing her act so high and mighty made her want to grind her teeth into dust. Someone she had effortlessly treated like garbage was now sitting across from her at the negotiation table, holding all the cards. To Vivienne, this was an unbearable humiliation.

But the math just wasn't adding up. How on earth had Willow swindled her way into Merit Biotech? Managing a multi-million dollar portfolio with a VP title? Was the man behind the curtain at Merit a complete idiot?

Why else would he put someone with zero capability, zero connections, and zero relevant experience in charge of something this massive?

She had dreaded dealing with some bitter, overweight middle-aged spinster, but now she realized she would have vastly preferred that over facing Willow.

Suddenly, everything clicked. All those brutal, endless revisions to the project proposals hadn't been because her work was subpar. It was a targeted, vindictive campaign by Willow to make her life a living hell.

But despite her boiling fury, Vivienne still had a job to do. As the lead contractor on the account, the burden of the actual presentation fell squarely on her shoulders.

Vivienne booted up the presentation she had forced Leo to compile and began reciting her rehearsed talking points. She stubbornly refused to look in Willow's direction. On the rare occasions her gaze did drift toward the head of the table, it was laced with blatant, searing disgust.

Even without Vivienne saying a word, Willow could instantly tell the core data had been produced by Leo and his team. Vivienne had likely done nothing but merge the slides. And yet, she had managed to bungle even that simplest of tasks. The data was glaringly inconsistent, the conclusions directly contradicted the charts, and the entire deck was riddled with amateur errors.

As Vivienne droned on into the case studies, Willow finally reached her limit. "Let me stop you right there," she interrupted sharply. "There's a critical error in this breakdown."

Vivienne was stunned to be cut off mid-sentence, especially in such a ruthless manner. Seeing Willow smirking at her, her temper flared. "These results have been verified through countless clinical trials!" she snapped back. "You have absolutely zero proof. What gives you the right to claim they're wrong?"

Willow didn't even look at her, completely unbothered by her tantrum. She simply raised a laser pointer and circled a specific graph on the screen. "The internal reference gene's Ct values are wildly unstable. Your melt curve shows multiple rogue peaks. And your

treatment and control group bands are visually identical, yet your text claims a significant variance. Need I go on, or is that sufficient evidence?"

Vivienne barely understood half the scientific jargon Willow just threw at her, but being publicly humiliated was something she absolutely refused to tolerate. Since Leo's team had done all the heavy lifting, she felt invincible. "The data is flawless," she shot back haughtily. "If you're so paranoid, you're welcome to tour our labs and see the process yourself."

"Did I ever say the raw data was flawed?" Willow challenged, her voice dripping with condescension. "I said your breakdown was wrong. Is it possible that the data is perfectly fine, but your summary and conclusions are a complete disaster?"

With that, Willow systematically tore through the presentation slide by slide, meticulously dismantling every single error and contradiction for the entire boardroom to see.

The rest of the attendees listened in rapt, agreeable silence, thoroughly impressed by her sharp analysis. Everyone except Vivienne. Because Vivienne knew the truth—she was the one who had botched the summaries. To her, Willow wasn't just critiquing a slide deck; she was viciously slapping her across the face in front of the entire room.

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Vivienne didn't care whether Willow was right or wrong, nor did she care what the correct standard should be. She only felt that Willow was disrespecting her in front of all these people, deliberately suppressing her just to show off.

So, she stubbornly refused to admit her mistake and twisted the narrative. "Deviations in experiments are perfectly normal. I think anyone in research knows that. Rejecting the entire project based on a single data point or sentence is completely unreasonable."

Willow wasn't swayed. She stood her ground. "You can interpret it that way, but that's as far as it goes. When it comes to the actual implementation of this project, my requirements are the standard."

"Why?" Vivienne argued. She was used to being domineering, blurting out inappropriate comments even in a professional setting.

"Why do you think? Do I need to remind you who the client is here?" Willow didn't back down an inch, her gaze sweeping over the other woman with cold detachment.

Vivienne choked on her words. Unable to keep yelling, she shot a pleading look at Julian, begging for his help.

