

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

Chapter 301

"I'll let it slide this time, but never again."

Hearing him relent, Vivienne Sinclair's face instantly lit up. "Don't worry, you have my word. It won't happen again."

Taking advantage of his better mood, she slipped in another request. "Julian, the Seattle Bio-Tech Summit is next week, and I'd like to attend. Aside from checking out the latest industry tech, I want to meet up with Leo Yardley and his team to build some rapport. Since we're usually on opposite coasts, regular face-to-face meetings are essential."

Though she pitched it as a professional courtesy, her true motive was to confront Leo in person and clean up the mess before Julian found out what was really going on.

Julian was always generous when it came to technology investments, so he didn't even hesitate. "Fine by me. Make the arrangements yourself."

Meanwhile, in Silas Thorne's office, he was discussing the exact same event with Willow Horgan.

Knowing how passionate Willow was about this field, Silas had actually stepped in as a financial backer for the summit.

After he gave her the time and location, she agreed to go without a second thought. She might not care about the usual corporate networking, but she was always eager to dive into anything related to gene editing.

Seeing her agree so readily put Silas in an exceptionally good mood. It wasn't often he managed to do something that visibly delighted her, and the thirty-something billionaire suddenly found himself feeling almost awkwardly endearing about it.

He immediately pulled out his phone to check the weather in Seattle. Seeing the forecast predicted heavy rain and dampness, he quickly reminded her to pack an umbrella and the right clothes. He warned her about Seattle's notorious spring showers and made sure she knew to bring dehumidifying packets.

Before she could even answer, his protective instincts went into overdrive. "Actually, never mind. Don't worry about packing that stuff. I'll take care of it for you."

Willow found his fussing a bit excessive and chuckled softly. "You don't need to stress so much. Did you forget? I lived in Seattle for three years."

Her reminder hit Silas like a splash of cold water. He really had forgotten. Since she used to work there, she probably knew the city's climate better than he did.

But logic often vanished when you deeply cared about someone; his brain had simply blanked, leaving him to act purely on protective instinct.

Refusing to be swayed, Silas pushed forward with his plan. "That was over a year ago. The weather changes every day, and the forecasts are never accurate anyway. Leave the prep to me. I'll have everything ready and bring it to you before we leave."

Willow caught the subtle implication in his words. "Are you attending the summit too?"

Usually, high-level executives skipped these dry academic events, preferring to send their technical teams and just read the executive summary afterward.

This was the first time she'd seen an executive of his caliber personally attend something like this.

"Yes, I'm going," Silas replied, completely unfazed. If she was going, there was no way he was staying behind. "I need to head back home for a visit anyway."

Hearing that reason, Willow completely understood. Returning to his family was probably his real agenda, making the summit just a convenient stop along the way. After all, he hadn't been back home since he moved to New York City, not even for the holidays.

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Merit Biotech and Sinclair Group were both absolute titans in the industry, which meant they were both invited as guest speakers for the summit. The organizers hoped they would share their most advanced gene-editing breakthroughs and help push the entire field forward.

Willow had no problem with this. She agreed the moment she heard the news. She had recently been diving deep into the data Silas had provided her and had reached some fascinating conclusions she was eager to share.

Vivienne, on the other hand, was in a much tougher spot. She barely grasped the basic concepts, let alone the most advanced breakthroughs. She had never paid attention to the actual science.

When Julian heard about the invitation, he felt a flicker of doubt about her ability to handle the presentation, so he decided to attend the summit with her. That single decision sent Vivienne's stress levels through the roof.

If Julian hadn't been going, she could have winged it. Even if the other attendees realized she was clueless, they wouldn't dare report it back to Julian. But with him sitting in the audience, failing meant public humiliation and immediate professional ruin.

So, just to maintain her competent facade in front of him, Vivienne had to put on the performance of a lifetime.

The sheer panic kept her awake all night. Leo Yardley was completely ignoring her orders now, leaving her with no one to write her presentation. Left to her own devices, she couldn't produce a single cohesive sentence. Desperate, she remembered that Willow had left behind a trove of research and patents when she resigned. Vivienne scrambled to dig through those old files.

Just as she hoped, she uncovered a wealth of new patents and technologies she had never even seen before. Vivienne's mood instantly shifted from panic to sheer elation. She knew this was her golden ticket.

She could already picture it: stepping onto the stage, unveiling these groundbreaking patents, and basking in the awe and admiration of everyone in the room.

Right in the middle of her daydream, her assistant broke some highly unpleasant news. Merit Biotech was also attending the summit, and their technical representative was none other than Willow Horgan.

Talk about a small world.

Vivienne cursed Willow under her breath, though she refused to actually view her as a threat. After all, she now held all of Willow's new tech and patents, safely filed under Sinclair Group. What could Willow possibly present? She would just be a nobody in the audience, forced to watch Vivienne shine.

Vivienne snapped her fingers at her assistant. "Go order me a few stunning outfits immediately. Suits, silk blouses—only the best fabrics and tailoring. The more expensive, the better. I'll need them for the summit."

The assistant didn't dare waste a second and practically ran out the door. Along the way, he bumped into Julian, who asked why he was in such a rush. Terrified, the assistant lied

about a pressing work emergency, too scared to admit he was running out to buy Vivienne's wardrobe.

Vivienne had actually summoned Julian to her office. The moment she found Willow's data, she had eagerly texted him, desperate for his praise and validation.

Naturally, she didn't mention a word about Willow. She spun a tale of how she had painstakingly developed the research herself.

Julian bought it the second he looked at the files. He knew Willow had left behind several patents, but he had never reviewed the specifics, allowing Vivienne to easily pull the wool over his eyes.

Not only did he believe her, but he was also deeply impressed, convinced that this data would make Sinclair Group the absolute star of the summit.

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Compared to the chaotic scrambling at Sinclair Group, things at Merit Biotech were completely serene.

Willow had received her speaker notification as well, but since she was fully prepared, she didn't feel an ounce of panic. She was the picture of calm.

Silas was a bit worried about her, but not because he doubted her abilities. He was worried she was pushing herself too hard and wanted to make sure she wasn't exhausting herself.

"How is it going? Can you handle it alone, or do you want me to assign a team to help you?"

"No, I'm good. I'm not tired at all." On the contrary, Willow thrived on this work. When she was deeply immersed in research, she was truly happy, and having a team hover over her would only break her focus.

It was a habit she had picked up during her years in Seattle. She loved doing her deep-dive research late at night when the office was quiet and her mind was at its sharpest.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Relax, I've got this. All you have to do is check the final results."

Seeing her so determined, Silas backed off, though he made sure to tell her he didn't care about the results at all. He even offered to cancel her presentation if she didn't feel like doing it. Her comfort was his only priority.

Before he left, Silas casually mentioned, "Sinclair Group is also sending a team to the summit."

Willow didn't even flinch at the news. Her expression remained perfectly neutral.

Watching her, Silas assumed she was just trying to be professional and keep the peace. He leaned in and offered, "If you don't want them there, just say the word. I'm one of the main backers for this summit. If you don't want to see them, I'll have their names struck from the guest list right now. It only takes one phone call."

But Willow just shook her head. "It's fine. It's an open industry forum, anyone interested in gene editing should be able to attend. Besides, whether they show up or not doesn't affect me in the slightest."

"As long as you're okay with it." Silas rarely interfered with her choices, preferring to act as her silent shield. Even now, if anything went wrong at the event, he would be right there beside her to crush it instantly.

With work out of the way, Silas shifted gears. "Since we're flying out next week, did you want to visit Martha before we leave?"

Willow had been planning exactly that. "I'm going this Saturday."

"Then I'll go with you," Silas replied smoothly. "It's been a while since I checked in on her, anyway."

"You really don't have to. If you're busy, just skip it." Technically, he was just her boss. The fact that he had visited before was already above and beyond. There was no need for him to make a habit of it.

But Silas was stubborn. "I'm going."

When Saturday rolled around, Martha Mercer was absolutely overjoyed to see Silas and Willow walk through the door together. Her recovery was going perfectly, with no adverse reactions to the surgery, and the healthy color had finally returned to her cheeks.

She had initially been worried when she heard Willow was traveling to Seattle, but learning that Silas was going with her instantly put her mind at ease. Secretly, she was crossing her fingers that the trip would spark something romantic between them.

She kept those hopes to herself, of course. Martha knew Willow was still sensitive about Silas supposedly having someone else he loved, so she stuck to reminding her daughter to take care of her health.

The day of their departure arrived quickly. Since Silas had his own private jet and flight path, Willow naturally flew with him.

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It was Willow's first time stepping onto a private jet. She had heard the term thrown around in elite circles, but seeing it with her own eyes finally made her understand what people meant by 'understated luxury.'

Silas owned The Gulfstream G650ER. Its pristine white fuselage sat quietly on the tarmac, the sunlight bouncing off its pearlescent finish. Its sleek aerodynamic design made it look like a falcon ready to strike—elegant, yet aggressively dominant.

The moment Willow crossed the threshold into the cabin, she felt like she had stepped into another dimension.

The interior was paneled in rich mahogany, perfectly complementing the deep brown, top-grain leather seats. The ambient lighting was warm and subtle, giving the space an aura of quiet power. Plush cashmere carpets covered the floor, and the air carried a faint, masculine scent of cedar and aged wood.

It wasn't just seating, either. There was a fully stocked bar, a wine cabinet, a gourmet galley, and a pristine bathroom. Everything you would expect in a penthouse was right here. Calling it an airplane felt insulting; it was a high-end luxury condo that just happened to fly.

Since stepping inside, Willow hadn't stopped marveling at how the ultra-wealthy truly lived.

Silas didn't miss the wonder shining in her eyes. He offered a soft smile, his gaze overflowing with affection and a quiet sense of relief.

He was just glad she was interested in these little luxuries—and incredibly thankful he actually possessed them to show her.

In the past, money meant absolutely nothing to Silas. He had so much of it that the concept had lost all value. But now, realizing his wealth could bring a smile to her face, he suddenly decided being a billionaire wasn't so useless after all.

He stepped up behind her, his voice a low, soothing hum. "Take your time looking around. The flight is a few hours long. We have plenty of time."

As he spoke, he closed the distance between them, standing so near it felt as though he had wrapped her in an invisible embrace. Though their bodies weren't touching, the sudden, charged intimacy left no room for anyone else in the world.

Willow was too captivated by her surroundings to fully process the intense shift in his demeanor. Curiosity got the better of her, and she blurted out, "Do you mind if I ask... how much a plane like this actually costs?"

"Not too bad. Just a few hundred million dollars." Silas answered instantly, his expression flat and his tone as casual as if they were discussing what to have for lunch.

Willow, on the other hand, nearly choked. Hundreds of millions! An amount of wealth she couldn't comprehend achieving in a hundred lifetimes! And he just brushed it off with a breezy 'not too bad'?

Clearly, the billionaire mindset was a completely foreign language to an everyday person like her.

Noticing her stunned silence, Silas added, "If you like it, I'll buy you an identical one once we get back."

This time, 'shocked' didn't even begin to cover it. Willow felt like she had been shoved out of a plane without a parachute. Her brain completely short-circuited, wiping away any ability to form a rational thought.

A private jet?

Hundreds of millions of dollars?

As a gift?

Stringing those words together simply did not compute in her reality.

Silas had casually mentioned giving her things before, but those were items she could at least wrap her head around. This, however, absolutely shattered the boundaries of her comprehension.

In her state of total bewilderment, her mind began to spiral into chaotic logistics. If he actually gave it to her, would she have to apply for airspace clearance? How on earth

would she afford the astronomical daily maintenance fees? Would she have to hire a pilot on a retainer?

"What are you thinking about? Do you not like this specific model? If you want something else, there are plenty of options. I can take you to look at a few, and you can pick whichever one you want."

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Silas's deep, magnetic voice pulled her right out of her spiraling thoughts. She snapped back to reality and waved her hands frantically in refusal. "No, no, absolutely not!"

"Why not?" Silas looked genuinely perplexed. "Didn't you just say you liked it?"

Willow sighed in exasperation. "Just because I like something doesn't mean I have to own it."

"Why wouldn't it?" Silas truly couldn't grasp the concept. In his world, if you wanted something, you claimed it. Especially if it was something she wanted.

Willow couldn't hold back anymore. "Mr. Thorne, please stop joking around."

"You think I'm joking?" His easy demeanor vanished, replaced by a fierce intensity. "Every word I say to you is the absolute truth."

His intense sincerity only made Willow feel more unmoored. They were boss and employee—why on earth would he buy her something so outrageously expensive?

But seeing the hard, serious set of his jaw, she decided not to argue. No matter how indulgent a boss was, they rarely appreciated being openly contradicted.

So, she smoothly pivoted. "Do we have anything to eat on board? I rushed out this morning and skipped breakfast."

Silas's expression shifted instantly. The intense billionaire vanished, replaced immediately by a man radiating pure, anxious concern. He was normally a man of ice, keeping his emotions locked away behind an impenetrable wall. But around her, every one of his rules seemed to shatter.

"Of course. Come with me."

He guided her into the dining cabin. The lighting was warm and intimate. Fine bone china and polished silverware were meticulously arranged on the table in front of plush leather seats. It felt exactly like stepping into an exclusive, five-star restaurant.

"What are you craving?" Silas asked, pulling out her chair. "The chef on board has a Michelin star. You can ask for literally anything you want."

Looking at the impeccably dressed, smiling Western chef waiting for her order, Willow tried to figure out what she actually wanted, suddenly feeling terribly awkward about asking.

"What's wrong? I thought you were starving?" Thinking she was just being shy, Silas leaned in, his voice dropping to a low, coaxing murmur. "How about the salmon? I had it flown in fresh from Hokkaido."

That only made Willow feel worse about her actual craving.

Assuming he just hadn't hit the right note, Silas kept trying. "Not feeling fish? How about a steak? The beef just arrived from France this morning."

Willow still didn't say a word.

Realizing she was holding back, Silas bent lower, his face mere inches from hers as he turned his ear toward her. "None of that sounds good? That's fine. Just whisper to me what you really want."

She was already going to whisper, because asking for what she really wanted in this ridiculously opulent setting felt vaguely embarrassing.

Leaning close, she kept her voice so soft only he could hear. "I was hoping for the Golden Truffle Risotto... if that's possible?"

She fully expected him to be surprised, maybe even tease her for wanting such a hearty, specific comfort dish when he had a kitchen full of imported luxury proteins. Instead, Silas just looked at her with pure, unadulterated adoration. "Of course it's possible. The chef is here to make exactly what you want."

Turning to the chef, Silas relayed the order in flawless English.

The chef was entirely professional. He didn't bat an eye, simply nodded, promised it would be ready shortly, and vanished into the galley.

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Once the chef retreated to the galley, the awkwardness Willow felt began to dissipate. While she still had moments of self-consciousness around Silas, she was leagues more comfortable with him now than she had been at the start.

"You hired a Michelin-starred chef just to have him whip up a bowl of risotto? Doesn't that feel like a massive waste of his talents?"

Silas was in the middle of hanging her coat. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Don't think like that. This is his job. Cooking is cooking. The only thing that matters is that you enjoy it."

He finished smoothing out her jacket and walked over to hand her a glass of water. "I want you to always prioritize your own desires. When you're with me, you never have to hide what you really want."

Willow didn't read too deeply into his words. He had said similar things before, and she always chalked it up to an extremely supportive boss looking out for his team. Instead, her mind jumped to a practical question. "What are you having? Should I ask the chef to prepare some of that salmon or steak for you?"

"No, I'm having the Golden Truffle Risotto with you," Silas replied without missing a beat.

Willow blinked in surprise. "Are you sure?"

When he listed off those imported ingredients earlier, it sounded so natural—clearly, that was his standard diet. She was worried that dropping his luxury menu for a simple bowl of risotto wouldn't sit well with him.

"Why wouldn't I be sure?" Silas gave her an easy smile. "I'll eat whatever you're eating."

It wasn't long before the exquisite Golden Truffle Risotto was served.

Presented on a shallow white porcelain plate, the dish glowed with a rich, golden hue. The rice was perfectly cooked, each grain distinct and coated in a savory, aromatic glaze without being overly greasy. The earthy, intoxicating scent of the truffles blended seamlessly with the rich base.

Willow took a bite. The texture was incredible—creamy yet with a satisfying bite, perfectly balanced in flavor, with a delicate finish that didn't overwhelm the palate. It was a masterclass in culinary precision.

"This is incredible," she couldn't help but sigh in appreciation. A Michelin-starred risotto really was on another level.

"Is it? Let me try."

Before Willow could even ask when his portion was coming, Silas reached out, scooped a spoonful directly from her plate, and placed it smoothly into his mouth.

Willow froze instantly, completely forgetting to chew.

Did he just do that?

It was the first time she had ever shared a single plate of food with a man. It felt wildly intimate and entirely unfamiliar, yet because it was Silas, she didn't feel a strong urge to pull away.

Still, the action crossed a distinct line past normal colleague behavior. She couldn't stop herself from glancing up at him.

But one look at his face made her feel silly for overthinking. Silas's expression was entirely composed, exactly the same as when they discussed quarterly reports. There wasn't a trace of the awkward tension she was feeling.

She really was just overthinking it.

Across the table, Silas had absolutely caught her shocked expression, but he smoothly pretended not to notice. He scooped another bite from her plate and ate it just as calmly. "You're right. It is incredible."

His total lack of self-consciousness made Willow feel foolish for analyzing it. She forced herself to push the romantic panic aside and simply shared the plate with him.

She even came up with a perfectly logical excuse in her head: The chef must have only prepared one portion. If they both wanted some, sharing was the only option.

Except, the moment they scraped the plate clean, the chef walked out holding an entire pot, and promptly served them each a brand-new, steaming bowl.

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Looking at the fresh bowls in front of them, Willow couldn't even begin to untangle the knot of emotions in her chest. Awkwardness? Confusion? Disbelief? It all crashed into her at once, leaving her utterly speechless.

And right on cue, Silas casually picked up his spoon. "Why did you stop? I thought you were craving risotto."

Willow desperately wanted to ask him: If there was an entire pot in the kitchen, why on earth did you eat off my plate first?

But the words died in her throat. Whatever. It was his jet, his food, his rules. Besides, he had just returned the favor by making sure she got a fresh bowl, hadn't he?

Deciding it was safer not to dig any deeper, Willow focused on her food. The risotto really was phenomenal, leaving her little brain space to obsess over his actions anyway.

While they were comfortably indulging in their five-star meal at thirty thousand feet, Vivienne was living a nightmare, crammed into a tiny economy seat staring down at a sad, pre-packaged airline meal.

When the flight attendant handed it to her, Vivienne took one sniff, wrinkled her nose in disgust, and snapped, "Take it away! Get this out of my face! Is this supposed to be food? It smells like garbage!"