As for Julian, he had remained completely silent throughout the argument. Deep down, he agreed with Willow and knew she was right. But since Vivienne represented the Sinclair Group, he kept his mouth shut.

He only regretted not reviewing Vivienne's materials more carefully before they arrived. It would have saved them all this trouble. He had overestimated her. He thought she would have improved after her last mistake, but clearly, nothing had changed.

Truthfully, as he watched Willow argue with Vivienne, he found himself drawn to his ex-wife.

Her points were sharp, hitting the nail on the head, and she backed up her conclusions with solid evidence. For a moment, he was reminded of the very first time he heard about Merit Biotech's impressive vice president.

Back then, he had been captivated by her sheer competence. Now, that competence had a face and a voice, leaving him slightly dazed.

On top of that, Willow was wearing a dark gray business suit today, looking entirely different from how he usually saw her. Now that she had lost weight, he realized she had a stunning figure—long, slender legs and a perfectly toned upper body.

He had seen this side of her before, but only in casual, everyday settings. Today, in her tailored suit, she wasn't just beautiful; she radiated a unique resilience and crisp professionalism. Beneath her gentle exterior lay a razor-sharp edge.

"Make the revisions according to Director Horgan's requirements," Julian finally spoke up, pulling his gaze away.

Vivienne was furious but didn't dare talk back. Her eyes widened, practically shooting daggers.

Julian completely ignored her temper tantrum. Instead, he turned his attention back to Willow. "Director Horgan, are you satisfied now?"

Willow rejected his olive branch, her tone remaining icy. "Whether you revise it or not is your choice. It's not about my satisfaction. I'm only responsible for the final results and making the ultimate selection."

Julian smiled. "Since we're collaborating, our main goal should be finding common ground. Otherwise, how can we move forward?"

Willow didn't bother entertaining him. Keeping things strictly professional, she said, "Let's continue."

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When the disagreement broke out, Arthur Vance initially planned to step in and help Willow. But after observing for a moment, he realized it was entirely unnecessary. Willow was crushing the opposition in both competence and sheer presence.

Besides, he had another task to handle. From the moment he stepped into the conference room, his phone hadn't stopped buzzing with messages from Silas Thorne.

[How many people are on their team?]

[How many men and women?]

[What does the man look like?]

[How is the meeting progressing?]

[Is anyone giving her a hard time?]

He had far too many questions, some of which Arthur felt had absolutely nothing to do with the project. But since the boss asked, he provided detailed answers to every single one. When he mentioned the argument that had just occurred, Silas fired off several follow-up questions in rapid succession.

Arthur repeatedly assured him that Director Horgan was doing perfectly fine. She was calm, collected, and logically bulletproof. She hadn't lost an inch in the debate. A few times, she even left the other side entirely speechless, forcing them to back down.

Silas accepted the first part of the report. He knew her capabilities well; there were very few people in this industry who could rival her. But he completely rejected the last part.

How could she possibly leave people speechless? She had such a gentle, peaceful personality, as soft and sweet as a kitten. Even when she encountered something she disliked, the most she did was frown. Even then, she remained as elegant as a lily.

There was no way she was ripping into people.

Arthur must have misheard.

Because of this, Silas gave Arthur a mild scolding over text, telling him to pay closer attention and stop making baseless, inappropriate claims.

Putting his phone down, Silas stood by the floor-to-ceiling window. After thinking it over, he still felt uneasy. He decided to go down and see for himself.

Back in the conference room, the meeting was wrapping up. Despite the disagreements, as long as the Sinclair Group was willing to make the necessary corrections, they could continue moving forward.

That was the whole point of these project meetings—exchanging ideas, aligning timelines, and getting both parties on the same page.

Usually, after a meeting, both sides would chat for a bit. Willow had no desire to socialize with them, so she left immediately, leaving Arthur to handle the pleasantries.

After stepping out, she headed for the restroom at the end of the hall. Halfway there, she heard footsteps behind her. Glancing back, she saw Julian trailing her.