Her loud, abrasive outburst immediately drew the ire of the surrounding passengers, who didn't hesitate to fire back.

"Who do you think you are? What do you mean 'is this supposed to be food'? Are the rest of us eating garbage?"

"Seriously. You might be a pampered princess at home, but out here, nobody cares. If you don't like it, don't eat it. Keep your lack of manners to yourself!"

"Princess? Please. Real money flies private. At the very least, they fly first class. What kind of elite socialite sits in economy? Stop pretending to be something you're not. If you're back here with the rest of us, you're no better than we are."

The barrage of insults ignited a fiery rage in Vivienne's chest, but trapped in the crowded cabin, she was completely powerless. She couldn't out-argue them, and she certainly couldn't fight them. Seething with humiliated fury, she aggressively yanked a flimsy blanket over her head, shoved in her earbuds, and squeezed her eyes shut.

But the burning humiliation refused to fade.

The truth was, Julian was on this exact flight, traveling to Seattle with her.

But because her assistant had booked the tickets too late, there was only a single seat left in first class. That meant only one of them could take it, leaving the other stranded in economy.

Vivienne had naturally assumed Julian would give the seat to her. He had always done so in the past, gracefully stepping back and telling her to make herself comfortable.

But this time, her assistant nervously informed her that Julian had kept the seat. His excuse had been a dismissive, 'I have work to do on the flight,' effectively shutting down the conversation.

Vivienne was furious, but she didn't dare complain to him directly. She tried dropping passive-aggressive hints, only for Julian to cut her off coldly, stating that if she was unhappy, she could just stay home and he would handle the summit alone.

That threat had terrified her. This trip was crucial. She had to manage the Leo Yardley crisis, deliver a speech that would cement her brilliance, and, most importantly, publicly humiliate Willow. There was no way she was missing it.

So, swallowing her pride and her nausea, she had accepted her fate in economy class.

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The second the plane finally landed, Vivienne shoved her way down the aisle, practically sprinting off the aircraft. She bumped into several passengers, ignoring their irritated glares and muttered complaints. She didn't care. If she had stayed in that cramped, suffocating tube for one more second, she felt she might actually die.

Her mood was already incredibly foul, but as she stepped out into the terminal, she spotted a private jet parked on the tarmac in the distance. Instantly, a wave of bitter jealousy washed over her.

She recognized it immediately—The Gulfstream G650ER, the absolute gold standard of ultra-long-range business jets, the undisputed 'King of the Sky'. Julian had desperately wanted one a while back, but the astronomical price tag had forced him to back down. He had been sulking about it for weeks.

Because of that, Vivienne knew instantly that whoever owned this jet possessed a level of wealth and power that was practically untouchable.

Smoothing down her clothes, she quickly pulled a designer lipstick from her purse, touched up her makeup, and began swaying her hips, preparing to strut over and see who it was.

She knew exactly where she stood these days. Julian was clearly pulling away from her, and Toby was a ticking time bomb just waiting to blow up in her face. Before the inevitable fallout, she needed to secure a new, powerful safety net.

But her grand plan was shattered before she even took her third step. Because the man stepping off the stairs of the multi-million-dollar jet was none other than Silas Thorne.

If it had just been him, she would have still tried her luck. Men were all the same, and she knew she was beautiful. She refused to believe Silas would be entirely immune to her charms.

But it wasn't Silas that made her freeze in her tracks. It was the woman walking right behind him: Willow.

For a split second, Vivienne couldn't believe her own eyes.

Was there no justice in the world? What kind of CEO treated an employee like this? Not only did he let her fly on his personal private jet, but he was literally hovering beside her as she walked down the stairs, treating her like she was made of glass.

Remembering the miserable hell she had just endured in economy, Vivienne's jealousy spiked into pure, unadulterated hatred. If looks could kill, Willow would have been ripped to shreds on the tarmac.

Bitch! she cursed venomously in her head.

Why did Willow always get the upper hand? Why did she always have to compete with her?

Seeing this only fueled Vivienne's desperation to crush her at the summit. She was going to use this stage to reclaim her pride and slap Willow back down into the dirt where she belonged!

Meanwhile, entirely unaware of Vivienne's toxic glare, Willow and Silas bypassed the main terminal and headed straight through the VIP channel. Willow was still feeling a bit awkward about how fiercely Silas was hovering over her, especially the way he insisted on hovering near her elbow as they descended the stairs.

"It's fine, you really don't have to baby me. I can walk."

Silas completely ignored her protests. "You're wearing heels. These stairs are steep. Obviously, you need to be careful."

Since it was a business trip, Willow was dressed in full professional attire today—a sharp, tailored suit paired with matching stilettos. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as her casual wear, but after years in the corporate world, it was basically second nature.

She offered Silas an easy smile. "I've worn heels much higher than this before. I've literally had to sprint through lobbies in them. Trust me, these stairs are nothing."

She said it to reassure him, hoping he would relax. Instead, Silas's expression darkened noticeably. "I don't care what you had to endure in the past. But when you're with me, you will never have to suffer. If the heels hurt, you don't even have to wear them."

Realizing the conversation was quickly derailing from her original point, Willow scrambled to clarify. "It's really not that serious. I need them for the summit anyway."

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"Then I have to make sure you don't fall."

And just like that, Willow found herself walking at a leisurely pace under his fiercely protective watch.

A sleek luxury SUV was already waiting for them as they exited the airport. Settling into the leather seats, Willow couldn't help but marvel internally. Traveling with the boss really was the ultimate luxury. She hadn't had to worry about a single detail.

Their accommodation was the Peninsula Seattle, located fairly close to the airport, so the drive was short.

As the vehicle glided to a stop beneath the hotel's grand entrance, a bellboy in a crisp, dark uniform and white gloves immediately stepped forward, bowing slightly as he opened their door and greeted them.

Willow had only ever seen this hotel in the news, usually serving as the backdrop for billionaires and global dignitaries. She never imagined she would actually get the chance to stay here.

Stepping into the lobby, the warm glow of crystal chandeliers reflected off the pristine marble floors. The air carried a subtle, expensive fragrance, and the entire atmosphere felt incredibly serene yet overwhelmingly luxurious. The decor leaned heavily into rich mahogany and soft creams.

Through the towering floor-to-ceiling windows, she could see the sweeping view of the harbor. The aesthetic was the perfect blend of classic elegance and modern comfort, instantly putting her at ease.

As the concierge led them to the front desk, Willow pulled out her ID, assuming she was checking in alone.

But a second later, Silas slid his own ID across the marble counter. "Set up a room for me as well."

Willow blinked in surprise. "You aren't heading back to your family's place?"

In her mind, if he had traveled all the way to Seattle to visit his family, he would obviously stay with them. After all, that was half the reason he was even on this trip.

"Not right now. I'll head over after the summit wraps up," Silas replied smoothly. "Besides, there are a few final details for the presentation I want to go over with you today."

That made sense to Willow. The summit kicked off tomorrow, and even though she was the one stepping up to the podium, she was representing Merit Biotech. It was totally normal for the CEO to want a final review. Plus, today was really their only free window.

"Alright, let's head up and get to work."

"There's no rush. You've had a long day of traveling. You should rest in your room for a bit first."

Hearing that actually made Willow feel guilty. What 'long day of traveling'? She had literally been pampered in the lap of luxury the entire way here.

Once they had their keys, Willow checked the time and asked if they could just skip the rest and review the materials now.

Instead of answering, Silas stared at her closely. "Are you absolutely sure you're not tired?"

Willow shook her head. "The flight was incredibly comfortable. I'm honestly not tired at all."

But the moment the words left her mouth, a sudden thought struck her. Was it possible that *he* was the one who was exhausted? Maybe he was just too proud to admit it directly, so he was trying to suggest a break in this roundabout way?

It was her fault for being so inconsiderate. After all, he was a whole decade older than her. That kind of age gap had to come with a difference in energy levels.

Instantly shifting into a highly considerate tone, she asked gently, "Are you feeling worn out? It's totally fine if you are. We can absolutely take a break and go over everything later."

Silas frowned, clearly bewildered. "Why would you ask me that?"

Willow shot him a subtle, evaluating glance. "No reason. Everyone gets tired, it's totally normal. Pushing the review back a few hours won't derail anything."

At first, Silas couldn't decipher the strange look in her eyes. But as her gaze drifted over him a few more times, it suddenly hit him like a freight train. Was she implying he was too old?

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His age was the one thing Silas was deeply, agonizingly insecure about. The mere thought that she might view him as old or lacking in stamina made him want to cough up blood out of sheer frustration.

He locked eyes with her and asked point-blank, "Do you think I'm tired because I'm older than you and my stamina is failing?"

Caught completely off guard by how accurately he read her mind, a fiery blush swept across Willow's cheeks. She immediately backpedaled. "No, no, of course not! That's not what I meant at all. Please don't misunderstand."

But Silas wasn't buying it. Her mouth was denying it, but the panic in her eyes confirmed that was exactly what she had been thinking. Otherwise, she wouldn't have brought it up in the first place.

Yet, he couldn't exactly argue with biology. A ten-year age gap was an undeniable fact, and no matter how much wealth or power he possessed, he couldn't turn back the clock. Forcing down his bitter frustration, he took a slow breath.

He couldn't change his birth year, but he could certainly prove that he made up for it in every other conceivable way.

He took a step closer, angling his head down to hold her gaze perfectly level with his. His tone was a mix of intense explanation and fierce determination. "I spend roughly four hours every single day in the gym. I wake up early for an hour of core strength conditioning, take another hour at noon for high-intensity reinforcement, and spend two hours every night doing explosive combat training. So, rest assured, my stamina is exceptional. I will never fall short in that department."

Listening to the first half of his routine, Willow felt a wave of admiration. Highly successful men truly were built differently to maintain such a grueling schedule. But his final sentence threw her for a loop. Why was he telling her to 'rest assured'? His physical stamina had absolutely nothing to do with her.

Unsure of how else to respond to such an intense declaration, she offered a stiff, awkward smile. "That's... great. That's really great."

Silas was far from satisfied with her reaction. He could hear the polite brush-off in her voice. He pressed closer. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"What? No, of course I believe you!" Willow had no idea how to navigate this conversation anymore. She simply felt it wasn't any of her business. Naturally, she hoped he stayed fit and lived a long, healthy life, but that was strictly from the perspective of a friendly colleague.

Silas's eyes narrowed slightly. "Your expression says otherwise."

Trapped, Willow finally gave him the honest truth. "I just don't think it really concerns me. That's your private business, and it wouldn't be appropriate for me to know the details."

"There's nothing inappropriate about it," Silas replied, letting a rare flash of annoyance slip through his usually flawless composure. "And as for whether it concerns you or not... you'll find out soon enough just how much it matters."

The loaded words left Willow completely baffled, but she decided it was vastly safer not to ask for clarification. Just as she had said, a boss's private life was a minefield she had no desire to step into.

By the time the tension settled, they had reached their adjacent rooms. Before swiping her keycard, Willow asked, "So, are we starting the review now?"

Silas's brief irritation vanished, instantly replaced by his usual affectionate warmth. "If you're truly not tired, then yes, let's start now."

"Perfect. Just let me drop my bags inside," Willow said, tapping her card against the lock. "Where should we meet?"

"I'll have the concierge book a private conference room."

"We really don't need to do all that just for the two of us. We can just use your room or mine."

Silas's heart leaped at the suggestion. Sharing a private hotel room would guarantee uninterrupted time together, giving him the perfect chance to close the distance between them. It was exactly what he wanted.

But, playing the perfect gentleman, he made sure to ask, "Are you sure you're comfortable with that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Willow smiled, thinking back to her grueling days at the Seattle office. "When Leo and the team were racing against deadlines, they used to crash in my room all the time to run late-night meetings. Trust me, it's really not a big deal."

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As his words fell, the smile on Silas's face stiffened. Even though he knew such interactions were inevitable in a professional setting, a flicker of jealousy still flared in his chest. "Try not to let other men into your room from now on."

Willow immediately understood what he meant. "Don't worry," she quickly clarified. "There's absolutely nothing going on between us."

But Silas held his ground. "If they aren't interested, it's a no. If they are interested, it's an absolute no."

Realizing he might have sounded a bit too intense, he softened his tone. "I'm not saying they're bad guys, but you need to be careful. It's just a matter of safety."

Hearing this, Willow felt a sudden, surreal warmth, like a daughter receiving advice from a protective father.

She had barely experienced any paternal love growing up, and the first man she had given her heart to was a scoundrel like Julian. No one had ever spoken to her with such protective care.

In many ways, when it came to the dynamics between men and women, she was as naive as a blank sheet of paper. Silas was the one filling in those gaps.

He had told her so much, taught her even more.

Putting his advice into immediate practice, Willow suggested, "In that case, I'll come over to your room in a bit."

Silas paused, surprised she had applied his rule to him so quickly. But he figured it was fine—at least she was listening.

Shortly after, Willow gathered her things and headed to Silas's room. Upon arriving, she realized he was staying in a massive presidential suite. Complete with a living room, dining area, study, and even a private gym, the space was sprawling.

Seeing the sheer size of the suite, any lingering awkwardness vanished.

Instead of diving straight into work, Silas ushered her toward a lavish afternoon tea spread provided by the hotel, featuring an endless array of pastries and fresh fruit.

Willow had eaten quite a bit on the flight and wasn't hungry at all, but she couldn't resist Silas's enthusiasm and politely took a few bites.

Since she was primarily there to prepare for tomorrow's presentation, she kept the snacking to a minimum.

She walked Silas through her entire plan and the core modules she intended to cover. He listened with absolute focus, nodding frequently, clearly impressed and completely on board with her strategy.

However, there was one detail that caught his attention. He asked, "What were those patents you just mentioned? I don't think I've ever heard you talk about them before."

It wasn't surprising that he hadn't heard of them. They were the very technologies she had been forced to leave behind at Sinclair Group when she resigned. Some had been patented, others hadn't, but it hardly mattered now.

Those were relics of the past. Thanks to the Broad Institute data Silas had provided, Willow had already developed something far more advanced.

"It's nothing important," she dismissed gracefully. "I've already developed the latest iteration of that technology, and I'll be unveiling it at the summit tomorrow."

"Perfect. We'll stick to your plan. You have my full support."

Silas was about to add something else when his phone suddenly rang. Glancing at the screen, he saw his mother, Jocelyn Thorne, calling.

He considered ignoring it to call back later, but Willow had already caught a glimpse of the caller ID. Jocelyn Thorne. It was such a beautiful name; the woman behind it had to be stunning.

Perhaps this was the woman he had feelings for.

A sour pang of jealousy twisted in Willow's chest, but she kept her expression perfectly composed. "Go ahead and take it," she offered smoothly. "We've pretty much covered everything anyway. We can always text if anything else comes up."

With that, she let herself out of his suite.

Silas stared at the door as she left, letting out a heavy sigh.

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Only after Willow left did Silas finally answer the phone.

The moment the call connected, Jocelyn's gentle voice floated through the receiver. "Cy, what took you so long to pick up?"

"I was caught up with work. What's going on?"

Perhaps because she had been pampered her entire life, Jocelyn possessed an innocent, almost childlike demeanor, complete with a wonderful temper. In contrast, Silas often felt like the mature, steady adult in their dynamic.

"Nothing major. I just heard you were back in Seattle, so I thought I'd call."

It wasn't hard to guess who she had "heard" it from. Arthur Vance was not only Silas's executive assistant but also heavily involved in the Thorne family's daily affairs.

Silas didn't bother hiding it. "Yeah, I arrived today for a business trip."

Jocelyn immediately pressed, "If you're in Seattle, why didn't you come home? Your father and I miss you terribly, and your grandparents ask about you every single day."

Silas already had a timeline in mind. "I'll head home once my work is wrapped up. I'll let you know beforehand."

"When will you be done?"

"Probably in three or four days." The truth was, his work would be finished by tomorrow, but he wanted to carve out a few extra days to show Willow around the city, so he deliberately extended the timeframe.

"That's not too long."

Sensing her hesitation, Silas cut straight to the chase. "Mom, just say what you want to say. You don't have to beat around the bush with me."

Jocelyn laughed. "You always see right through me. Fine, I'll be direct. You didn't come on this trip alone, did you?"

"No, I didn't. I'm with Willow." Silas was straightforward. If she knew he wasn't alone, she definitely knew he was with Willow.

"Oh, what a coincidence!" Jocelyn dragged out the vowels, feigning absolute shock. Her acting was so terrible it completely gave her away.

Silas didn't know whether to laugh or groan. "What scheme is brewing in your head now?"

"What could I possibly be scheming? You know I rarely interfere in your personal life," Jocelyn replied, before instantly pivoting. "But this is different! After all these years, you finally found a girl you like. I'm just so thrilled. When it's convenient, could you bring her over for dinner?"

Silas's immediate instinct was to refuse, not wanting to put Willow in an awkward position. "We aren't together like that. It wouldn't be appropriate."

"Oh, stop overthinking it! You are way too conservative," Jocelyn scolded. "Even if you aren't together, can't she still come over for dinner? Friends have meals together all the time, right? You're friends and colleagues. One dinner won't hurt."

Put that way, Silas had to admit she made a fair point. But he couldn't make that decision for Willow; he had to ask her first. "Let's wait until the work is done before we discuss this."

Taking that as a yes, Jocelyn's mind instantly went into overdrive. "What kind of food does Willow like? Does she enjoy our local Seattle cuisine? If not, tell me now so I can have the chef prepare something else."

"Did she like that bracelet I gave her last time? If she did, I just got my hands on a stunning set of matching earrings and a necklace with incredible clarity. I'll get them ready to give to her when she comes."

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"You also need to tell me what kind of family dynamic she prefers so we can rehearse! I don't want anyone saying the wrong thing and scaring her away."

"And one more thing—"

"Mom, you're the one who's going to scare her away," Silas interrupted.

He knew Willow's personality perfectly. She was humble, polite, and deeply mindful of boundaries. If she walked into an ambush of overwhelming enthusiasm, she would absolutely panic.

Besides, even if he did invite her, it would be strictly as a friend. There was no need to treat this like an official introduction to her future in-laws. That would only terrify her.

"Just host her like a normal guest. Please, do not go overboard," Silas warned.

"Alright, alright, I get it. Just figure out a time with her and let me know. I'll handle the rest."

She said she understood, but Silas knew full well his mother hadn't absorbed a single word. And since she ruled the household and his father indulged her every whim, all he could do was pray it wouldn't be a total disaster.

—

Since the summit kicked off tomorrow, while Silas and Willow were finalizing their strategy, Vivienne and Julian were doing the exact same thing across town.