Willow couldn't be bothered with him and tried to ignore his presence. But a second later, Julian suddenly stepped into her path, blocking her way. "Let's talk."

She shot him a freezing glare. "We have nothing to talk about."

"Whether we do or not isn't up to you," Julian replied, clearly not intending to let this go.

Willow had no patience for his nonsense. "Get out of my way, or else—"

Before she could finish, Julian grabbed her arm and yanked her into the adjacent fire stairwell.

Reacting as if she had been touched by something vile, Willow fought to shake him off. "Let go of me!"

When she couldn't break his grip, she resorted to kicking his legs wildly. Eventually, the pain must have become too much for him, and he let go, though he still used his body to block the stairwell door.

Willow took two steps back to put some distance between them. "Julian, take a look around. Do you really think this is a place where you can pull this kind of garbage?"

Instead of getting angry, Julian let out a low laugh. "I actually wanted to ask you how you managed to land Merit Biotech as your backer. You're quite resourceful."

He had been waiting for her to come crawling back to him, begging for help. He never expected her to pull a move like this, transforming into his client overnight. It had completely caught him off guard.

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The initial novelty of seeing her in this new setting had faded, leaving only the frustration of feeling played, along with a bitter sense of defeat and loss of control that he refused to acknowledge.

"Are you out of your mind?" Willow looked at him with sheer disgust. "We're in a public place. Do you really think I won't scream for security right now?"

"Go ahead," Julian replied, unfazed. "If you don't mind the scene, then neither do I. Don't forget, we are still legally married. I don't see anything wrong with people seeing us together."

Hearing this actually calmed Willow down. She knew that if it came down to a contest of shamelessness, she would never win against him. So, she cut straight to the chase. "What exactly do you want?"

"I said it from the start. I want to talk." Julian's expression remained neutral.

Realizing that he couldn't actually do anything to her in broad daylight, she decided it was better to let him speak than to remain in this standoff.

Dropping her defensive posture, she prompted him. "Fine. What do you want to talk about?"

Her sudden 180-degree shift in attitude left Julian momentarily at a loss. It dawned on him that he didn't know her at all; he could never predict her next move.

"I thought you wanted to talk? Spit it out," Willow urged.

Julian snapped out of his daze. "Let's start with my previous question. How did you get this job at Merit?"

Willow answered without hesitation. "I refuse to answer that."

Julian's eyes widened, his face darkening instantly.

"What's with that look?" Willow stared back coldly. "I agreed to talk. I never agreed to answer your questions. Julian, you're a grown man and an executive of a major corporation. You shouldn't be this petty. Besides, I did what you asked. What more do you want?"

She had completely cornered him with her words, leaving Julian stranded and unsure of how to respond.

"Is there anything else? If not, I'm leaving," she pressed.

In that short span, the dynamic between them had completely flipped. Julian was no longer leading the conversation; Willow had taken full control, dictating the flow and direction of their interaction.

With a grim expression, Julian finally asked, "When are you coming home?"

"Home? What home? The one you share with Vivienne?" Willow had managed to calm her emotions to a state of total indifference, but that question actually made her laugh.

"Enough," Julian snapped, finally losing his temper. "Do I need to remind you again? We are still married."

"Then let me remind you to show up for our divorce hearing."

"Willow!" He had completely run out of patience.

She ignored his outburst. "You'd better keep your word. We're done talking, and I'm leaving."

With that, she stepped around him and pushed the door open.

Refusing to give up, Julian followed her out and grabbed her arm from behind.

"Let go!" Willow had truly reached her limit, her voice much louder than before. But Julian acted as if he hadn't heard her, his grip tightening.

Unable to break free, she was just about to raise her hand to strike him when a deep, commanding voice echoed from behind them. "Let her go."

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Recognizing that familiar voice, Willow turned and saw a tall figure striding toward them from a distance. Instantly, a lump formed in her throat.

She had no idea why he was here. Wasn't he supposed to be in a meeting in his office at this hour? And how had he even found them?

All she knew was that the moment he appeared, all her anxiety and agitation vanished, replaced by a profound sense of security—and a sudden wave of unspoken vulnerability that she couldn't quite explain.

It was Julian's first time seeing this man, but judging from his elegant posture and the chilling, predatory aura he exuded, his identity wasn't hard to guess. After all, the only person who dared to speak like that at Merit Biotech was the man behind the curtain himself, Silas Thorne.

Julian released Willow's arm, took two steps forward, and greeted him proactively. "Mr. Thorne."

Silas completely ignored him. He pulled Willow behind him, lowering his voice so only she could hear as he asked if she was alright. Once she shook her head, he finally shifted his gaze to Julian.

His expression was unreadable, his eyes utterly devoid of emotion as he stared directly at the other man. "What did you do to her?"

Julian hadn't expected him to be so blunt, skipping the pleasantries altogether. Clearly, Silas didn't take him seriously. Feeling his own temper flare, Julian shot back, "I think you're mistaken. We're married. What could I possibly do to her?"

Bringing up their marriage was the worst thing he could have done. Silas's anger surged, an impenetrable frost radiating from him. When he spoke, his words were laced with ice. "I don't care what your private relationship is. This is Merit Biotech. Here, she is my employee, and I will not allow my employee to be bullied in the slightest."

As his words fell, both Julian and Willow froze.

Julian was shocked that a CEO of his caliber would care so deeply about a single employee.

For Willow, it was the first time in her life someone had stepped up to defend her so unconditionally in a professional setting.

Julian looked awkward. They were on someone else's turf, so he couldn't push back too hard. "I think there's been a misunderstanding. Today isn't a good time. I'll arrange a formal visit another day."

Silas gave him a dismissive glance. Then, he turned to Willow, double-checked that she was truly unharmed, and led her away.

Meanwhile, Vivienne was growing restless in the conference room. She had seen Julian follow Willow out, and with them leaving back-to-back, she couldn't guarantee something wouldn't happen between them.

Using a flimsy excuse, she asked Arthur Vance to give her a tour of the floor. When they finally spotted Julian, it happened to be the exact moment Willow and Silas were walking away. Even though she only saw his back, Vivienne was instantly captivated by Silas.

She had seen plenty of attractive men in her life, but she had never encountered someone with his level of presence.

Beyond his sheer good looks, he radiated an intense restraint and absolute wealth.

He felt like the freezing Seattle wind at midnight—too cold to approach, yet so magnificent you couldn't look away.

Vivienne couldn't help but ask the man beside her, "Who is that?"

Arthur already strongly disliked her. She was loud, demanding, and clearly incompetent—traits he had easily picked up on during their short meeting. He honestly couldn't understand why the Sinclair Group had put her in charge of the project.

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But for the sake of their business partnership, he replied politely, "That is our boss, Mr. Thorne."

Hearing that last name, Vivienne gasped in shock. Before coming here, she had done her research on Merit's history, so she knew exactly what the name 'Thorne' meant.

She couldn't believe her luck. On her very first visit to Merit, she had caught a glimpse of the legendary Silas Thorne.

Rumor had it that he rarely made public appearances and declined all private dinner invitations. More importantly, he kept his personal life spotless and was completely single.

Vivienne cleared her throat and put on an act. "Since we ran into him, maybe I should go say hello? It might lead to more collaborations in the future."

"That won't be necessary. Mr. Thorne is very busy and doesn't have time," Arthur quickly blocked her path. He knew his boss's temperament perfectly. If he let a woman like her approach Silas, he would be chewed out for sure.

Besides, Silas had just walked off with Willow. If they accidentally interrupted them, Arthur's head would definitely be on the chopping block.

Vivienne wasn't ready to give up. "It's fine, I can wait. It's still early anyway. And since we're already here, it's such a great opportunity."

She was always driven by ambition. If she could somehow connect with Silas Thorne and impress him, she would never have to worry about finding new projects again.

Arthur knew exactly what she was plotting. He had been in the corporate world long enough to spot her type from a mile away. "There is no need."

Finishing his sentence, he made sure to redirect her attention. "Mr. Sinclair is right over there. You can go to him now."