As soon as they arrived at their hotel, Julian booked a conference room and demanded Vivienne run through her entire presentation.

Vivienne had had a miserable day. After enduring hours in economy class, she had suffered from motion sickness on the ride over on an empty stomach. Her irritation and exhaustion had reached a boiling point, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't mask it anymore.

She shoved her suitcase aside and collapsed onto the sofa. "I can't do this right now. I need to rest, and I need food."

Julian's brow furrowed in instant displeasure. It was the eleventh hour, and she was throwing a tantrum? Did she even grasp the magnitude of tomorrow's summit? "If you want to throw a fit, pick a better time," he reprimanded coldly.

In a flash, Vivienne saw it—the exact same look of contempt, arrogance, and impatience he used to reserve exclusively for Willow. There was not a shred of warmth or sympathy in his eyes.

Vivienne froze. She never imagined that look would ever be directed at her, let alone this soon, and without any warning. A chilling wave of fear washed over her—fear of him, and fear for her future. If he was already this impatient with her, what hope did she have?

Tears immediately welled in her eyes, but unlike her usual fragile act, this time she layered it with indignation and a desperate grit. "Do you think I'm just throwing a tantrum? Because I'm not. You seem to forget I just spent hours crammed in an economy seat. I haven't eaten, I haven't slept, and I was carsick the whole way here. Even if you don't care about me personally, as my boss, you should at least let me grab a bite and catch my breath before demanding a presentation."

Julian hesitated, momentarily caught off guard. He genuinely hadn't considered any of that. But the hesitation was fleeting, and the underlying impatience in his gaze didn't waver. "Fine. Go eat. Meet me back in the conference room in an hour."

Vivienne had hoped her outburst would earn her a sliver of sympathy, maybe even a pass on tonight's rehearsal. Clearly, it hadn't. Her face flushed with silent fury.

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But Julian was the one holding all the power here, and her entire future depended on him. No matter how furious she felt, Vivienne had no choice but to swallow her pride and follow his orders.

She considered arguing further, but that would only fracture their relationship even more. Willow was a glaring example of what happened when you pushed him too far, and Vivienne was far too smart to make the same mistake.

Sticking to Julian's timeline, she choked down a quick meal and hurried back to the conference room. He wasn't there yet, so she waited.

Ten minutes later, Julian walked in. Vivienne immediately approached him. She knew how to bend when necessary, always keeping her eyes on the prize. Right now, that meant making amends. "Julian, please don't be mad at me. I was just so hungry my blood sugar dropped. I felt awful, which is why I snapped."

"You have low blood sugar? Since when?" Julian asked, his brow furrowing. They had been together for a long time, and this was the first he was hearing of it.

Vivienne had pulled the excuse out of thin air, and his sharp question sent a spike of panic through her. She scrambled to cover her tracks. "I developed it after having Toby. It's not severe, so I never brought it up. Between skipping meals and the motion sickness today, it just flared up."

Julian stared at her, genuinely struggling to believe her. Knowing how spoiled and demanding she was, it was impossible for her to suffer in silence. When she was pregnant with Toby, she had thrown a fit and demanded he fire the chef just because a dish was slightly too salty. The idea that she would keep a medical condition a secret was highly suspect.

Sensing his doubt, Vivienne doubled down. "What's wrong? Do you not believe me? If you think I'm lying, I can go to the hospital right now and get a doctor to pull my records."

"Enough," Julian sighed, thinking she was blowing things out of proportion. "I didn't say anything. If you have low blood sugar, just make sure to keep some candy in your purse from now on. You'll need it."

Without giving her a chance to milk the moment, he cut to the chase. "Let's get started. Pull up your presentation materials."

Swallowing her frustration, Vivienne opened her laptop. She knew he probably didn't believe her entirely, but she couldn't dwell on it. Her only option was to crush this presentation and win back his approval.

Throughout her entire run-through, she radiated absolute confidence.

But the moment she finished, Julian frowned. Aside from the new patents and technology, which he admitted were impressive, he despised the rest of it.

"There are too many modules, and no clear focus. The explanation is completely superficial and lacks depth. You spent way too much time spotlighting yourself and entirely missed the point of the presentation." His critique was ruthless and entirely strictly business.

Vivienne managed to keep a neutral face at first, but as the criticism dragged on, her mask slipped. "Julian, do you have a problem with me right now? Why is it that everything I do and say is suddenly wrong?"

Julian thought she was throwing another tantrum. He was simply analyzing the work, holding her to the exact same standard he would hold any other employee. How did that translate to having a problem with her? Still, wanting to avoid another meltdown, he softened his tone slightly. "I'm just keeping things strictly professional."

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Strictly professional? Vivienne found his words laughable. He had never treated her like this before. In the past, whenever she struggled, he thought it was adorable and would eagerly step in to do the work for her. Since when did they operate on a "strictly professional" basis? Since when did he hold her to strict standards?

The real reason was glaringly obvious, but she didn't dare say it out loud.

"Fine, tell me what needs to be changed, and I'll adjust it," she conceded, unwilling to pick another fight.

Julian offered a laundry list of revisions, most of which Vivienne accepted. However, there was one non-negotiable point: he wanted her to cut down on the self-promotion and focus entirely on the project data. On that, she dug her heels in.

Her primary reason for attending this summit was to elevate her own status. If she couldn't shine in the spotlight, there was no point in even showing up. She absolutely refused to change that section.

The next morning, the summit kicked off at nine-thirty. Willow and Silas arrived right on time, only to find Julian and Vivienne already seated.

As representatives of two industry titans, they were all seated in the very front row of the VIP section.

Willow wore a tailored, off-white blazer and skirt set. The matte fabric didn't catch the light or scream for attention, but the sharp tailoring at the shoulders gave it an impeccable, crisp silhouette. Beneath it, she wore a matching silk blouse with a subtle mandarin collar, buttoned flawlessly to the top without a hint of frivolous lace, exuding a clean, restrained professionalism.

Her long hair was pulled back into a loose, low bun, and she wore a single pair of delicate silver stud earrings. Her makeup was minimal, her lips tinted a soft pink.

She looked elegant, dignified, and fiercely professional—a perfect canvas of quiet power that commanded the room. The fact that the strikingly handsome Silas Thorne was standing by her side only amplified her presence.

The moment they stepped into the venue, every eye in the room gravitated toward them. Vivienne was no exception.

She eyed Willow's outfit and sneered inwardly. Dressed so plainly, she looked positively provincial. At an event like this, you were supposed to dress like royalty to ensure people remembered you.

Noticing Julian's gaze drifting toward Willow, Vivienne let out a cold scoff. "Talk about having no class. Wearing something like that to a major summit? Has she become so destitute at Merit Biotech that she can't even afford a decent designer outfit?"

Julian glanced at her out of the corner of his eye but said nothing. Internally, he thought Willow's attire was flawlessly appropriate for a business setting. Unlike Vivienne, who was dressed to the nines as if she were walking a red carpet.

Unwilling to start an argument, he simply said, "Review your notes again. We're starting soon."

Frustrated by his lack of agreement, Vivienne kept her mouth shut but silently added another tally to her burning hatred for Willow.

As Willow took her seat, Silas leaned in. "If you don't like this spot, I can have the organizers switch our seats."

He didn't explicitly say it, but Willow knew exactly why the seat was "bad." The two Sinclair executives were sitting just a few feet away, entirely within her peripheral vision.

But Willow didn't care; ignoring them was effortless. Besides, she hadn't done anything wrong, so there was no need to flee. Moving now would only make it look like she cared.

"It's fine, no need to move. They won't affect me in the slightest."

"Alright, it's up to you. Let me know the second you feel uncomfortable."

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After the event organizers personally stopped by to greet Silas, the official program began.

The morning progressed through the standard opening remarks and industry overviews before finally transitioning to the guest speaker presentations.

The speaking slots were meticulously scheduled. Representing Sinclair Group and Merit Biotech, Vivienne and Willow were placed at the very end. Vivienne was the penultimate speaker, while Willow held the grand finale slot.

When Vivienne's name was called, she strutted up to the stage with triumphant arrogance.

Truthfully, she didn't consider Willow a threat today. She thought Willow looked drab, lacked social grace, and, most importantly, Vivienne had complete control over the only cutting-edge patents Willow possessed. She stepped up to the podium fully intending to crush her.

Standing center stage, Vivienne rested her manicured fingers lightly on the microphone. Her gaze swept slowly across the audience before locking onto Willow with a look of pure, condescending provocation.

Capitalizing on the technology Willow had left behind, combined with Julian's expert coaching, Vivienne's thirty-minute presentation was undeniably stellar. It was substantive, properly highlighted the new patents, and ended to thunderous applause.

The praise rolled through the audience like a tidal wave.

"Sinclair Group really is a powerhouse. Those new patents are absolutely groundbreaking. It looks like the future of gene editing is safe in the hands of the corporate giants."

"Agreed. The technology is cutting-edge, and the speaker was fantastic. For someone so young, her expertise is remarkable. A brilliant rising star."

"No kidding. With Sinclair Group setting the bar this high, Merit Biotech is under serious pressure. They're a bigger firm, but if their presentation falls short, it's going to be a massive embarrassment."

The murmurs of admiration echoed throughout the venue, and Vivienne absorbed every word. Standing tall, she radiated an aura of cold, unapproachable superiority rather than grace. Her eyes gleamed with even more arrogance as she stared down the audience, silently daring Willow to try and top her.

While Julian was still annoyed by how much Vivienne had made the presentation about herself, the overwhelmingly positive crowd reaction and the sheer brilliance of the new tech kept his criticisms at bay.

He might have had his issues with Vivienne lately, but she was representing Sinclair Group. He wanted her to shine, and more importantly, he wanted her to completely humiliate Willow and Silas.

Returning to her seat, Vivienne immediately fished for praise. "How did I do, Julian? I didn't embarrass you or the company, did I?"

"You did well," Julian replied. While his face remained cool, he gave her the validation she craved. "The segment on the new tech was especially strong. The crowd clearly loved it."

His words sent Vivienne over the moon. The applause of a hundred strangers meant nothing compared to a single compliment from Julian. She immediately started making grand promises. "Don't worry, I'll work even harder to develop more groundbreaking patents for us in the future."

On the other side of the aisle, Willow hadn't spoken a single word since Vivienne took the stage. Her face was an icy mask of sheer professionalism. The rest of the room might have been fooled, but she knew the truth: every single piece of new tech and patent Vivienne had just paraded was the exact work Willow had been forced to surrender when she left the company.

To think Vivienne would brazenly use her own life's work to steal the spotlight and elevate Sinclair Group. It was the ultimate act of thievery.

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Silas's attention had been entirely on Willow, and he immediately noticed the shift in her demeanor. "What's wrong? Are you feeling alright? We can always pull you from the lineup if something's off."

"It's fine. I'm not going to cancel a scheduled presentation over a personal issue," Willow replied, declining his offer. Besides, she had major plans for the stage.

She turned to look at him. "Mr. Thorne, if I deviate from the script we discussed yesterday, will you hold it against me?"

"I promise I won't do anything to damage Merit Biotech's reputation, but things might get a little chaotic in here."

Silas didn't hesitate for a fraction of a second. "Say whatever you need to say, and do whatever you need to do. Merit Biotech and I will always have your back."

Though he could tell something profound had triggered her, he didn't pry. He respected her, supported her, and was ready to be her absolute shield.

His words anchored her completely. While she was one hundred percent confident in her upcoming counter-attack, she knew it would inevitably drag Merit Biotech into the crossfire. Knowing she had his explicit permission erased any lingering hesitation.

The announcer called her name, and Willow stood up to take the stage. As she walked past Vivienne, she caught a sneering side-eye and clearly heard her mutter, "You're just going up there to make a fool of yourself."

Willow ignored her, her steps growing firmer with every stride. Originally, she had only come to this summit to share knowledge and exchange ideas; she had never planned to actively target Vivienne. But since Vivienne was pushing her to the brink and weaponizing her own stolen research against her, she had no choice but to strike back.

Taking the podium, Willow delivered a masterclass of a presentation. It was rigorous, authoritative, and profoundly credible, though it initially lacked the explosive shock value of the patents Vivienne had showcased.

Just as everyone assumed the presentation was wrapping up, leaving Sinclair Group as the undeniable victor of the day, Willow suddenly shifted gears. "I actually have a differing perspective on the material Ms. Sinclair just shared. Would it be appropriate to use this platform to discuss it?"

The venue erupted in a collective gasp.

Typically, this segment was strictly for individual presentations. Critiquing another speaker's work was incredibly rare and almost universally reserved for the roundtable discussions later in the day. Calling someone out directly on the main stage was unprecedented.

Willow knew exactly what she was doing. She chose this exact moment to maximize the devastation.

A heavy silence fell over the room. The host was visibly sweating, terrified of stepping on the toes of either Sinclair Group or Merit Biotech. Unsure of how to proceed, he looked toward the backstage crew for a lifeline.

In the audience, a flash of panic crossed Vivienne's face. She never imagined someone as restrained as Willow would dare challenge her in such a prestigious setting. Though Vivienne was convinced she had scrubbed the data clean and left zero evidence of theft, she desperately wanted to shut this down. She furiously shot glares at the event staff, demanding they intervene.

But she had forgotten one crucial detail: the staff didn't answer to her. They answered to Silas.

Moments later, Silas's voice cut through the tension. Unhurried, composed, and carrying the unshakable authority of a man who could fix anything for her, he issued a simple command. "Let her speak."

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Following the directive, the host expertly navigated the tension, smoothly handing the floor back to Willow and giving her free rein to speak.

Though she didn't see it happen, Willow knew Silas had pulled the strings to clear her path. Across the sea of faces, she locked eyes with him. Even from a distance, she could feel the absolute weight of his support.

Taking a deep breath, she spoke with razor-sharp precision. "The new technology and patents Ms. Sinclair just presented were not her own creation. The actual research was conducted by someone else. She merely copied and pasted the results."

The words hit the room like a bomb.

Accusing someone of patent plagiarism was a catastrophic allegation, especially in a room packed with the industry's most powerful figures. Willow was effectively nailing Vivienne to a cross. If the allegations held true, Vivienne's career would be permanently destroyed.

Hearing the accusation, Vivienne's reaction bordered on feral. She shot up from her seat, slamming her hands onto the table so violently her porcelain teacup rattled. Her eyes burned with venom. "You're lying! Do you have any idea where you are? This isn't a place for you to spout insane delusions!"

"You better have proof, or I will sue you for everything you're worth for defamation!"

"Don't panic. The proof is right here," Willow replied, her composure a stark contrast to Vivienne's hysteria. She gestured to the AV team to project Vivienne's presentation back onto the main screen.

"Look closely at this section," Willow instructed, aiming her laser pointer at a specific dataset. "Out of ten control groups, why are the other nine perfectly accurate, while this specific one contains a glaring error?"

During Vivienne's presentation, she had breezed past the data so quickly, dazzling everyone with her conclusions, that no one had caught the discrepancy. But Willow knew it intimately—because she was the one who had recorded that exact dataset.

Being publicly interrogated humiliated Vivienne, but she wasn't entirely rattled yet. She firmly believed she had covered her tracks and that there was zero concrete evidence linking her to the theft.

She scoffed loudly. "A single data error? Is that your grand conspiracy? Are you seriously pretending you've never made a minor logging error in your entire career? I'm sure everyone in this room has. Accusing me of plagiarism over a single typo is incredibly desperate."

The atmosphere shifted. Everyone in the room was a researcher; they knew the grueling reality of lab work and the inevitability of human error. Naturally empathizing with the struggle, the crowd began to murmur that while Vivienne had made a mistake, Willow's accusation was far too aggressive.

Willow had anticipated this. She never expected one faulty dataset to be the silver bullet. That was just the appetizer.

"If that's your defense, let's keep going." Willow traced her laser pointer to the crown jewel of Vivienne's presentation, refusing to beat around the bush. "The core conclusion drawn here is fundamentally flawed. The breakthrough in the Intranuclear Synthesis of Single-Stranded DNA Templates doesn't rely on de novo synthesis, but rather on unwinding the double-stranded DNA to expose the template, which is then stabilized by proteins."

Vivienne froze. She barely understood the scientific jargon Willow was throwing at her, leaving her utterly incapable of forming a rebuttal. But glancing at the faces of the audience—and, more importantly, at Julian—it was painfully obvious that the seeds of doubt had firmly taken root.

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Refusing to believe Willow could dismantle her work so quickly, Vivienne dug her heels in. "Impossible. You're talking nonsense! I spent an entire year researching this. You think you can just glance at it and declare it wrong? If science were that easy, why do we even run experiments? We should all just bring our work to you for a visual inspection."

Her logic wasn't entirely wrong. True research required countless days and nights of obsessive dedication; some things couldn't be debunked at a passing glance. But Willow was absolutely certain because she was the one who had originally drafted that very conclusion. The experiment hadn't been finished when she left, so she had placed a question mark next to that specific theory.

She never imagined Vivienne would be foolish enough to copy it verbatim.

"You're right; most things can't be debunked at a glance. But what if the research was originally mine, and you simply stole it? In that scenario, I don't think anyone in this room is more qualified to speak on it than I am."

The confrontation had reached a boiling point. The underlying feud between the two women was now glaringly obvious, and the rest of the room sat in stunned, breathless silence.

Vivienne knew panicking would only doom her. Since things had escalated this far, her only survival strategy was absolute denial. Without a smoking gun, Willow's words were just accusations.

She let out a cold scoff, maintaining her haughty facade. "Willow, you're representing Merit Biotech. You can't just throw out baseless accusations. You better produce actual evidence proving my conclusion is flawed."

"Since you're so eager to see it, I'd be happy to oblige."

In the next second, Willow swapped the display to her own prepared file. Coincidentally, her research also focused on the Intranuclear Synthesis of Single-Stranded DNA Templates. Not only did it directly contradict Vivienne's conclusion, but it was also backed by exclusive data from the Broad Institute. Its professional rigor and undeniable accuracy made it the undisputed crown jewel of the entire summit.

Vivienne was absolutely blindsided. While Willow didn't produce a literal video of her stealing the files, her presentation and the irrefutable accuracy of her new data served as devastating circumstantial evidence of the plagiarism.

A suffocating wave of despair crashed over Vivienne. She clenched her fists so tightly her knuckles turned white. She had meticulously calculated every angle, but she had fatally underestimated Willow. How could this plain Jane possibly develop a wildly superior version of the technology in just a few short months?

The reactions from the crowd were even more electric. Half were captivated by the explosive corporate drama, while the other half were deeply shaken by the sheer magnitude of Willow's data.

Everyone in the room knew exactly what the Broad Institute was. It was the undisputed, dominant apex of global life sciences, genomics, and precision medicine.