Vivienne looked up and saw Julian standing in the distance, smoking a cigarette and clearly in a terrible mood. She had no choice but to brace herself and walk over to him.

On the other side of the building, Silas escorted Willow directly up to his office. Without saying a word, he started rummaging through his drawers.

Willow had no idea what he was looking for and didn't dare ask, so she simply stood quietly to the side.

A moment later, he walked back over, holding a tube of ointment. He handed it to her. "Apply this."

Willow looked confused. "Apply it where?" She didn't feel hurt anywhere.

Silas let out a soft sigh and pointed to her wrist. Following his gaze, she finally noticed a large, angry red mark marring her skin. It was severe and showed no signs of fading, likely caused when Julian had yanked her arm earlier.

She hadn't even noticed the pain until he pointed it out, but now it suddenly started to throb.

Seeing her expression, Silas didn't hand the ointment over. Instead, he unscrewed the cap. Gripping her forearm gently over her sleeve with one hand, he used his other hand to carefully apply the soothing gel to the bruised skin.

Startled by the coldness of the medicine and completely unaccustomed to the gesture, Willow flinched.

He stopped immediately. "What's wrong? Does it hurt?"

She shook her head. It didn't hurt; she just wasn't used to being treated this way, especially by a man. It felt entirely foreign to her.

"I'll be gentler. Tell me if it hurts."

"Okay."

They fell into a quiet silence as he carefully finished applying the ointment.

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Although Silas was applying the ointment for her, his movements were incredibly polite and restrained, using only his fingertips to lightly brush against her skin. He worked quickly and finished in no time.

"Take a look. Does anything else hurt?"

Willow shook her head. Honestly, if he hadn't pointed out her wrist, she never would have noticed.

Reflecting on the incident, she felt the need to explain the situation to him. Since Julian had already announced their marital status, there was no point in hiding it anymore.

"I apologize, Mr. Thorne. My personal life interfered with my work today. But rest assured, I will handle it quickly. It won't happen again."

She was referring to her divorce, but to Silas, it sounded like something else entirely. They were married. It was their private matter. They would fix it, and they didn't need his interference.

He could have just dropped the subject right then and there. But Silas couldn't control himself. The calm, composed demeanor he maintained around everyone else completely vanished when it came to her.

Crossing the line or not, he broke his own rules and pressed the issue. "Did you guys have a fight?"

Willow didn't think much of the question, assuming he was just checking in on a subordinate, especially after what he had said to Julian. But she honestly didn't know how to answer him.

Could her situation with Julian even be considered a fight?

Probably not. A fight implied a mutual connection, a desire to argue toward some sort of resolution. But that wasn't the case here. She just wanted a divorce.

"Not really."

Hearing that, Silas's heart sank a little lower. Any fool could see they had been arguing, but she was denying it just to protect her husband.

Sigh.

"Did he hurt you?"

Willow shook her head. Aside from her wrist, she was fine. And verbally, she hadn't lost an inch of ground.

Silas still wasn't reassured. "If you're being bullied, you can tell me. Like I said earlier, you are my employee, in my company. I don't care what your private relationship is with him, but here, I make the rules. I can handle it for you."

Hearing those words, Willow felt that familiar lump in her throat again. In all her years of working, no one had ever said something like that to her.

You can tell me, and I will handle it for you.

In the past, Willow had only ever faced suppression and rejection, forcing her to develop the habit of shouldering everything alone. She never dared to reveal her true feelings.

So when genuine kindness was offered to her, she only felt lost and overwhelmed.

For a split second, she considered telling him everything. He was so powerful; he could definitely help her fix it.

But then she realized he was probably only talking about work, and her problem fell entirely outside that scope.

When she didn't respond, Silas felt a wave of panic. He worried he had said something inappropriate and made her overthink things.

Taking two steps closer, he looked down and immediately noticed the faint redness at the corners of her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" He frowned, his chest tightening.

"I'm not." Willow turned away, hastily wiping at her eyes. She had been like this since she was a child—whenever her emotions swelled, it always showed in her eyes.

Staring at her back, Silas sighed inwardly. Had he really said something to upset her?

Thinking back, all he had done was offer to stand up for her and go against Julian. Was that why she was upset?

His brows furrowed slightly, his lips pressing into a thin line.

It was his own fault for being so presumptuous, forgetting that Julian was her actual husband.

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He knew it was impossible, yet he chose to drown in it anyway. He knew there was no future, yet he still wanted to try. When he finally woke up, he realized it was just a fleeting dream, and he had gambled half a lifetime of affection on it.

But what else could he do? It was her. He accepted his fate.

Silas pulled a tissue from the box and handed it to her. "Does it hurt you that much to hear me say that? It was just a few words. If you don't like hearing it, I won't say it again."

Willow had absolutely no idea what he meant, but she was too embarrassed to ask. Around a high-level executive like him, she always felt shy about asking questions, terrified of accidentally exposing her own ignorance.

Bosses always preferred smart subordinates. And even if you weren't a genius, you were at least expected to read the room. But around him, she constantly felt clueless. Whenever that happened, she just pretended to gloss over it.

However, in Silas's eyes, her reaction made it seem like she simply didn't believe him. He quickly reassured her, "Don't worry. If you don't say the word, I absolutely won't do anything. So, whether you want to proceed with this project, how you want to handle it, and who you want to work with—it's entirely up to you."

As for him, it didn't matter. He was just an outsider anyway.

That statement was very clear. Willow instantly assumed she understood. Thinking he wanted to discuss the project details, she gave him a thorough breakdown of the Sinclair Group's presentation. Then she asked, "Do you have any feedback on their proposal today?"

Silas had no issues with their proposal, but he definitely had issues with their people. However, he didn't dare say it out loud, afraid he might make her cry again.

"It's up to you."

Assuming he genuinely wanted to talk business, Willow analyzed the situation objectively. "Although they made some minor errors, their overall logic and direction are sound. As long as they're willing to make revisions, it won't be a major issue. Plus, some of the concepts in their proposal are quite innovative. It might be worth exploring together."

"You call the shots on the project," Silas said, watching her. Seeing her mood improve, he felt a wave of relief. "You are the lead on this. You can make whatever decisions you see fit. You don't even need to report some of these things to me."

"Reporting is still necessary," Willow insisted, a rare moment of stubbornness on her part. "For major directions and decisions, we still need your final approval."

"Alright," Silas agreed, indulging her. "Are you done being sad now?"

"I wasn't sad to begin with," Willow replied, feeling a bit flustered. She had just been touched by his kindness, that was all.

He didn't argue. As long as she was happy, she could call it whatever she wanted.

Glancing at his watch, he noticed it was about time for lunch. "Where are you planning to eat?"

"The Merit Commons." Merit had an exclusive cafeteria downstairs with a massive variety of food. To save time, Willow usually just ate there.

"Perfect timing. I was just about to head down there myself. Let's go together." Silas lied effortlessly. He didn't even know where the cafeteria was located.

Willow looked puzzled. "You're going too?"

From what she knew, he never set foot in places like that. His lunches were usually prepared in advance by his assistant and brought straight to his office. What was going on today?

Just as she was wondering, a knock sounded at the door. Arthur walked in, carrying an insulated lunchbox. "Mr. Thorne, your lunch is here."

Willow looked at the lunchbox, then back at Silas, completely utterly confused. He already had lunch, so what was all that about going downstairs?

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Silas hadn't expected Arthur to show up at this exact moment. Not a minute earlier, not a minute later, right after he had just made his excuse. The man's timing was impeccable.

He shot his assistant a dark look, his voice dropping an octave. "Didn't I tell you earlier that I wouldn't need that today? Eat it yourself. I'm going downstairs for lunch."

Arthur swore to God that his boss had never said such a thing. But as an executive assistant, reading the room was his most basic survival skill. Noticing Willow standing right there, he instantly caught on.

"My apologies, sir. You did mention that. It slipped my mind. Which restaurant are you and Director Horgan planning to visit? Should I make a reservation?"

"No need," Silas rejected immediately. Today was all about the experience. He wanted to see how she lived her everyday life.