The fact that a young woman had not only secured their exclusive data but successfully engineered groundbreaking new research off it was nothing short of earth-shattering.

The venue descended into absolute chaos, buzzing with an adrenaline-fueled frenzy. Despite the host's desperate attempts to restore order, the crowd was completely unmanageable.

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"Who exactly is this Willow Horgan? She's so young, yet she actually managed to secure data from the Broad Institute and produce a massive breakthrough?"

"Isn't it obvious? She's with Merit Biotech. Silas Thorne is clearly backing her. Do you have any idea how much power the Thorne family wields? There isn't a problem on earth they can't solve."

"That's not how science works. Merit Biotech might have endless money, but you can only buy what already exists. If something requires original research and development, it takes raw talent and genius. Do you honestly think Sinclair Group doesn't have money? We haven't cracked this tech yet because we lack the brilliance, not the budget."

"Fair point. The girl is undeniably brilliant."

The atmosphere in the room hit a fever pitch. Across the chaotic sea of attendees, Willow locked eyes with Silas. A flicker of guilt tugged at her; she had completely derailed a massive industry summit and worried he might be angry.

But Silas didn't look angry in the slightest. Through the crowd, he arched a brow at her, his expression radiating a clear, unmistakable message: brilliantly done.

Beside him, however, Julian and Vivienne were anything but calm. Taking in the absolute trainwreck unfolding before him, Julian shot Vivienne a look of pure disgust. "What the hell is going on here?" he demanded icily.

He knew Willow had left behind certain patents and tech when she departed the company, but he never fathomed Vivienne had copied them verbatim, errors and all, dragging Sinclair Group's reputation through the mud on a global stage.

Only now did genuine terror seep into Vivienne's bones. "Julian, you have to listen to me! It's not what it looks like! I didn't plagiarize anything, and I have no idea how it went so wrong. You have to believe me, please!"

"Shut up. I don't have time for your useless excuses. You better start figuring out how you're going to fix this catastrophic mess."

With that, Julian shifted his focus back to Willow on the stage. She was elegant, fiercely intelligent, and commanded the room effortlessly. It was a shame she was currently destroying Vivienne, and by extension, Sinclair Group. Furious as he was with Vivienne, he couldn't let his company go down without a fight.

Cutting through the deafening noise of the crowd, Julian's voice rang out sharp and authoritative. "Since Ms. Horgan brought up the issue of patent infringement, I have a question of my own."

The room instantly quieted down. Julian pressed forward. "Ms. Horgan just admitted that her entire conclusion is based on data from the Broad Institute. I'd like to ask: how exactly did you acquire that data? Did you receive official authorization to use it? Because if you didn't, isn't your own presentation an act of infringement?"

Willow knew exactly where she stood. There was zero chance the data Silas had provided her was compromised. But in the heat of the moment, she refused to drag Silas into the mud with Julian, so she deflected. "You're more than welcome to contact the Broad Institute yourself. If they claim I've infringed on their data, I won't say another word, and I will gladly face the legal consequences."

Julian aggressively doubled down. "Why go through the trouble? You're standing on the stage right now, and you've had plenty to say already. Why can't you just tell us exactly where you got those files?"

Listening to him, Willow felt a profound wave of disgust. If there hadn't been a room full of industry leaders watching, she wouldn't have even bothered giving him a polite response.

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Willow was about to brush it off with a few perfunctory words when a remarkably steady, slightly imposing voice rang out from the crowd below: "I gave it to her."

It was Silas Thorne.

With that, he rose from his seat and strode toward the stage. Wherever he passed, the eyes of the entire audience followed his every move.

Silas was dressed in a sharp black suit, his demeanor cold, austere, and undeniably commanding. As he walked toward her, for a fleeting moment, Willow actually saw a halo of light surrounding him.

Upon reaching the stage, Silas first gave Willow a reassuring look, then stepped protectively in front of her. He repeated, "I gave it to her. If anyone has a problem with that, you can take it up with me directly."

The moment those words hung in the air, the entire hall fell into a dead silence. Even Julian Sinclair, who had been interrogating her so fiercely just moments ago, lost his momentum. No matter how furious or disgruntled he was, he wouldn't dare clash head-on with Silas Thorne.

"Well, if Mr. Thorne provided it, then I'm sure there are no issues," Julian conceded, lowering his defenses.

But Silas had no intention of letting him off the hook so easily. His tone remained icy as he declared, "Just in case there is anyone here who isn't aware, I will take this opportunity to reiterate: Willow is a member of Merit. From now on, anyone who tries to make things difficult for her will have to answer to me."

As his voice faded, people exchanged bewildered glances. Everyone knew Mr. Thorne's reputation—ruthless, decisive, and completely detached from romantic entanglements. No one expected him to bring a woman to an event today. And to actually offend the CEO of Sinclair Group for her sake? For a moment, everyone was left guessing about the exact nature of their relationship.

However, they had to admit that standing side by side, Mr. Thorne and Ms. Horgan looked incredibly well-matched, a perfect picture of power and beauty.

Offstage, Julian and Vivienne were equally stunned. While they weren't particularly close to Silas, they had crossed paths several times. Coupled with all the industry rumors over the years, they had never seen him show this level of care for anyone.

Besides, wasn't Willow involved with Arthur Vance? She had absolutely no connection to Silas Thorne. Could it be that he was just exceptionally generous to his subordinates? Generous enough to personally look out for his assistant's girlfriend?

With Silas having spoken, no one in the room dared to voice a single word of discontent. This man was at the very pinnacle of their world; many people's livelihoods depended on him. Flattering him was hard enough, let alone offending him.

Thanks to his intervention, the remainder of the summit proceeded in quiet order. Once it concluded, Silas escorted Willow out. In the car, he asked if she had been frightened by the confrontation. Willow shook her head. Not only was she unafraid, but she actually felt an overwhelming sense of joy at having taken that crucial step forward.

While Silas respected her courage, he firmly told her he wouldn't allow her to face something like that alone again. At the very least, she needed to loop him in beforehand so he could cover her blind spots.

Meanwhile, right after Silas and Willow departed, the swarm of reporters descended on Julian and Vivienne, relentlessly pressing them for their thoughts on the incident and how they planned to handle the fallout.

Julian was already in a foul mood. On one hand, Vivienne's scandal had humiliated him thoroughly. On the other hand, witnessing Silas defend Willow so fiercely had ignited an inexplicable, burning rage in his chest.

He ended up taking all his fury out on Vivienne. Tossing out a cold, "Handle it yourself," he turned on his heel and strode away, leaving Vivienne completely alone to face the barrage of cameras and microphones.

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Finally landing such an explosive scoop, the reporters weren't about to let Vivienne Sinclair off easily. A barrage of sharp, probing questions hit her all at once, microphones shoved practically into her face.

"Ms. Sinclair, what is your response to Ms. Horgan's accusations just now? Did you genuinely plagiarize?"

"Although Ms. Horgan only mentioned two specific instances, were all the patents you presented today stolen?"

"Did you know beforehand that Ms. Horgan was going to accuse you? If so, was your explanation just now pre-planned?"

As the interrogation escalated, the topics veered shamelessly into her private life, crossing every boundary.

"Is there a personal grudge between you and Ms. Horgan? Why would she suddenly target you at such a formal event?"

"What exactly is your relationship with Mr. Sinclair? We hear he is a married man with a wife and child. By parading around with him so publicly, are you acting as the other woman ruining his family?"

Vivienne had been listening with a deep frown, managing to keep a strained composure. But the moment she heard that last question, her emotions snapped. "Which publication are you with? Do you have any professional ethics at all? Keep spouting this fabricated nonsense, and I'll sue you for defamation!"

Her outburst only fueled the fire. The reporters weren't intimidated in the slightest; they wanted her agitated because that made for better headlines.

The subsequent questions grew even more aggressive, each one aimed squarely at Vivienne, plunging the scene into absolute chaos. Ultimately, it took the intervention of the security team to restore order.

Before storming off, Vivienne threw out one last warning: "Regarding Willow's defamatory claims of plagiarism today, I will use every legal avenue to defend my rights. As for the rest, that is my private life, and I have no obligation to report to you."

Unfortunately for her, she had no idea that her grand declarations and supposed warnings looked like an absolute joke to everyone else.

The moment she left, the reporters began gossiping amongst themselves. "Usually, the one shouting the loudest is the one feeling the most guilty."

"Exactly. I don't know what she's acting so arrogant about. During the whole summit, Julian didn't even spare her a glance; his eyes were glued to that Willow woman. Even when facing us, Julian walked off first and left her to clean up the mess. If you ask me, he doesn't respect her at all."

"You hit the nail on the head. If I were Julian, I'd go for Willow too. She clearly has the brains and the competence, not to mention she is absolutely stunning."

As soon as Vivienne returned to her hotel room, she was informed that Julian had already left. Although they had agreed beforehand that he would leave after the conference while she stayed behind to meet with Leo Yardley and the team, his abrupt departure without a single word was completely unacceptable to her.

She quickly grabbed her phone and dialed Julian's number. The moment he answered, she blurted out, "Julian, why didn't you tell me you were leaving?"

Julian's voice was frigid over the line. "I have work."

Vivienne obviously knew he had work. She called mainly to hear him explain himself directly to her, but clearly, he had no intention of doing so.

Forced to swallow her bitterness and grievances, Vivienne softened her tone. "Then I won't bother you. Just remember to let me know when you land in New York City."

Julian ignored her affectionate remark, his tone remaining devoid of warmth. "Focus on cleaning up your own mess first."

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Left with no other option, Vivienne could only desperately pledge her innocence. "I know you're upset with me about what happened today, but I am being framed. We've been together for so many years, please believe me. I will definitely find the evidence to prove my innocence."

If it had been any other matter, perhaps he would have entertained it. But Julian had been personally involved in the patents issue. Back when Willow left, he had gotten into a massive fight with her over it, so his memory of the situation was crystal clear.

Hearing Vivienne lie through her teeth without batting an eye only filled Julian with a chilling indifference. He tore through her facade without hesitation. "It was my oversight to assume those subsequent developments were your own work. Now that the damage is done, whether I believe you or not is irrelevant. Your only priority should be figuring out how to minimize the fallout for Sinclair Group."

Those words cut deeper than a direct accusation, filling Vivienne with absolute despair. He had completely shut her out, showing zero emotion and absolutely no concern.

In a panic, Vivienne refused to give up, continuing to plead and demand that he believe her. But before she could finish her sentence, Julian hung up the phone.

Sitting in the back of his car, Julian pinched the bridge of his nose in sheer frustration. Dealing with Vivienne was only part of the problem; he also had to field a relentless stream of calls from the Sinclair family.

There were no secrets in their world. The scandal from the summit had already spread like wildfire, and as a result, Sinclair Group's stock prices were plummeting.

The first call came from Susannah Sinclair. She didn't care about the context or the truth of what actually happened; her first words were a harsh reprimand. "What on earth is going on with you two? How could you let something like this happen? Do you have any idea how much damage this is doing to the company?"

Julian held the phone away from his ear, unwilling to listen to the tirade. Only when she finished did he bring it back. "The damage is already done. Lecturing me now achieves nothing."

Susannah was furious. "I really don't know what to say to you. It's one thing to pamper Vivienne in your free time, but how could you hand over something as critical as patents to her? Don't you know exactly what she is and isn't capable of?"

A cold scoff escaped Julian's lips. "Before things blew up, someone was praising her to the heavens. Now that there's a crisis, you immediately start passing the blame. Is that how a mother should act?"

He wasn't actually defending Vivienne; he simply couldn't tolerate Susannah anymore. From his childhood until now, her parenting had always been about prioritizing profit above all else, devoid of any real principles. In her eyes, everything and everyone was just a tool to be used. Julian's current ruthless nature was undeniably shaped by her influence.

Susannah had rarely seen him push back like this and was momentarily speechless. But to her, nothing mattered more than financial interests. Even in this disastrous situation, she demanded that Julian do whatever it took—even lie or fabricate a story—to stabilize the stock market immediately.

After that, the senior members of the Sinclair board called one by one, demanding to know what the hell was going on. Eventually, thoroughly exhausted and irritated, Julian simply powered off his phone.

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After leaving the summit, Willow and Silas didn't speak of the incident again. From Willow's perspective, the matter was closed, and she didn't want to dwell on it. For Silas, of course, it was far from over, but she didn't need to worry about the fallout; he would handle everything perfectly behind the scenes.

Assuming they were flying straight back to New York City, Willow asked him what time they were scheduled to depart.

But Silas replied that they weren't leaving today.

Willow quickly connected the dots. He was from Seattle, so he naturally planned to visit his family and stay a few extra days. "I'll go ahead and book my own flight back then," she offered.

Aside from wanting to see Leo Yardley and the team one last time before leaving, she had no other plans in the city.

"No need. You're staying for now too," Silas countered, shutting the idea down.

Now, Willow was genuinely confused. "Why? Do you have other work arrangements?"

He certainly had arrangements. Silas wanted to spend a few days exploring Seattle with her, but he wasn't quite sure how to casually suggest it. After a moment of thought, he tried a more subtle approach. "What do you think of Seattle?"

"It's great. Strong economy, wonderful weather, and plenty of career opportunities. It's a fantastic city," Willow replied honestly, unsure where he was going with this.

"Then how about staying a few more days to look around?" Silas seized the opening.

"I'd better not," Willow declined. "When I first moved to Seattle, I practically explored every corner of it. Besides, I have a mountain of work waiting for me. I can't really relax and play tourist with all that hanging over my head."

"Fair enough." Silas respected her boundaries and wasn't going to force the issue. "We'll skip it this time. There will be plenty of opportunities in the future."

There would indeed be many chances to visit Seattle, and even more chances for them to come together. So, Silas let the matter drop without a second thought.

However, there was one more thing he needed to ask. "My parents invited you over for dinner at our place tonight. Would you be open to that?"

For a second, Willow thought she had misheard him. She murmured, repeating his words, "Your parents... invited me?"

His parents were the elders of the prestigious Thorne family, prominent figures she had only ever seen in the news. What right did she have to dine with them?

"Yes," Silas replied, trying to read her shocked expression. "What's wrong? Are you uncomfortable with it? If you are, I can easily decline on your behalf."

Willow was startled by his assumption and quickly corrected him. "No, I'm not unwilling. I'm just a little in shock that your parents would want to have dinner with me. But... why?"

Silas certainly couldn't tell her the real reason. She was easily spooked as it was; if he revealed his family's true intentions, she might run for the hills.

After a brief pause, he formulated a plausible excuse. "They probably just want to meet my colleagues and get a feel for my work circle. Just like when I went to visit your mother. It's just a casual dinner between coworkers, nothing more."

Silas essentially recycled the excuse Jocelyn had given him earlier, and saying it out loud, it actually sounded somewhat logical.

Hearing his explanation, Willow felt it made sense. After all, he had visited her mother at the hospital several times. As a matter of basic courtesy, it was only right that she accepted an invitation from his family.

The only issue was that she had never interacted with such a powerful, elite family before. Julian's parents were the closest she had come, and they were sharp-tongued and highly critical, treating her horribly from their very first meeting. The experience had left her with a lingering trauma regarding wealthy in-laws.

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She was terrified that if Silas's parents were similarly difficult to please, the evening would be an absolute disaster.

Deciding to be upfront, she confessed, "I rarely interact with prominent families like yours. To be honest, I'm actually a bit intimidated. Especially when it comes to elders, I'm really worried I might do something wrong and offend them."

Silas didn't like how she created a divide between them, using words like 'yours' and 'mine'. To him, they were cut from the same cloth. However, he understood her fears—likely stemming from some unpleasant past experiences. But as long as he was by her side, he would never let anyone disrespect her.

"Don't worry. My family isn't full of complicated drama. You'll understand once you meet them. They might be a little different from what you expect, so I just hope you won't mind them too much."

Thinking about how his father utterly spoiled his mother into being wonderfully carefree, Silas actually worried that Willow might find them too informal.

"I won't," Willow said decisively. "Anyone who raised someone as good as you couldn't possibly be difficult."

"Do you really think so?" Silas teased lightly. "Then I hope you won't be too surprised later."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"So, is that a yes?"

"I don't think I really have a choice, do I? We are on your turf, after all."

It was rare for her to joke, and Silas let out a soft laugh.

With the decision made, they agreed to return to the hotel to change before heading to his family's estate.

On the drive over, Willow remembered a crucial detail. It was her first time visiting his home, and showing up empty-handed was out of the question. But for a family of their stature, she had no idea what kind of gift would be appropriate.

When she brought this up, Silas was quick to reassure her. "No problem. Leave that to me. I've got it handled."

After leaving the hotel, Willow assumed he would take her shopping, but to her surprise, the driver headed straight for the Mercer Island Estate.

Silas explained, "I've already prepared the gifts. You can just hand them over when we get inside."

Knowing he arranged it, Willow felt completely at ease. "Then let me transfer the money to you."

As she pulled out her phone to send the funds, the car took a sudden, sharp turn, tilting slightly. Willow lost her balance and fell directly into his chest.

Silas caught her securely, wrapping his arms around her. "We can settle that later."

Flustered, Willow quickly pulled away from his embrace, gracefully letting the topic slide.

She was about to ask him something else when she noticed a rapid succession of messages popping up on his phone screen. The contact name was 'Jocelyn Thorne', the same name she had seen before. Instantly, she sat up straighter and subtly shifted closer to the window.

"I need to reply to a message," Silas offered voluntarily.

"Go ahead, don't mind me," Willow replied politely.

Silas thought her tone sounded a bit strange, different from her mood just moments ago, but focused on replying to Jocelyn and didn't dwell on it.

Earlier, he had texted Jocelyn to let her know he and Willow were coming for dinner. Since then, his phone hadn't stopped buzzing.

She asked how far away they were, then demanded to know what Willow liked to eat so the kitchen could prepare. Finally, Silas felt a wave of exasperation and typed back: "She's easily startled. Just act normal so you don't scare her off."

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The Thorne family residence was located in the ultra-exclusive Mercer Island Estate, nestled against a lush mountain and facing the vibrant blue waters of the bay and a private yacht club. With the mountain at its back and the sea at its front, it was a prime piece of real estate surrounded by sandy beaches, clear skies, and pristine greenery.

During her years working in Seattle, Willow had mostly experienced the life of an everyday professional. This was her first time stepping into such an elite echelon, and she truly felt the overwhelming wealth of the Thorne family.

As they approached the entrance, the massive wrought-iron gates slowly swung open, flanked by estate managers in pristine white suits who respectfully greeted Silas.

The driveway leading from the gates to the main residence was quite a distance. Along the way, perfectly manicured low hedges lined the path, and warm yellow ground lights illuminated the stone-paved road all the way to the front doors.

Before the car even pulled up, Willow could see four elder figures standing by the entrance. Silas gave her a quick rundown. "Those are my parents and my grandparents."

Willow had been worried that his family might be stern and imposing, but seeing this completely erased her doubts. If they were coming all the way outside to greet her, they couldn't possibly be that intimidating.

Among the four, the younger woman was undoubtedly his mother. She wore a pale apricot silk dress, its simple cut perfectly accentuating her elegant and gentle demeanor. Her complexion was luminous, her features delicate and completely devoid of any sharp edges. When she smiled, she radiated the soft warmth of flawless jade.

The woman holding her arm had to be Silas's grandmother. Nearing seventy, her hair was neatly smoothed back into a loose bun, held only by a simple, elegant jade hairpin. Yet, her eyes held the same sincere and welcoming warmth as his mother's, instantly putting anyone at ease.

The two gentlemen standing nearby appeared slightly more serious, but both possessed tall, upright postures and a striking presence. In a flash, Willow understood where Silas got his extraordinary aura when she first met him—it was clearly a powerful family trait.

For their very first meeting, the entire family had come out to welcome her. Willow couldn't tell if she was more nervous or deeply touched.

Sensing her emotional shift, Silas placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Don't be nervous. Just follow my lead when you say hello."

Willow nodded. Having him by her side genuinely anchored her.

The car soon glided to a stop at the entrance. The moment the driver opened her door, Jocelyn stepped forward, grasping Willow's hands with immense warmth. "Willow, you're finally here! You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

Fearing his mother might overdo it, Silas immediately intervened. "Mom."

Jocelyn reined herself in slightly, dialing back the overwhelming excitement, but she didn't let go of Willow's hands. "How was the trip? Are you exhausted?"

In all her life, Willow had never experienced such immediate intimacy from a female elder. At home, she was used to being the strong one, and during her time with the Sinclair family, she had never felt a shred of genuine affection.

She thought she would feel awkward, but having her hands held like this felt incredibly natural. A warm sensation flooded her chest, soothing and tender. "Thank you for asking, Mrs. Thorne. The trip wasn't tiring at all."

Up close, Willow found her even more stunning, especially her eyes. Like Silas, she had long lashes and deep-set, expressive eyes. Despite her age, her face showed remarkably few traces of time, giving her the vibrant energy of a much younger woman.

"That's wonderful. I was so worried the travel would wear you out."

For the next few minutes, Silas barely got a word in. Jocelyn guided Willow to greet each family member one by one. Everyone looked at her with beaming smiles, repeatedly saying, "Wonderful," and, "So lovely." Even the slightly more imposing Alistair and Arthur Thorne looked at Willow with expressions full of grandfatherly and fatherly affection.

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Any lingering nerves Willow had vanished into thin air.

Silas checked in quietly. "How are you holding up? Adjusting okay? If you feel uncomfortable at all, just let me know."

Willow shook her head. "Your family's dynamic is definitely different from what I imagined."

"Yeah, they're good people. Just treat this place like your own home."

Once inside, Jocelyn guided Willow to sit on the plush sofa and immediately had the staff bring out an array of fresh fruits. Willow didn't have to lift a finger; her only job was to be pampered and fed.

Silas even handled the presentation of the gifts flawlessly. Once everyone was seated, he signaled the staff to bring them over, specifically telling Jocelyn and the others that they were from Willow.

Willow knew he had prepared something, but she had no idea it would be this extensive.

There were eight elegantly packaged boxes in total. From the exquisite wrapping, one could tell they contained premium items—sea cucumber, bird's nest, and cashmere for the women, alongside rare teas, aged liquor, and purple clay teapots for the men. It was a comprehensive, meticulously thought-out selection.

She was taken aback by Silas's incredible attention to detail, having considered every single angle. Her appreciation for him deepened significantly. Not only was he wealthy and handsome, but he possessed an incredibly thoughtful heart. Whoever ended up with him would be undeniably lucky.

Willow wasn't the only one impressed. When Jocelyn saw the gifts, her first reaction was sheer surprise. "Willow, sweetheart, why did you go to all this trouble?"

Her second reaction was pure delight. "How did you know I love this cashmere scarf? I was just about to buy one! And this purple clay teapot—it's Grandpa Thorne's absolute favorite."

Feeling slightly guilty, Willow was about to confess that Silas had arranged everything.

But Silas smoothly cut in before she could speak. "Willow did a lot of research beforehand."

Beatrice Thorne smiled warmly at her. "We're just happy you're here. There was no need for gifts, but you are such a thoughtful girl."

Since Silas wouldn't let her correct them, Willow had no choice but to awkwardly accept the praise. "It was the least I could do."

Jocelyn beamed. "Willow, really, treat this place as your own home. Whatever you want to eat or drink, just tell us. Don't be shy about anything."

From that point on, Jocelyn's entire focus was locked on Willow. One minute she was praising her lovely personality, the next she was complimenting her stunning features. It was blatantly obvious how much she adored her.

Standing nearby, Silas grew anxious, terrified his mother might ask a question that would make Willow uncomfortable. He shot his father a subtle look, silently urging him to rein his wife in.

Alistair Thorne simply gave him a placid look and replied, "As long as your mother is happy."

Silas was momentarily speechless. He really was overthinking things; his father would never try to control his mother's joy. It was a futile effort anyway—in their household, Alistair was famously known for doting on his wife to the extreme.

Taking advantage of Jocelyn getting up to fetch water, Silas leaned in and whispered to Willow, "If you don't like being interrogated so much, you can just tell her no."

But Willow genuinely didn't mind. "I can tell your mom actually likes me, and talking to her is a lot of fun."

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Hearing her say that set Silas's mind somewhat at ease, and he stopped trying to intervene. Soon, Beatrice joined the conversation, clearly hitting it off with Willow just as well, and they chatted happily.

Silas remained standing close by, prompting Jocelyn to shoo him away. "Why are you hovering over us while we talk to Willow? You rarely come home. Go spend some time with your dad and grandpa."

Silas glanced at the two men sitting on the far sofa, sipping tea and reading the newspaper, and flatly refused. "No need. They don't require my company."

"Then go find something else to do," Jocelyn insisted, clearly wanting him out of the way so they could gossip in peace.

"I don't have anything else to do."

Seeing his stubbornness, Jocelyn cut straight to the chase. "What, are you worried about leaving her alone with your own mother and grandmother? We're not going to eat her. Run along."

Silas didn't react, but Willow felt a sudden wave of awkwardness. She murmured softly to him, "Maybe you should go take care of your own things."

Silas didn't budge. He looked at her closely. "Are you sure you'll be okay by yourself?"

"I think so?" Willow looked at him, puzzled. "Isn't this your house? Didn't you bring me here? What exactly are you worried about?"

Silas was in a bind. He couldn't exactly tell Willow he was terrified Jocelyn would drop a bombshell question that Willow would be too polite to dodge. All he could do was instruct her, "If they ask anything you don't want to answer, just politely decline."

With that final warning, he reluctantly walked away.

Watching his retreating back, Jocelyn leaned in and grumbled affectionately to Willow. "Look at him, guarding you so fiercely. Just like his father."

Willow didn't quite catch the underlying implication and gave her a slightly confused look.

Jocelyn quickly stopped herself. Silas had warned her repeatedly not to push too hard, meaning the timing wasn't right yet. Although she had been spoiled into having a wonderfully straightforward personality over the years, she still knew how to navigate important matters.

She smoothly pivoted the topic. "So, Willow, what do you think of my Cy?"

"Cy?" This was the first time Willow had heard the name, and she looked thoroughly surprised. "Are you talking about Mr. Thorne?"

"Exactly, that's him," Jocelyn confirmed. "When we're at home, drop the 'Mr. Thorne' business. Just relax and call him Silas. Or, since I know he's a bit older than you, you could call him Silas if you're comfortable."

Willow wasn't entirely comfortable with either option; it just felt too intimate. More importantly, she was completely blindsided by the fact that the ruthlessly cold CEO had such an incredibly endearing childhood nickname like 'Cy'.

She avoided using the options provided but also dropped the formal title, opting for a safe middle ground. "I think he is a very good person."

"Really? You don't find him too cold? His face is usually like a block of ice, he barely ever smiles," Jocelyn probed.

Recalling her very first encounter with Silas, Willow had to admit the description was remarkably accurate. A small smile tugged at her lips. "I suppose he can be a little bit."

"A little bit? He practically scowls permanently," Jocelyn complained playfully. "Ever since he was a little boy, he's been just like his father—an old soul, unsmiling, and a man of very few words."

After chatting for a while, Willow had a good read on Jocelyn's personality—genuine, straightforward, and clearly someone who had been fiercely protected and loved by her family. Willow enjoyed being around people like that, and without realizing it, she relaxed significantly. "Then how did he end up with such a cute nickname like Cy?"

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At the mention of the nickname, Jocelyn instantly lit up with endless stories. "Let me tell you, I forced the name Cy on him. At first, he absolutely refused to accept it. He thought it was way too cute and completely clashed with his serious personality."

Jocelyn fell into a fond reminiscence. "Whenever I called him by his nickname, he would keep his little face totally stoic, pretending he didn't hear me. It wasn't until I called him a few times in a row that he would slowly turn his head. He'd look so conflicted and put upon, like a little leopard cub being scuffed by the back of its neck—trying to look tough but utterly helpless."

Hearing this, an image of a handsome, deeply conflicted little boy instantly popped into Willow's mind. She figured even when he was pouting, he was probably the most adorable kid around. Without realizing it, a soft laugh escaped her.

"Pretty cute, right? He had so many moments like that. I'll have to tell you all about them eventually," Jocelyn promised.

"I'd love that." The thought of learning more about Silas's past brought a genuine smile to Willow's face.

They continued chatting warmly for a while longer until a staff member approached to announce that dinner was served.

The dining room was situated in the east wing, an expansive space with soaring ceilings. The massive dining table was crafted from dark, solid wood, its rich tone gleaming with a warm, polished patina cultivated over decades of care. Above them hung a vintage chandelier with frosted glass shades, casting a warm, inviting glow that illuminated the room perfectly without being harsh. The aesthetic flawlessly matched the understated elegance of the rest of the estate.

The spread on the table was incredibly diverse, every dish a masterpiece.

There were local coastal favorites like double-boiled chicken soup with fish maw and steamed coral trout, alongside classic New York City dishes like braised shark fin and savory meatballs.

Beatrice was the first to speak. "Willow, we weren't entirely sure of your preferences, so we prepared a bit of both. Please, have whatever you like and don't stand on ceremony."

Willow was deeply flattered. This was the first time she had ever visited someone's home and been treated with such extraordinary hospitality, to the point of accommodating entirely different regional palates.

She quickly expressed her gratitude. "Thank you, Grandpa, Grandma, Mr. and Mrs. Thorne. Thank you so much for going to all this trouble. Everything looks absolutely wonderful."

"If you like it, please eat as much as you can."

"You're so slender, you don't need to worry about your figure."

"Cy, put some food on Willow's plate."

The dinner was filled with joyous laughter and warm conversation, the atmosphere harmoniously perfect.

In the past, meals at the Sinclair household were always fraught with arguments or sharp, sarcastic remarks. Even if the hostility wasn't directed at her, there was always tension among the other family members. That environment had led Willow to falsely believe that all elite, wealthy families functioned in a state of constant warfare.

But tonight, surrounded by Silas's family, she realized she had been completely wrong. Families at the top could also have a gentle mother, a calm father, and doting grandparents.

As the meal progressed, she felt a profound sense of awe. Leaning slightly toward Silas, she whispered, "Your family dynamic is truly wonderful."

Silas was in the middle of ladling soup for her. Instead of handing it over immediately, he waited for it to cool down to a safe temperature before placing the bowl gently in front of her. "If you like it, you can come over often."

Willow offered a soft smile but didn't say anything, secretly thinking to herself that there probably wouldn't be many opportunities in the future. This visit was only due to a business trip. She had no idea how often she'd return to Seattle, and even if she did, what possible reason would she have to visit his family again?

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Beyond the warm atmosphere, Willow noticed something else: every man in the Thorne family was extraordinarily attentive to his wife.

Arthur Thorne, despite his advanced age, spent the entire meal carefully serving food and soup to Beatrice. Alistair was the same; throughout the dinner, Willow watched him meticulously cater to Jocelyn's every need.

He removed the bones from her fish, peeled her shrimp, and even carefully picked out the peppercorns and garlic from the vegetables before placing them on her plate. Had she not witnessed it with her own eyes, she would never have believed that a man who commanded absolute authority in the brutal corporate world could be so profoundly tender and meticulous in his personal life.

While she was still marveling at this, Silas placed a piece of fish on her plate. Just like his father, he had flawlessly removed every tiny bone. "Eat carefully," he instructed softly. "I tried to get them all, but there might still be a stray bone."

Willow nodded her thanks, realizing that this level of devotion and character was clearly a deeply ingrained family trait. She was merely his subordinate right now, and he was already treating her with such care. She couldn't even imagine how incredibly he would treat his future wife.

Halfway through the meal, Jocelyn accidentally swallowed a piece of chili and coughed twice. Alistair immediately poured her a glass of water and gently patted her back.

Beatrice watched with concern. "What's wrong, Jo-Jo? Are you alright?"

While ensuring Jocelyn drank the water, Alistair smoothly took the blame. "She's fine. It's my fault for not picking the chilies out properly, she just accidentally bit into one. I'll be more careful next time."

By now, Willow was completely desensitized to their extreme displays of affection; nothing could surprise her anymore. However, she was suddenly hyper-aware of the name Beatrice had just used.

'Jo-Jo.'

A nickname that sounded suspiciously familiar. She had seen the name 'Jocelyn' light up Silas's phone screen countless times.

Curiosity getting the better of her, she turned to Silas and asked directly, "What is your mother's full name?"

"Jocelyn."

Jocelyn?

That was too much of a coincidence. Willow could hardly believe it. Her voice trembled slightly as she added the last name. "Jocelyn... Thorne?"

Silas had absolutely no idea the mental gymnastics she was doing and was genuinely impressed she guessed it correctly. "Exactly. Very clever."

Willow felt a massive wave of embarrassment wash over her. It really was Jocelyn Thorne. It wasn't cleverness at all; it was simply because she had seen the name and secretly analyzed it in her head so many times that the moment she heard it, all the pieces clicked together.

Thinking back to how she had mistakenly assumed 'Jocelyn' was the woman Silas was secretly in love with, Willow cringed internally. What a colossal, embarrassing misunderstanding...

Unable to look Silas in the eye, she ducked her head and focused entirely on her food.

Noticing her sudden silence, Silas found it strange. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing. I just think your mother has a beautiful name."

Silas cast a deeply meaningful glance at her. "Yours is beautiful, too."

After dinner, everyone moved to the living room to chat. Before long, Jocelyn and Beatrice brought out the gifts they had prepared for her.

Jocelyn presented several sets of haute couture from Hermès—all the latest season—insisting that Willow could easily wear them to work. Beatrice, meanwhile, gifted her an entire matching set of flawless, imperial green jade jewelry, complete with a bangle, necklace, and earrings.

The gifts complemented each other perfectly; one catered to her professional lifestyle, while the other was a timeless treasure, proving both women had put serious thought into them.

The problem was, Willow didn't dare accept them. She shot a desperate, pleading look at Silas.

Receiving her distress signal, Silas immediately stepped in. "Keep the gifts for now. Willow has to fly back to New York City, and it's not convenient to travel with all of this."

Jocelyn was quick to counter, "If it's too much of a hassle to carry, then you can hold onto them for her. You can give them to Willow later, it's the same thing."

Beatrice chimed in, "Exactly. Willow brought us such wonderful gifts when she came to visit. It simply wouldn't be right if we didn't give her something in return."

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Willow wanted to mention that Silas had prepared those gifts as well, and that she hadn't actually done anything. But recalling his earlier instructions, she swallowed the words.

After some back-and-forth, they finally agreed that Silas would hold onto the presents for now.

Willow breathed a quiet sigh of relief. With the items in his possession, it was as good as leaving them with his parents.

In the car ride back to the hotel, Silas turned to her. "My family can be a bit overwhelming. Please don't mind them if they made you uncomfortable in any way."

Willow thought he was overstating it. "You have a wonderfully normal family dynamic. I didn't feel uncomfortable at all. Honestly, I envy your relationship with them."

Silas didn't say anything, but his unwavering gaze told her he was listening intently.

Falling into a natural rhythm, Willow continued. "You've seen my mother. She's sick right now. As for my father..." She paused for a moment. "He's not worth mentioning."

An irresponsible alcoholic who never cared for his wife or child didn't warrant much discussion.

"Actually, they aren't my biological parents. To this day, I have no idea who my real parents are."

Silas had been listening quietly. At her confession, he reached out, gently smoothing her hair before his knuckles brushed lightly against her cheek. His voice was incredibly soft. "Do you want to find them? If you do, I can help."

"No." Willow shook her head. She had never met them and didn't know why they had abandoned her, but the abandonment was a fact. She had grown up under that lingering shadow.

She had faced everything alone, so she no longer harbored any deep obsession with the past. "I'll leave it up to fate."

"Okay," Silas agreed smoothly. "Your feelings come first. It's your life, and you have every right to choose how to handle it."

Wanting to lift her spirits, he shifted the topic. "What were you talking about with them when I stepped away earlier?"

Thinking of Jocelyn mentioning his childhood nickname, Willow's features softened into a genuine smile. "Do you really want to know?"

Seeing her smile made Silas relax. "What, is it a secret?"

"I can tell you, but you have to promise not to get mad." After all, Jocelyn had warned her that he absolutely despised the name 'Cy'.

"Go ahead." Silas kept his eyes on her. Bathed in the soft moonlight, his gaze was overflowing with undeniable affection. "I could never be mad at anything you say."

"Cy?" Willow tested the waters.

Instantly, Silas's expression shifted.

It wasn't anger, but a visible blend of helplessness and awkwardness.

Willow found it fascinating. She had never seen that particular look on him before. "Are you mad?"

Silas shook his head. "I told you I wouldn't get mad at you, and I meant it. I just haven't heard that name from anyone else in a very long time. And... I'm really not a fan of it."

"But Cy is such a cute name. Why don't you like it?"

"Do I look like the word 'cute' applies to me?"

Willow glanced at his sharp profile. "Maybe not now. But with your features, you must have been an adorable kid."

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"You think I'm good-looking?"

Willow nodded without hesitation. "Of course. I'm pretty sure I've mentioned that before."

She had indeed said it before, but Silas just wanted the satisfaction of hearing the words leave her lips again.

"What about you? Did you have a nickname?" Silas asked.

Willow thought for a moment. "Strictly speaking, no. But my closest friends usually just call me Willow."