"Understood. I won't disturb you and Director Horgan any further. Let me know if you need anything." With that, Arthur took the lunchbox and made a swift exit.

Watching him leave, Willow felt a twinge of regret. She honestly couldn't understand Silas. Did anyone really prefer eating at a crowded food court over enjoying a gourmet, perfectly plated meal?

If she had the choice, she would definitely pick the gourmet option. It saved time and tasted amazing. What a shame.

"Shall we?" Silas asked.

Snapping back to reality, Willow walked out of the office with him. "Sure."

They took the Executive Lift down. They were the only two inside. Willow stood near the control panel, while Silas leaned against the mirrored back wall.

"Which floor?" he asked.

"Basement level one," she replied.

As she reached out to press the button, she had no idea Silas was reaching for it at the exact same moment. Their fingertips brushed against each other as they both pressed the panel.

A dry, radiating warmth transferred through their touch. Willow's cheeks instantly flushed crimson, and she yanked her hand back.

Taking two quick steps backward, she accidentally stumbled right into a solid, warm chest. Immediately, a faint, clean scent enveloped her senses.

It was a crisp, cold fragrance—like pine branches after a heavy snowfall mixed with cool, woody undertones. It was so subtle it was almost imperceptible, only noticeable when she was this close, making her feel incredibly safe yet intensely aware of his presence.

Silas steadied her by the shoulders, releasing his grip only after she found her footing. "Sorry about that."

Willow knew he was referring to their accidental touch on the button. "It's fine. It was an accident." Besides, she had just bumped into him, too.

Silas didn't offer any further explanation. Only he knew whether certain things were truly accidents.

Just like right now. Standing barely three feet away from her, breathing in her soft, natural scent, and watching the luminous skin of her neck glow under the elevator lights, a thousand thoughts raced through his mind.

Some things could be brushed off as 'accidental,' but others definitely could not.

The elevator chimed, and they stepped out.

It was the peak lunch rush, and the hall was packed. Worried he wouldn't be used to the chaos, Willow deliberately walked on the outside to shield him. But in reality, Silas kept his arm subtly hovering behind her, silently blocking the brunt of the crowd from bumping into her.

"What would you like to eat?"

"What do you usually have?"

"I usually just grab whatever is quick." Rice bowls, pasta, sandwiches, soup—she just ate whatever was convenient without much thought. But she couldn't exactly do that with him today.

"Whatever you're in the mood for, we can get."

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Chapter 199

"I'm in the mood for what you usually eat. Let's just stick to your normal routine and grab something casual."

Even though he said that, Willow still picked a stall with a slightly nicer seating area, ensuring they had their own separate booth. That way, he wouldn't have to squeeze in with everyone else.

Once they sat down, Willow pulled out her phone to order. Everything was done via QR code these days. She quickly selected her usual meal, then handed her phone across the table to Silas. "Take a look. What would you like?"

She had planned to explain the menu to him, assuming this was his first time at a place like this. But before she could even open her mouth, Silas handed the phone back. "I already ordered."

"That fast?"

Willow glanced at the screen and realized he hadn't picked anything new. He had simply duplicated her order—down to the exact spice level and extra toppings.

Thinking he had made a mistake, she explained, "You don't have to order the exact same thing as me. And you can change all these customizations. Tell me what you want, and I'll adjust it for you."

"I'm not changing it. That's exactly what I want," Silas insisted, surprising her with his stubbornness.

"Alright then." Willow didn't push the issue. Maybe it was just a coincidence, and he actually liked those flavors. It was best to respect his choice.

It wasn't long before their food was ready. Willow started to stand up to grab the trays, but Silas stopped her. "You don't need to do that. Just sit here."

With that, he stood up and headed to the pickup counter.

Soon, he returned with two identical bowls of food, then made a second trip for their silverware and napkins, running back and forth until everything was perfectly set up.

Throughout the entire process, Willow had repeatedly offered to help. Sitting there while a powerful executive fetched her food felt incredibly awkward. But Silas was resolute, refusing to let her lift a finger. Willow was left with no choice.