Silas nodded, eager to hear more. "What were you like as a kid? Just as beautiful as you are now?"

Willow shook her head. "I wasn't pretty at all."

"I don't believe that." Silas's gaze drifted from her eyes down to her lips. He found it impossible to imagine that someone with such stunning features could have ever been anything less than gorgeous.

"We were poor when I was growing up. I rarely spoke at school, so no one ever called me pretty." Willow slipped into her memories. If she had to pinpoint when she first realized she was attractive, it was probably in middle school.

Once she hit her teens, the boys started paying attention. Crowds of them would linger outside her classroom just to catch a glimpse of her. But that same attention made her the target of relentless bullying from the other girls for three solid years.

That isolation was exactly why she had been so naive and trusting when she first met Julian Sinclair, diving headfirst into that relationship without a second thought.

"They were just blind," Silas said, his brow furrowing. He looked at her with intense sincerity. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Willow laughed. "Then you definitely didn't see me back in Seattle when I was a heavyweight."

"I did see you," Silas insisted stubbornly. "And I didn't see any difference between then and now. You looked just as stunning."

Willow had been treating the conversation as a lighthearted joke; she had long since stopped caring about her past weight. But seeing the absolute gravity in Silas's eyes, she realized he wasn't joking at all.

And beneath that seriousness, there was something else burning in his gaze.

Right on cue, the car pulled up to the hotel. Willow snapped back to reality, planning to head straight to her room.

But Silas had another idea. "Take a walk with me. We're really close to the Elliott Bay Waterfront. It's the perfect time to catch the night view."

Back in her room, Willow could see the waterfront right from her window, but she had never actually gone down to stroll along the promenade at night.

So, instead of heading inside, they made their way toward the waterfront to walk.

The night air over Elliott Bay was gentle and dazzling.

Ferries glided across the water, their lights painting long, shimmering streaks on the surface. The distant glow of the city skyline stood in quiet contrast to the bustling promenade. A cool, salty breeze brushed against their faces, washing away the noise of the day and leaving only a vibrant, sweeping tranquility.

The walkway was crowded with people. Silas instinctively kept Willow on the inside of the path, using his own body as a shield to ensure no one bumped into her.

After walking for a bit, a sudden gust of wind swept off the bay. The temperature dropped, carrying a brisk chill. Before Willow could even mention it, Silas shrugged off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"You don't have to do that. I'm not cold," Willow said, trying to hand it back.

Silas refused to take it. "Wear it anyway. The wind is sharp this time of year. If we aren't careful, you'll wake up with a cold tomorrow."

"But if you give me your jacket, what about you?"

"Between the two of us, who do you think is more likely to catch a cold?"

"Fair enough." Willow decided not to argue. When it came to physical fitness, Silas clearly had the upper hand.

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Wrapped in his jacket, Willow walked quietly beside him.

They hadn't gone far when Timmy, a young boy selling flowers, bounded up to them. "Sir, buy a bouquet for your girlfriend."

Willow offered the boy a gentle smile and explained that they weren't dating, so they wouldn't be buying any flowers tonight.

Timmy was incredibly polite. Hearing her explanation, he simply apologized and turned to walk away with his basket.

Watching his small figure retreat, Willow felt a sudden pang of regret. Had she been too serious? He was just a kid trying to make a few dollars. Buying a bouquet wouldn't have been a big deal. Why did she feel the need to over-explain?

Sensing her internal conflict, Silas asked her to wait for a second. He waved Timmy back over. Instead of taking a bouquet, he pulled a thick stack of cash from his wallet and handed it to the boy. "I'll take all the flowers. Go on home."

Timmy looked overwhelmed by the generous amount, but he stood his ground. "Sir, I really appreciate you buying them, but if you've paid for the flowers, I can't just take them with me."

Amused by his earnest principles, Silas asked, "What do you suggest, then?"

Timmy's eyes lit up. "How about this? I'll pass these out for free to all the couples here, as a way of spreading good luck for you. That way, I keep my promise, and you don't lose out."

Silas was impressed by the kid's quick thinking and honesty. "Deal. Do it your way."

"You got it! I'm on it." Timmy flashed a bright, gap-toothed smile. Before dashing off, he looked up at Silas and added, "By the way, I can tell you're completely crazy about that beautiful lady. I hope you win her over soon. But just a heads-up, sometimes fate requires a little initiative. Good luck."

It had been a long time since Silas had heard something so refreshing. He chuckled. "How did you figure that out?"

Timmy puffed out his chest. "I might be a kid, but I sell flowers here every night. I see a lot of people. Some things you can just tell at a glance. But I also wanted to tell you, sometimes, fate needs a push."

With a final wave, he added, "Good luck!" and darted into the crowd.

Even after he was gone, Timmy's words echoed in Silas's mind. Fate requires a little initiative. He let out a low laugh. To think a child understood a truth that had taken him this long to fully grasp.

Willow had been standing a short distance away, watching the exchange. When Silas walked back, she asked, "What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing much. I saw you felt bad, so I bought out his inventory so he could go home early," Silas explained easily.

Willow's eyes widened in pleasant surprise. "Really?" She hadn't said a word, yet he had effortlessly read her mind. It was almost magical.

"Yeah. But the kid is stubborn. He refused to take advantage of me and insisted on handing them out to the couples here in my name."

Willow laughed. "He's a smart one."

Silas locked eyes with her. "He is. He also gave me a piece of advice."

"Oh? What was it?"

"That sometimes, fate requires a little initiative."

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Willow didn't read too much into it. Assuming he was talking about the woman he supposedly had a crush on, she simply nodded. "That makes sense."

They continued their stroll until they spotted two little girls playing with sparklers. The sight jogged Willow's memory. "I heard the fireworks over the bay are absolutely stunning. It's a shame we won't get to see them tonight."

"You want to see them?" Silas asked.

"Yeah." Willow kept her tone conversational, not thinking anything of the question. "I've been here a few times, but it's always either the wrong time of day or just bad timing. It's a bit of a letdown to always miss them."

Silas studied her face for a moment. "Wait here for a second. I need to make a call."

"Sure."

He stepped away and returned a few minutes later. Seeing that it was getting late, Willow asked, "Should we head back?"

Silas checked his watch. "Give it five more minutes."

He guided her toward the edge of the promenade, leaning against the railing.

Assuming he just wanted to enjoy the ocean breeze a little longer, Willow didn't press him and stood quietly by his side.

Roughly five minutes passed, she wasn't exactly counting, when a deafening boom shattered the night. A massive shower of golden sparks erupted over the water, casting a brilliant, shimmering glow across the dark waves. The vibrant fireworks danced against the backdrop of Downtown Seattle, painting the night sky in a breathtaking display of flowing colors.

Willow was utterly mesmerized.

She wasn't the only one. The surrounding crowd froze in sheer disbelief. At first, no one processed what was happening. Fireworks were strictly prohibited here, reserved exclusively for massive, city-sanctioned events. Since it wasn't a holiday and there had been no official announcements, a display like this was unheard of.

But as the explosions continued, layering the sky with silver and gold, the reality sank in. The promenade erupted into cheers and excited screams. People scrambled to pull out their phones to record the spectacle.

It was an incredibly rare event, leaving everyone to assume some insanely wealthy billionaire was pulling strings just to make his wife smile.

As the undeniable star of this grand gesture, Willow slowly gathered her senses. There were very few people in Seattle with the power and capital to orchestrate something of this magnitude on a whim.

Especially since the fireworks had ignited mere minutes after she casually mentioned wanting to see them.

She turned her head to look at Silas. "You arranged this."

It wasn't a question.

Silas didn't try to hide it. "I did. Do you like it?"

Hearing him admit it sent a massive shockwave of pure joy through her system. Her voice actually trembled. "How did you even manage this?"

"There's no rush, I'll tell you the details later," Silas murmured, stepping up close behind her. His posture naturally boxed her in, creating an intimate, protective shield against the crowd. "Just watch the show."

They were standing so close that his warm breath brushed against the sensitive skin behind her ear when he spoke. Her ears instantly burned crimson.

Too flustered to meet his eyes, she quickly turned her attention back to the sky. "Okay."

The display grew even more magnificent. Violet, azure, silver, and crimson bursts layered over each other in a thunderous symphony of light. The radiant glow washed over the rooftops, the water, and the faces of the crowd, leaving nothing but an overwhelming, awe-inspiring beauty.

Pulling off something this spectacular on such short notice was nothing short of incredible. Overwhelmed with gratitude, Willow turned around to thank him.

But before a single word could leave her lips, a warm, firm pressure pressed softly against her forehead.

By the time her brain registered what had just happened, her thoughts shattered into complete chaos.

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Unless she was losing her mind, Silas Thorne had just kissed her.

Silas kissed her?

Silas kissed her.

What kind of monumental misunderstanding was this.

"You... I..." Willow stammered, entirely losing her grip on the English language.

Seeing her deer-in-the-headlights expression, Silas realized he had genuinely spooked her. He also recognized that his move had been incredibly impulsive. But he didn't regret it. Just like Timmy had said, sometimes you had to take the initiative.

He gently gripped her shoulders, bracing himself, and looked down at her with a steady gaze. "Willow, listen to me."

Still reeling from the shock, hearing him use her first name with such sudden intimacy completely short-circuited her defenses. "Please don't call me that right now," she blurted out.

She desperately needed a second to process. What just happened? Weren't they just watching fireworks? Why did he kiss her?

Her head was spinning. One of them was currently navigating a messy divorce, and the other already had someone he was deeply in love with. Morally and emotionally, that kiss should never have happened.

She convinced herself it was just the environment. The dazzling lights, the romantic atmosphere, the overwhelming sensory overload, it had temporarily hijacked their brains. It was an illusion.

Once they left the promenade and escaped this hyper-romantic bubble, everything would go back to normal.

Besides, he already had a woman he was crazy about.

The more Willow analyzed it, the more chaotic her thoughts became. She knew that as long as she stayed standing next to him under these flashing lights, she would never be able to calm down. So, she took the quickest way out. "I'm starting to feel a bit cold. We should head back."

Silas knew she was retreating, and while he hated to push her, he wasn't ready to let the moment die. "Can we stay just a little longer? The finale hasn't even started."

"Let's go back," Willow insisted firmly. "It's late. Someone might be worrying about you."

She was deliberately referring to the mystery woman he supposedly loved, trying to jog his memory so he wouldn't do anything he'd regret later.

But to Silas, her words hit completely differently. He thought she was reminding him that she was still a married woman with a legal husband waiting in the wings.

In a fraction of a second, the liquid courage in his veins turned to ice. Yes, fate required initiative, but only if the other person was actually willing to receive it.

Swallowing the bitter taste of defeat, he didn't argue. He simply followed her as they turned back toward the hotel.

Because the fireworks were still painting the sky, the streets were packed. Silas remained hyper-vigilant, carefully shielding her from the crushing throngs of pedestrians the entire walk back.

The journey was suffocatingly quiet. Every time Silas tried to delicately steer the conversation back to what had just happened, Willow expertly deflected. She even shoved his jacket back into his arms, drawing a hard, invisible line in the sand.

He desperately wanted to explain himself, but she refused to leave him an opening. The second they reached her hotel room, she tossed out a hurried "Goodnight" and shut the door.

Silas stood frozen in the quiet hallway. The overhead lights stretched his solitary shadow across the carpet, amplifying the stinging sense of rejection.

Not a single sound leaked from behind the heavy door.

He raised his hand, knuckles hovering inches from the wood, before slowly letting it drop back to his side. Forget it. Pushing her into a corner right now would only make things worse.

The outcome hadn't been ideal, but at the very least, he had finally taken the first step.

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Inside the room, Willow leaned heavily against the locked door. She didn't move a muscle until the faint sound of Silas's footsteps finally faded down the hall. Only then did the adrenaline crash, her knees giving out as she slid down the door to the floor.

That kiss hadn't just landed on her forehead; it had seared itself straight into her chest, leaving her entirely unsure of how to react.

On the walk back, she had felt him trying to breach the subject, but she absolutely refused to hear it. She was terrified of what he might say and had no idea how she was supposed to handle it.

If he confessed that it was a genuine slip of romantic feelings, she wouldn't believe it.

But if he chalked it up to a momentary lapse in judgment fueled by the adrenaline of the fireworks, it would shatter her in a way she didn't want to examine.

Given the miserable options, she'd rather pretend it never happened to spare them both the agonizing awkwardness.

After a shower, she checked her phone. Silas had sent her a text. The message was maddeningly simple: 'Are you asleep?'

She was wide awake, but since she had no idea what the appropriate response was to the man who had just kissed her, she ignored it.

The following morning, she finally texted back: 'Sorry, I crashed hard last night and missed this. Did you need something?'

A minute later, she sent a follow-up: 'I'm heading out this morning to meet Leo and the team.'

The moment the text delivered, her phone buzzed with an incoming call from Silas. After sending his message the night before, he had stared at his screen waiting for a reply that never came. He hadn't double-texted, terrified of waking her.

But he hadn't slept a wink. He had tossed and turned, his mind racing until exhaustion finally dragged him under around five in the morning, only for him to snap awake shortly after.

Running on zero sleep, Silas's voice was rough and gravelly. He cleared his throat before speaking. "What time are you meeting Leo? I'll drop you off."

Willow was already settling into the backseat of a car. "No need. I already grabbed a ride."

Silas frowned, instantly assuming she was still furious about last night and was intentionally shutting him out. Before he could ask, she cheerfully filled the silence.

"I was actually going to ask you, but when I got to the lobby, the hotel staff offered a complimentary car service, so I figured I wouldn't bother you."

Her tone was light, airy, and perfectly normal. It didn't sound like she was harboring any anger. Silas immediately translated her behavior: she was going to bury last night's incident and pretend it was nothing more than a hallucination.

A pang of disappointment hit him, but this forced normalcy was a lot better than her running away from him. He knew she needed time. That was fine. He had all the time in the world.

"Alright. Be safe on the way. Text me when you get there, and call me if anything comes up."

Hearing his calm response, Willow couldn't quite pinpoint the knot in her stomach. He wasn't pushing the issue, which meant she had been right, it had just been a fleeting impulse.

Thank goodness she had shut him down last night before he could say anything stupid. If he had, today would have been an absolute nightmare for both of them.

Before she could reply, Silas added, "Let me know when you're wrapping up. I'll swing by and pick you up."

"You really don't have to," Willow argued gently. "It's super easy to get a cab around here. I'll just catch one back."

Silas wouldn't budge. "It's fine. I have to head over to Merit Biotech's local office this morning anyway. I'll grab you on the way back, drop you at the hotel, and then we'll head back to New York together."

Sensing that might not be enough to convince her, he threw out a strategic lure. "Didn't you mention that Leo and his team still need to go through my final interview to get hired? Let's just knock it out today. That way, we save them the hassle of flying all the way to New York."

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In reality, Silas couldn't care less about the interviews. If Willow wanted to hire them, they were hired. He would back her decisions blindly. Throwing the interviews out there was nothing more than a calculated excuse to secure a reason to see her.

Predictably, the bait worked. Willow didn't shoot him down immediately, falling silent as she weighed the logistics. She had considered suggesting a local interview before but was worried it was an overstep or that Silas would find it inconvenient. She hadn't expected him to volunteer.

"Are you sure that's appropriate?"

Hearing the hesitation in her voice, Silas knew he had won. He locked it in. "Perfectly appropriate. It's efficient. It's settled. Just call me when you guys are almost done."

He hung up before she could formulate a counterargument.

Staring at her phone, Willow shrugged. He had a point. If it needed to be done, they might as well do it now.

She thought about giving Leo a heads-up so the team could mentally prepare, but her car was already pulling up to the location. She decided to just break the news in person.

They had agreed to meet at The Daily Grind, a cozy spot not far from the Sinclair Group's local branch. By the time Willow walked in, Leo was already seated at a table. He jumped to his feet the second he saw her, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish as he stared at her in utter disbelief.

Willow broke the silence first. "What's wrong? It's only been a few months. Have you forgotten what I look like?"

Hearing her familiar voice snapped Leo out of his trance. "Boss?" he asked tentatively.

Willow smiled and slid into the booth across from him. "In the flesh."

"How... how did you change so much?" Leo stammered, entirely abandoning his filter. Realizing how that sounded, he frantically backpedaled. "I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just, the difference is insane."

Willow took a slow sip of the coffee he had already ordered for her. It was her favorite order. The fact that he remembered after all this time sent a wave of warmth through her chest.

She slipped right back into their old banter. "What, are you saying I look hideous now?"

"Hell no." Leo practically shouted, waving his hands. "You look like a stunning beauty now. Like, A-list celebrity level. The kind of gorgeous that makes people trip over their own feet walking down the street."

He was an engineer; his vocabulary for compliments was notoriously limited, and comparing her to a celebrity was the highest praise his brain could compute.

Willow decided to tease him a bit more. "So, you're saying I was hideous before?"

"No, no, no." Leo panicked, desperate to dig himself out of the hole. "You were pretty before, but now you're just, next level. But seriously, how did you lose so much weight? Did something terrible happen? Are you sick?"

Seeing the genuine panic in his eyes, Willow dropped the joke. "I'm fine. I just went on a diet."

"A diet?" Leo looked thoroughly confused. Sure, she had been a bit heavy before, but it hadn't taken away from her looks. "Wait. Do you have a crush on someone?"

"No," Willow said, cutting him off cleanly. "It's because I'm getting a divorce."

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"A divorce?" Leo was completely short-circuiting. He physically stood up, did a tight spin in the aisle, and aggressively ran a hand through his hair. "Wait, hold on. When the hell did you get married? Who is the guy? How did none of us know about this?"

"Sit down, take a breath, and I'll explain everything," Willow said, keeping her voice low. She knew the actual truth was going to blow his mind even further.

Leo sat down, but he was buzzing with nervous energy. His fingers drummed rapidly against the table, his eyes locked onto her face. "Spill it. Marriage isn't a joke, you can't just drop a bomb like that."

Since she was bringing them over to Merit Biotech, Willow was ready to lay all her cards on the table. Back when she was grinding away at Sinclair Group, she had kept her marriage a secret because she was deeply in the fog, terrified of making Julian angry. Later, when her mother got sick and her career hit a wall, she stayed quiet because she didn't want her team to worry.

But the nightmare was ending. She had a stellar new job, she was severing ties with Julian, and she finally had the power to protect the people loyal to her. The secrets no longer served a purpose.

Still, she needed to brace him. "The truth is a bit messy, so prepare yourself. And the guy... you know him."

Hearing this, Leo's heart hammered against his ribs. "Stop stalling and tell me."

"It's Julian Sinclair. We got married three years ago," Willow stated firmly. "But the divorce proceedings are already in motion."

Leo froze like he had been struck by lightning. He forgot to blink for a solid ten seconds before his brain finally rebooted. "Who? Julian Sinclair? Are you out of your mind?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No way." Leo looked like he wanted to jump out of his seat and spin around again, but Willow pinned him down with a sharp look. He forced himself to process the absolute absurdity of the revelation. "But if Julian Sinclair was your husband this whole time, literally nothing makes sense."

Willow knew exactly what he was referring to, the years of endless corporate abuse, so she let him connect the dots himself. No sane person would ever believe a husband could subject his own wife to that level of professional torment.

Leo's voice rose in pitch, thick with outraged disbelief. "If you two were married, why the hell did he exile you to Seattle to open a dead market? We watched you bleed for three years. You had zero resources, zero client base, and you built everything brick by miserable brick. And when everything went to hell, he didn't lift a single finger to help you."

Leo's fury was skyrocketing as he recalled her recent trip to headquarters. "If you're his wife, why did he publicly humiliate you when you went back to New York? He screwed with your bonus, forced you out, and then held a gun to your head to surrender all your proprietary tech before you left. He systematically tried to destroy you. I've been around the block, but I have never seen a man treat his worst enemy the way he treated his own wife."

He was practically vibrating with rage, entirely unable to lower his voice. "And what about Vivienne Sinclair? The whole office knows he's sleeping with her. I didn't know you were married to him back then, but looking at it now? He was married to you while actively parading his mistress around the office. He's a scoundrel. He's an absolute degenerate. Forget being a terrible husband, he lacks the basic moral requirements of being human."

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Willow knew he needed to vent, so she sat quietly, letting him purge all his rage before she spoke. "You're spot on. But thankfully, the nightmare is over."

She was entirely calm, but Leo was still seeing red. "Boss, why didn't you tell us any of this sooner? We might not have had the power to destroy him, but we sure as hell could have quit. We wouldn't have kept breaking our backs to make that bastard richer. Thinking about all the overtime I pulled for him makes me want to puke."

"Don't do that," Willow soothed. "If you're going to blame yourself, then I'd have to hate myself even more for giving him years of my life. Besides, if I hadn't been banished to Seattle, I never would have met you guys."

"I guess that's true," Leo muttered, finally finding a silver lining. His blood pressure slowly began to drop.

"Exactly," Willow encouraged. "And all that toxic drama is in the rearview mirror. I've got real power now, and massive backing. I even publicly annihilated Vivienne Sinclair at the summit yesterday."

Leo had seen the viral clips online. "I saw that. Yesterday I thought it was epic, but after hearing all this, it wasn't harsh enough. But don't worry, if I ever cross paths with her, I'll make sure she regrets it."

"She's a nobody now. Your future is what matters," Willow said, cleanly pivoting the conversation. "Oh, by the way, Silas Thorne is dropping by shortly. He wants to meet you today so you guys don't have to fly all the way to New York for your final interviews."

"Who?" Leo had barely digested the first bombshell, and now she was dropping a nuke on him. "Wait. Silas Thorne? The CEO of Merit Biotech?"

Willow gave him a look. "Do you know another Silas Thorne?"

Confirming that the apex predator of the corporate world was currently en route, panic seized Leo. It wasn't about his coding skills, he was confident in his tech. It was the fact that he was sitting in a casual coffee shop about to be interviewed by a titan, and he was wearing a hoodie.

"Boss, why didn't you warn me? I would have at least put on a suit."

"I literally just found out when I walked out the door," Willow defended herself.

"Can we reschedule? Doing this here... in these clothes... it feels insanely disrespectful to a guy of his caliber." Leo was a straight shooter and never hid his anxiety from her.

Willow understood where he was coming from. In the corporate world, appearances mattered, and you wanted to be flawless for the CEO of Merit. But Silas had made it very clear that this was happening today. She tried to ease his nerves. "Relax. Mr. Thorne is actually a really great guy. He only cares about talent and competence. He won't care about your outfit. Just talk to him normally."

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"A great guy?" Leo looked at her like she had grown a second head. "Boss, have you read the news? He's the Cold King. Hell's Reaper. The man is notoriously ruthless."

Unlike Willow, Leo was a Seattle native who kept his ear to the ground regarding the global tech elite. The Thorne family name commanded absolute terror in certain circles. Silas Thorne was essentially a corporate deity; just whispering his name was enough to make rival executives break out in a cold sweat.

Plus, Leo had actually caught a glimpse of Silas at an industry gala a few years back. Even from across a massive ballroom, the man's lethal, predatory aura had permanently burned itself into Leo's brain.

Seeing him look like he was about to faint, Willow sighed inwardly. This wasn't the first time she had to run PR for Silas's terrifying reputation.

She offered the same defense she always used. "Those are just exaggerated rumors. Don't let the media hype get in your head. You'll see when he gets here, he's actually surprisingly easy to get along with."

She quickly added a vital warning. "Oh, and whatever you do, do not call me 'Boss' in front of him. It's wildly unprofessional."

Leo nodded rapidly. 'Boss' was a gritty, rebellious title they had coined while surviving the trenches of the Sinclair Group. In a pristine corporate empire like Merit Biotech, it would sound like they were running a cartel. Plus, it carried a heavy emotional weight. He wanted Willow to shed that burden; if they joined Merit, they would be her equals in the fight, not her dependents.

"One more thing," Willow continued. "If Merit hires you, the entire team will need to relocate to New York for the initial rollout. We don't have a strict timeline yet, it depends entirely on how fast the project moves. You need to be completely sure about this. Even if you request a transfer back to Seattle, you'll be looking at a year or two minimum."

Leo didn't even blink. "Done. We already talked about this. To get into the number one firm in the world and keep working under you? One year, two years, five years, who cares? We'll eventually make it back."

Hearing his absolute certainty took a massive weight off her chest. However, Leo still looked like he was about to hyperventilate over the impending interview. She took pity on him. "Are you okay? You look sick."

"I am completely freaking out," Leo admitted shamelessly. "Are you sure we can't push this back a day?"

Seeing his genuine distress, Willow relented. "Hold on, let me check with him."

She pulled out her phone and fired off a tactful text to Silas: 'Are you already at Merit? Are you busy? If you're tied up, we can skip Leo's interview today. They can just fly out to New York later.'

When the text chimed, Silas was sitting at the head of a massive conference table in Merit's Seattle office, looking profoundly bored. He was surrounded by a swarm of desperate executives, all frantically trying to impress him with endless project updates.

Because he rarely visited the West Coast, every VP and director was trying to get face time, dragging out the meeting with excruciatingly minor details.

Silas had been staring at the wall, wishing he was with Willow. When her text popped up, a spike of panic hit him, she was trying to uninvite him. He typed furiously: 'Not busy at all. I just walked out of the office. Send me the address, I'll be right there.'

Hitting send, he abruptly stood up, cutting off a terrified director mid-sentence. "If you have questions, talk to Arthur Vance," he ordered coldly, turning on his heel and striding out the door.

The executives stared at his retreating back in stunned silence. Their workaholic CEO, a man who notoriously demanded micro-level updates on every global project, had been in the building for less than an hour before sprinting for the exit. None of them could process it.

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What on earth could be so important that he dropped all his work?

On the other side of the cafe, Willow Horgan received a text from Silas Thorne. She shook her head apologetically at Leo Yardley. "We can't change the time. He's already on his way."

Leo finally let the matter go. Thankfully, he wasn't the type to wallow in disappointment; he excelled at finding solutions to problems. He used the brief wait to ask Willow about Merit Biotech's current operations and future direction, quickly forming a clear picture in his mind.

Seattle's downtown wasn't overly large, and with traffic light at this hour, Silas arrived in no time.

At first glance, Leo was absolutely stunned. The man was insanely good-looking. He had heard the rumors, but seeing him in person carried a massive, intimidating weight.

Silas wore a sharply tailored dark gray suit that accentuated his broad shoulders and lean, towering frame, exuding a deeply commanding presence. Gold-rimmed glasses rested on the bridge of his nose, the cool glint of the lenses masking the emotions in his eyes. From a distance, he perfectly matched his reputation—aloof, indifferent, and ruthlessly cold.

However, that freezing gaze shifted the second it landed on them. The icy depths of his eyes quietly melted into a pool of warmth, completely shedding his previous hostility.

Naturally, this transformation wasn't for Leo. It was entirely for the woman sitting across from him. Leo hadn't realized his former boss and Mr. Thorne were on such good terms.

Leo and Willow both stood to greet him, but Silas's eyes remained fixed on Willow. While he was polite and amicable enough toward Leo, the difference in his demeanor was stark.

He pulled out the chair directly next to Willow and took a seat with effortless familiarity.

"Mr. Thorne, it's a pleasure to meet you," Leo quickly offered.

"The pleasure is mine," Silas replied instantly. "Willow has mentioned you quite a bit. It's good to finally put a face to the name."

His voice lacked any aggressive edge. In fact, his tone was steady and remarkably calm. Leo felt his anxiety evaporate. "You're too kind. Can I get you something to drink?"

Leo handed over the menu, but Silas didn't even glance at it. "I'll have what she's having." He pointed at Willow's cup.

"This one is a bit sweet," Willow chimed in immediately. "You might not be used to it. Why not pick something else?"

"It's fine," Silas insisted smoothly. "I'd like to try it."

When the fresh coffee arrived, Silas took a sip. Still worried it was too sugary for his palate, Willow asked, "How is it? We can order a new one if you hate it."

It was undeniably too sweet, completely contrasting his usual taste, but Silas didn't miss a beat. "It's good. I like it."

It was something she enjoyed, and he wanted to experience it too.

As they spoke, Leo watched from the sidelines. Their tone was normal, entirely devoid of forced intimacy. It was just a simple back-and-forth, yet the atmosphere between them felt inexplicably perfect. Their rhythm was so steady and attuned that it seemed they had synchronized it a thousand times before. There was no room for anyone else to interrupt.

And the way Silas looked at Willow was difficult to describe. His gaze was quiet—not blazing or overtly possessive, just anchored by a profound, underlying tenderness.

If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, Leo wouldn't have believed it. Was this really the legendary Hell's Reaper? It was a complete departure from the rumors.

He had harbored a sliver of doubt about Willow's earlier claims, but now, he didn't need to question a thing. No wonder she said Silas was actually a good guy.

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Since this was essentially an interview—even an informal one—Leo felt he should provide a basic overview of his background. He prepared to pitch his past experience and skill set to Silas.

But the moment he voiced the suggestion, Silas cut him off. "If Willow thinks you're capable, I have no objections. Besides, I didn't come here to conduct an interview."

"Then why are you here?"

Willow and Leo looked at him simultaneously. If it wasn't an interview, why would a billionaire CEO make a personal trip across town?

Silas shifted into a professional posture. "I am here to formally invite you and your team to join my company, and to personally make you an offer."

Without waiting for their bewildered expressions to clear, he laid his cards on the table. "Currently, Merit Biotech's primary gene-editing projects are based out of New York City. If you join, you will initially need to relocate there. Compared to your current setup, it means uprooting your lives. To compensate for that inconvenience, I am willing to offer double your current salary. Between the New York base pay and the Seattle relocation stipends, you will effectively be earning three times what you make now. Once the project concludes, I guarantee a smooth transfer back to the Seattle branch, complete with promotions and further raises for everyone involved."

The sheer weight of the offer left Willow and Leo stunned.

Leo shot her a look, silently asking if this was real and why she hadn't mentioned it.

Willow looked just as confused. This was the first time she was hearing any of it. Silas had never brought this up before. He had promised she could handle the team's recruitment herself, but not wanting any special treatment—and fearing he was just making polite conversation—she had pushed everything through the standard channels. She never expected him to be this serious.

And the compensation he just offered was lightyears beyond standard market rates. Was he sure he hadn't misspoken?

Too shocked to ask directly, the two of them simply stared at him in disbelief.

Silas took in their expressions, his gaze lingering on Willow. He found her reaction incredibly endearing.

Her eyes were wide, her lashes fluttering gently like the wings of a startled butterfly. Her lips were slightly parted, her breathing noticeably shallow. The pure, dazed shock on her face was breathtakingly soft.

"What?" Silas finally broke the silence. "Do you think I'm joking? If you don't believe me, I can have Human Resources draft the contracts right now."

"No, of course not," Leo quickly recovered. Being a straightforward guy, he voiced his primary concern. "I just never expected such a lucrative package. It completely shatters standard market increases. I'm worried that with such a high offer, our performance won't meet your expectations."

"You don't need to worry. I trust you, and more importantly, I trust Willow." Silas offered a faint smile. "Don't put too much pressure on yourselves. Just maintain the same level of research you're doing now. As for the results, leave that to me. If I'm making this move, I have my reasons."

To ease the tension, he added, "Don't forget, I'm a businessman. I don't make losing investments."

Despite his reassurance, the deal still seemed ridiculously unprofitable from Leo's perspective. But he knew better than to push it. When a man of Silas's caliber laid down the law, questioning him further would just be disrespectful. And, as Silas said, there were likely higher-level corporate strategies at play that Leo wasn't privy to.

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Silas definitely had his reasons, and he certainly didn't make a habit of losing money. But this situation was unique. His motivation had absolutely nothing to do with financial gain or corporate strategy; it was entirely based on Willow.

He knew all about her recent struggles at Merit Biotech. He had ordered Arthur Vance to run a discreet background check on her time there, discovering that Leo and the team weren't just her subordinates—they were her loyal friends. Naturally, he wanted to do something to support her.

That was what he meant by not making a losing investment. As long as he could give her what she wanted and see her smile, no amount of money could be considered a loss.

They chatted for a little while longer before Leo, who had taken time off to be there, needed to head back to the office. After expressing his deep gratitude to Silas a few more times, he excused himself.

Willow and Silas didn't linger either. They caught a ride back to the hotel to finish packing, planning to fly back to New York City that afternoon.

On the way, Willow was still reeling from the shock. The compensation package was simply too extravagant. Now that Leo was gone, she felt comfortable addressing it directly. "Why didn't you tell me about their salaries?"

"I wanted to surprise you. What, you don't like surprises? I'll make sure to consult you beforehand next time," Silas replied smoothly.

"That's not what I meant," Willow hurried to clarify. "You're the boss. You can do whatever you want without running it by me. I'm just worried that offering such insane terms isn't strictly a business decision."

She didn't want him making choices based on personal feelings, and she certainly didn't want those feelings clouding his judgment.

"Then what do you think my decision was based on?" Silas countered directly.

Their eyes locked. The memory of last night's charged intimacy flashed through Willow's mind. A sudden rush of heat flooded her cheeks, and she quickly backed down. "Never mind. It's nothing."

She shifted in her seat, trying to put a little more distance between them. Suddenly, the car hit a speed bump. The chassis jolted, throwing Willow off balance. She tumbled sideways, straight into Silas.

With predatory reflexes, he caught her instantly, his arms wrapping around her waist. "Are you alright?"

Ever since the incident last night, Willow had been hyper-aware of any physical contact with him, actively trying to avoid it. The moment she felt his grip, she scrambled to pull away, sliding further down the leather seat. "I'm fine. Just lost my balance."

Sensing her evasion, a flicker of disappointment crossed Silas's features, but he kept his silence. He rubbed his fingertips together, savoring the lingering warmth of her skin, and casually picked up the conversation. "Bringing them into Merit wasn't just a business move. My reasoning is actually quite simple. It's because of you."

He didn't sugarcoat it, answering her unspoken question with blunt honesty. "If there's anything else you want to know, you can ask me right now."

He leaned in a fraction of an inch, testing the waters. If she wanted the truth, he was fully prepared to lay all his cards on the table.

Unfortunately, Willow's mind automatically filed his words under 'romantic aftermath from last night.'

"Well, since it's your decision, I fully support it. Leo and the team are incredibly talented. They won't let you down."

The conversation died there. They rode the rest of the way to the hotel in complete silence.

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When they arrived, Silas didn't get out of the car. He told her to go up and pack her things while he ran an errand, promising to call her when he was back.

Willow had wanted to ask what he was doing and if he needed help, but the SUV pulled away before she could utter a single word, leaving her staring at the taillights. Only then did it dawn on her—was he angry?

From last night until now, she had essentially been fighting him at every turn. She doubted his words, shut down his attempts at conversation, and physically pulled away from him. Even the most patient man in the world would eventually get annoyed by constant rejection.

Not to mention, he was a powerful executive who was used to people bending over backward for him.

Willow convinced herself that his recent kindness had made her complacent, leading her to forget the boundaries she should have maintained. She had pushed too hard and finally hit a nerve.

She made a silent vow to tread much more carefully around him moving forward. She couldn't afford to throw any more emotional tantrums.

Weighed down by this realization, she was entirely distracted while packing. She barely had any luggage, yet she found herself unpacking and repacking the same few items, constantly forgetting things.

It wasn't until Silas called to say he was waiting downstairs that she snapped out of her daze. She shoved the last of her toiletries into her suitcase. "I'm all set. We can leave now."

The drive to the private airfield was suffocatingly quiet. Silas sat with a deep frown, his eyes locked on his laptop screen. Willow took this as absolute confirmation of his fury. She made herself as small as possible, trying not to make a sound.

The heavy atmosphere persisted until they boarded the jet. Silas finally broke the silence. "What do you want to eat? I'll have the chef prep it."

It was the exact same question he had asked on the flight out. But back then, he had been in a great mood, and she hadn't pissed him off. That was why she had felt comfortable requesting something as specific as the Golden Truffle Risotto from a Michelin-starred chef.

Now, she just wanted to be invisible. "No thank you. I'm not hungry."

Silas gave her a sharp look. "You haven't had lunch, just a single cup of coffee. How can you not be hungry?"

Willow shook her head frantically. "It's really fine. Please, just order for yourself, Mr. Thorne."

His frown deepened. Why was she suddenly calling him 'Mr. Thorne'?

Over the past few days, she had grown comfortable using his first name. He had gotten used to the casual intimacy. Hearing this sudden, rigid formality felt like a bucket of ice water.

He ignored her protests and took a guess. "Do you want the risotto? Are you just too embarrassed to ask?"

Willow flushed with anxiety. "No, no, I'm not hungry. You really don't need to worry about me, Mr. Thorne."

Hearing that formal title again sent a spike of irritation straight through his chest. He rubbed his temples, sounding both exasperated and resigned. "Are you doing this on purpose to piss me off?"

Willow froze. "What?"

Trying to piss him off? She would never. Even if she wanted to, she wouldn't dare.

"Did I misunderstand something, Mr. Thorne?"

Mr. Thorne! Mr. Thorne! Every other word out of her mouth was a defensive shield. If this wasn't trying to piss him off, what was it?

Clearly, she had forgotten everything he had told her before.