They had ordered Korean bibimbap, which required mixing the toppings into the rice. Considering he had already done so much, Willow offered to mix his bowl for him. But once again, Silas turned her down.

She honestly didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Mr. Thorne, if you don't let me do anything, I'm really going to feel guilty. We're boss and employee. Making you run around serving me is already crossing a line. At least let me do this one small thing."

She was practically begging, but he remained firm, shaking his head.

Willow lowered her eyes. It seemed she was destined to eat this meal with a knot in her stomach.

Then, Silas spoke up. "If that's truly how you feel, then I think you need to shift your perspective. And right now is the perfect opportunity to do so."

"An opportunity for what?"

"An opportunity to change how you view your own worth."

She didn't quite grasp his meaning.

Silas encouraged her patiently. "Earlier, you said our relationship is what?"

"Boss and employee," she answered instantly.

"That applies in a professional setting. But we aren't working right now. This is personal time," Silas looked at her with a gentle gaze. "Think about it again."

Willow was stumped. She genuinely couldn't think of any other connection between them aside from work.

Silas didn't rush her. Speaking to her as softly as one would to a child, he guided her. "Don't you remember? I told you this once before."

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Chapter 200

Willow shook her head. She already struggled to read him most of the time; throwing pop quizzes at her only made her panic more. "Could you just tell me?"

"A man and a woman," Silas provided the answer, not drawing it out any further.

He didn't mean to make things difficult for her. He simply wanted her to understand some basic truths and help her establish a healthy perspective on how men and women should interact.

"What does that have to do with us eating lunch?"

He had anticipated that response. She had missed his hints countless times before. When it came to romance, she didn't act like a married woman at all. Most of the time, she was as innocent and clueless as a teenager.

He couldn't fathom how that bastard had treated her or how he had taken care of her. Had Julian never done these basic things for her? Had he never said these things to her? What an absolute failure of a husband.

Since Julian hadn't done his job, Silas would gladly step in and take over the role.

"When a man and a woman are spending time together, you shouldn't have to do these things. A woman deserves to be spoiled, to be taken care of. Only when you understand this truth—and get used to this dynamic—will you be able to find a man who treats you right."

This was the very first time in Willow's life that someone had spoken to her so bluntly about these things. And coming from such a breathtakingly handsome man, she was completely at a loss for how to react.

Honestly, even though she was married, she was entirely naive about how couples were supposed to interact. Because she had never experienced it, and because no one had ever done these things for her, the concept had never even crossed her mind.

"I understand," she murmured, keeping her head down, too flustered to meet his eyes. Unsure of what to do with her hands, she instinctively grabbed her spoon and started mixing her rice.

Watching her, Silas felt a wave of helplessness, but mostly, his heart just ached. It seemed impossible to teach her. It just went to show how deeply her past environment had poisoned her mindset.

He caught her gaze. "Do you really understand? Then what are you doing right now?"

Prompted by his question, Willow finally realized she had unconsciously started working again. She bit her lower lip nervously. Habits built over years of neglect couldn't be broken overnight.

She had spent too many years enduring hardship.

"Don't bite your lip," Silas said, gently stopping her. He softened his tone to soothe her. "You've been stuck in that kind of environment for so long, it's completely understandable that you can't change immediately. Take your time."

Willow let out a massive sigh of relief. "Thank you for understanding."

"So, what should you do right now?"

Another multiple-choice question. Willow was completely lost again. What was she supposed to do? Based on what he just said, was she supposed to push her bowl over and ask him to mix it?

"Do I... give this to you?" she asked tentatively, sliding her bowl across the table.

The corners of Silas's lips curved upward. He couldn't help but praise her in his mind. Good girl. She's finally getting it.

"Exactly." With that, he took her bowl, added the extra toppings, and started expertly mixing the rice for her.

Seeing this, Willow quickly tried to stop him. "It's just an experiment, right? I understand the concept now. You really don't need to do it for me, I can do it myself."

"Are you saying you want to practice on me, and then take those skills to use on someone else?" Silas's eyes narrowed slightly. "Besides, I never said this was an experiment."