Silas's Adam's apple bobbed, his voice dropping an octave. "If you're not trying to make me angry, then why did you suddenly switch back to calling me 'Mr. Thorne'?"

Oh, that. It was entirely because she was terrified. She assumed he was already livid, so she was terrified of saying the wrong thing and making it worse.

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Seeing that he was genuinely hung up on the title, Willow quickly tried to explain. "I just thought you... I mean, I thought Silas was angry. I didn't want to upset you further, so I switched to being formal."

Now it was Silas's turn to be confused. "Why would you think I was angry?"

"Weren't you?" Willow mumbled, stealing a nervous glance at him. "I pushed you away several times and didn't give you any grace. Anyone else would have lost their temper. Plus, you didn't come into the hotel, and you ignored me the entire ride to the airport. I could feel that you were mad at me."

Hearing her reasoning left Silas entirely speechless.

He couldn't decide if she was observant or completely oblivious. She had noticed all the little details, but her conclusions were wildly off base.

He was a bit frustrated by her constant rejections, sure, but he wasn't angry. Throwing a tantrum just because he didn't get his way? What kind of man did she think he was?

Especially when it came to her. He spent half his time trying to figure out how to treat her better; he could never actually be furious with her.

As for not going into the hotel, he had suddenly decided to buy some local gifts for her mother and didn't want to drag her around when she was already exhausted.

And the silent car ride? He had a wireless earbud in and was listening to a high-stakes board meeting.

He honestly didn't know where to begin explaining all of this. Seeing her massive, innocent eyes staring back at him—completely devoid of any malice and thoroughly convinced she was in trouble—he let out a heavy sigh. He didn't have the energy to argue.

"You're right, my fault," he said, deciding to drop the extensive defense. "But I swear on my life, I am not angry. I didn't come up to the hotel because I went shopping."

He reached into a sleek paper bag and pulled out the treats he had stood in line for. "Try some."

The elegant packaging was unmistakable. Willow instantly recognized the signature artisan pastries and biscuits from Carlyle's Confections, along with an assortment of their famous candied fruits.

These treats were legendary. Back in New York City, Willow used to crave them constantly, swearing she would stock up as soon as she landed in Seattle. But with the

chaos of the past few days, she had completely forgotten. She couldn't believe he had remembered.

Her eyelashes fluttered, a sudden thickness welling up in her throat. She couldn't quite articulate the rush of emotion hitting her, but the suffocating weight pressing down on her chest vanished instantly. She could breathe again.

"So, you really aren't mad?" she asked softly.

Silas gave a helpless half-smile. "Do I look mad to you?"

He knew he could never harbor any real anger toward her. He cared far too much to ever let it happen.

A bright smile broke across Willow's face. She reached for a pastry, but then paused, pulling her hand back. "Actually, I think I'll save these. I want to bring them back for Mom and Jade."

Seeing her so thoughtful, Silas fought the overwhelming urge to brush his knuckles against her cheek. Remembering her recent aversion to his touch, he forced his hand to stay down. His voice was incredibly gentle. "It's fine, eat up. I bought extra boxes for them."

With that reassurance, Willow happily took a bite. It tasted exactly like she remembered.

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Willow savored the bite and immediately offered the box to Silas. He just looked at her, remaining silent.

She nudged it closer. "It's seriously so good. Are you sure you don't want to try it?"

Silas shook his head. "I don't typically eat sweets."

He maintained a rigorous fitness regimen year-round; cutting out sugar and heavy carbs was just a part of his daily life.

But Willow thought it was a tragedy. "It's a crime not to try something this delicious. One bite won't ruin your diet."

Silas's gaze drifted down to the corner of her mouth, where a tiny crumb of the pastry lingered. "You make a fair point. A little bit occasionally won't hurt."

He closed the distance between them. The sharp cut of his suit stretched taut across his broad shoulders. Behind the gold rims of his glasses, his eyes darkened, mirroring the deep, turbulent surface of a midnight ocean. His stare traced the curve of her lips.

Hyper-aware of his intense scrutiny, Willow felt a flush of embarrassment. Her first instinct was to touch her face. "What is it? Do I have something on my mouth?"

She raised her hand to wipe it away, but before her fingers could make contact, Silas beat her to it. A warm, calloused thumb brushed against the corner of her lip. A second later, she watched as he brought his thumb to his mouth and licked the crumb away. "You're right. The taste is excellent."

Willow sat there, completely short-circuited. Did he just eat a crumb off her face?

She shoved the entire pastry box into his chest. "If you want some, there are plenty of untouched ones right here."

Compared to her flustered panic, Silas looked effortlessly composed, as if the highly intimate gesture was the most natural thing in the world. "No need. I've had my share, and we avoided wasting food. Perfect."

With that, he gave her a final instruction. "I'm going to check on the chef. Eat slowly, and don't ruin your appetite for the main course."

The private jet's galley was stocked with premium ingredients flown in daily from around the world. Silas instructed the chef to prepare a few seasonal tasting dishes, adding one final, critical detail: "And don't forget the Golden Truffle Risotto. It's her favorite."

Meanwhile, back at the West Coast office, Leo gathered his five team members—all loyalists who had followed Willow through hell and back—and relayed the details of his conversation with Silas.

Their first reaction was absolute awe at Silas's staggering generosity. Compared to the toxic environment at Sinclair Group, it was literally night and day. Furthermore, learning the truth about what Vivienne Sinclair had put Willow through ignited a fierce, collective rage. They were determined to get revenge for her.

Just as they were plotting their next move, reception called to announce that Vivienne had arrived in the building. The team exchanged a dark, knowing look. Her timing was impeccable.

Blissfully unaware of the ambush awaiting her, Vivienne strutted into the office with her usual arrogant swagger. She snapped at the receptionist to prep a conference room and summon Leo immediately.

Moments later, Leo walked in, but he wasn't alone. His entire five-person team filed in behind him. Vivienne had never bothered to learn their names, treating them like invisible cogs in the machine.

She was instantly annoyed by Leo's unauthorized show of force, but she reminded herself that she was here to solve a crisis. She couldn't afford to escalate the tension right out of the gate, so she choked back her temper.

Whatever, they were all involved in the project anyway. Might as well deal with them all at once.

Comforting herself with that thought, Vivienne reached for her tea, preparing to launch into a condescending lecture. Before she could open her mouth, Leo and the team marched straight to the table and sat down across from her. None of them even offered a greeting.

Vivienne's carefully crafted composure began to crack. She slammed her designer bag onto the table. "Do you have any idea why I flew all the way out here today?"

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Leo wasn't buying her intimidation tactics. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Spit it out."

In her entire life, no one had ever spoken to her with such blatant disrespect. The blood rushed to Vivienne's cheeks, her voice spiking in pitch. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to right now? You better show some damn respect."

Leo scoffed, a smirk playing on his lips. "I know exactly who you are, which is why I'm talking to you like this. Frankly, you're lucky I'm even giving you the time of day."

"Leo Yardley!" Vivienne exploded. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Leo maintained his infuriatingly calm demeanor. "Are you going to get to the point or not? Because if you're done, we have a few things to say. It's actually convenient you showed up."

"You have things to say to me?" Vivienne repeated, her mind racing. It took her a second to jump to the most arrogant conclusion. They obviously wanted their jobs back.

They must have tested the waters, realized the job market was brutal, and discovered that without the Sinclair Group's name backing them, they were unemployable. Now they were desperate to crawl back.

At this realization, her fury evaporated, replaced by a sickeningly smug superiority. She straightened her spine, looking down her nose at them with a triumphant sneer. Her entire posture screamed: I told you so.

"What, finally figured it out?" she drawled, dripping with condescension. "I warned you. The second you step out of the Sinclair Group's shadow, you're peasants. You rode the company's coattails to a minor success and suddenly thought you were untouchable. I guess reality hit you hard."

The six of them stared at her deadpan, looking at her as if she were completely out of her mind.

Unfazed by their silence—assuming they were just humiliated into submission—Vivienne graciously offered her terms. "Look, for the sake of our past working relationship, I won't make this difficult. If you're willing to formally apologize and admit your mistake, I might be convinced to take you back."

She tossed out the bait. "If you withdraw your resignation letters by the end of the day, I'll sweep this entire mess under the rug. I'll even authorize a salary bump for each of you. A few hundred dollars more a paycheck. How's that for generous? I guarantee you won't find a better offer anywhere else."

She checked her luxury watch, thoroughly enjoying the power trip. "I won't force you to answer right now. You have exactly one hour to come to my office and finalize it."

Vivienne was absolutely certain they would grovel. She had flown out personally, offered them a raise, and given them a way to save face. There was no universe in which they refused.

Leo answered her without missing a beat. "We don't need time to think about it."

"Oh?" Vivienne raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Made up your minds that fast? Smart. An offer like this is a once-in-a-lifetime miracle for people like you. Go ahead and withdraw the resignations."

Leo stared at her and let out a cold laugh. "We're not withdrawing a damn thing. In fact, we're changing our end date. We quit. Today."

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The smug smile froze on Vivienne's face, instantly shattering as if someone had hurled a bucket of ice water over her. The triumphant light in her eyes died on the spot.

"What the hell does that mean?" her voice turned shrill and hostile.

"It means exactly what I said. We're quitting. We're done. Is that too hard for you to comprehend?" Leo wasn't intimidated in the slightest, his voice easily overpowering hers. Just thinking about the psychological torture she had inflicted on Willow made him want to reach across the table and slap her.

Vivienne still couldn't process it. In her twisted worldview, everyone was driven purely by greed, especially working-class nobodies like Leo and his crew. Toss them a bone, and they were supposed to wag their tails. Why were they acting so high and mighty?

"I don't have time to play games with you. You'd better retract those resignations right now, before I change my mind and rescind the offer," she warned venomously.

Leo let out a harsh bark of laughter, deciding he was done humoring her delusions. He pulled out the final handover documents, quickly scribbled his signature, and threw the paperwork directly into her face. "Is this clear enough for you?"

One by one, the second, third, and fourth team members mirrored his actions, tossing their signed exit forms onto the table until a messy pile sat before her.

Staring at the undeniable proof, Vivienne finally realized they were dead serious. They were rejecting her generous rescue and walking away from the Sinclair Group.

Refusing to accept defeat, she resorted to pure threats. "Do you honestly believe you can find a better job outside of Sinclair? Keep dreaming. I guarantee no company on this coast will match the terms I just offered."

Leo couldn't hold it in anymore. He openly laughed in her face.

Highly sensitive to mockery, Vivienne snapped, "What is so funny?"

"You. You're hilarious," Leo sneered, his eyes filled with absolute contempt. "You're a Director at the Sinclair Group, a massive conglomerate, and yet they somehow hired someone as pathetically clueless as you. Open your eyes. Sinclair isn't the only player on

the board. There are plenty of companies far more powerful, with benefits that make yours look like spare change."

Since they hadn't officially signed the contracts with Merit Biotech, and wanting to shield Willow from any retaliation, Leo smartly withheld the rival company's name. But the implication was crystal clear: they had secured significantly better positions, and they were rubbing it in her face.

The truth hit its mark. Vivienne shot up from her chair, her chair screeching against the floor. "With your mediocre track record, you found something better than Sinclair? You expect me to buy that?"

"Whether you buy it or not is entirely irrelevant. What you should really be worrying about is how you're going to explain this to Julian Sinclair," Leo reminded her coldly. "With all of us walking out today, the entire project is paralyzed. Aren't you terrified of the fallout when he demands answers?"

He had struck her absolute worst fear. The sudden loss of the core engineering team would completely tank the timeline. Even if she tried to cover it up, the damage was too massive to hide. That was the exact reason she had panicked and flown to Seattle in the first place—to handle them quietly.

She had lowered herself to come here, offered them money, and practically begged them to stay, and they still spat in her face. Fine. If they wanted a war, they were going to get one.

Vivienne snatched the exit forms off the table and ripped them to shreds, letting her manic rage show. "You think you can just waltz out of here today? You're dreaming. Legally, you owe the company a month's notice. Based on your original filing, you have two weeks left. For the next fourteen days, I have plenty of ways to make you regret this decision."

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Hearing her desperate threat, Leo and the team practically laughed out loud. "Standard policy dictates a month's notice, sure. But there are always exceptions to the rules. And honestly, we have you to thank for this one. Thanks to you acting like a tyrant and denying every single time-off request since last year, we've racked up a massive amount of PTO. We have more than enough vacation days banked to cover the final two weeks. As for the leftover hours? Keep the change. Consider it a parting gift."

"You—!" Her threats had spectacularly backfired, leaving her totally cornered. Vivienne was vibrating with rage. She opened her mouth to scream, but Leo ruthlessly cut her off.

"What's wrong? Feeling angry? Humiliated? Want to strangle me?" Leo mocked. "We've felt that exact same way under your management more times than I can count. Letting you experience it for once seems perfectly fair, don't you think?"

The words sparked a terrifying realization in Vivienne's mind. She replayed the way they had looked at her when she walked in, the way they had moved as a unified front. None of this was a spontaneous reaction. This was a calculated, premeditated ambush designed to watch her crash and burn.

Vivienne glared at them, her chest heaving violently. "You already knew you were leaving today, but you sat there and let me make that offer... You set me up!"

Leo and the team looked back at her, predatory smiles on their faces. "Took you long enough to figure it out. Honestly, you're a bit slow on the uptake. How does it feel to be completely played?"

Driven to absolute madness, Vivienne grabbed her glass of water and hurled it straight at Leo's head.

With quick reflexes, Leo caught the glass mid-air. In the very next second, he violently splashed the water right back into her face, delivering his final, crushing blow: "Shameless mistress."

Leo was not the type to bully women. Throughout his career, he had always treated his female colleagues with respect and grace. But Vivienne was the exception. She had pushed him past the point of basic human decency. In his eyes, she was completely devoid of morals; calling her human felt like a stretch.

He felt zero guilt watching her suffer. It felt incredibly satisfying.

Drenched in freezing water, Vivienne let out a piercing shriek and lunged forward, thrashing wildly. But the distance across the table was too great, and the water dripping onto the polished floor created a slick hazard. Her stiletto slipped.

Instead of landing a blow, she went down hard, collapsing flat on her face in a spectacular heap.

She lay sprawling on the floor. Her flawless hair was plastered to her face, her designer clothes soaked and wrinkled, stained with dirty water. She scrambled frantically to get up, but the panic made her clumsy. Her expensive heel snapped, leaving her in a pathetic, humiliating heap on the ground.

And right on cue, Leo and the team formed a circle around her, looking down at her, pointing and laughing in sheer mockery. The last shred of Vivienne's dignity disintegrated.

"Get out!" she screamed hysterically. "Get the hell out!"

She was intimately familiar with scenes like this. But in the past, she had always been the one standing tall, looking down. The person humiliated, trapped, and crying on the floor was always Willow.

She had relished watching Willow be degraded and backed into a corner. It had given her a sickening thrill.

Now, the roles were violently reversed. Her chest burned with toxic resentment and pure, unadulterated hatred. She wanted to rip Leo and his team apart with her bare hands, ensuring they never worked in this industry again.

At the same time, it clicked. This entire humiliation had to be orchestrated by Willow. The fact that Leo had specifically called her a "shameless mistress" proved it. Willow had clearly aired all of her dirty laundry.

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The violent commotion in the conference room drew the attention of the staff outside. Unaware of the brutal power struggle that had just occurred, they pushed the door open to find Vivienne collapsed on the wet floor, while Leo's team stood around doing absolutely nothing.

"What is wrong with you guys?" a random employee scolded them. "Don't just stand there! Help her up!"

Terrified that Leo might expose more of her dirty secrets to the entire office, Vivienne quickly intercepted. "I'm fine. Just help me up."

With the help of the oblivious colleagues, she managed to shakily pull herself to her feet. Having twisted her ankle in the fall, she could barely put weight on it, limping pathetically.

Seeing the extent of her injury, an employee asked if she needed to go to the hospital.

Vivienne instantly shut it down, her voice trembling with urgency. "No. Book me on the next flight to New York City. Now."

She didn't have time to deal with a sprained ankle. The news of the mass resignation was undoubtedly rocketing toward Julian Sinclair's desk as they spoke. She had to get back to headquarters immediately and do whatever it took to stop the fallout.

Her instincts were dead on. Julian found out almost simultaneously.

The news bypassed her entirely. Fearing the massive blowback from losing the entire engineering department, a panicked Human Resources manager broke protocol and reported directly to the CEO, willing to risk Vivienne's wrath to save their own skin.

Upon hearing the report, Julian had only one icy command: "Call her and tell her to get back to New York immediately."

Vivienne hadn't even boarded the plane when her phone started ringing. She didn't dare answer. She knew exactly why HR was calling. Until she fabricated a bulletproof excuse, total evasion was her only strategy.

The second her plane touched down in New York, she turned her phone back on. Dozens of notifications exploded onto her screen. Texts from HR, her frantic assistant, and her usual corporate sycophants all asking the same terrifying question: Why did the entire team quit?

But the most chilling detail was what wasn't there. There wasn't a single message from Julian.

Thinking she had missed it in the panic, Vivienne scrolled through the thread again, her eyes wide. Confirming his total silence, her stomach plummeted into an icy abyss.

Her heart hammered violently against her ribs, her hands shaking so badly she could barely hold the phone. She knew Julian better than anyone. When he was irritated, he snapped. When he was truly, dangerously furious, he went completely silent.

This disaster had pushed him past the point of anger.

She practically threw herself into the waiting town car, barking at the driver, "Skip the office. Take me straight to Emerald Heights."

In her panicked mind, Emerald Heights was her only sanctuary. It was the home she shared with Julian. Surely, even if he was in a murderous rage, he wouldn't unleash it in the sanctity of their house the way he would in a corporate boardroom.

And if worse came to worst, Toby and Susannah Sinclair were there. She could use them as human shields to absorb his wrath.

The moment she stepped through the door, Toby, who hadn't seen her in days, sprinted across the foyer and threw himself into her legs. "Mommy! You're finally home! I missed you so much!"

Consumed by her own terror and stress, Vivienne had zero patience for his affection. She shoved the little boy hard. "Get away from me. Stop annoying me."

Caught entirely off guard, Toby stumbled backward and fell hard onto his rear. He burst into loud, heartbroken sobs. "Why did you push me? You're a bad mommy! When Daddy gets home, I'm going to tell him! He's going to punish you!"

Hearing Julian's name snapped Vivienne back to reality like a slap to the face. Her relationship with Julian was currently hanging by a thread; she couldn't afford a single misstep that might provoke him further. She absolutely could not let Toby complain to him.

Her face underwent a terrifyingly fast transformation. She dropped to her knees and pulled the sobbing boy into a tight embrace. "Toby, dearest, Mommy is so sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you."