

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

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With that, she pointed to her ankle. "But Mommy didn't mean it. Look, Mommy's foot is hurt, and she's in a lot of pain. I didn't snap at you on purpose. Can you forgive me?"

Because Toby was just a little boy, he was easily placated by her sweet words. His anger faded as he wiped his tears and nodded. "I can."

Vivienne let out a silent breath of relief and seized the opportunity. "If Daddy comes home later and tries to argue with Mommy, you have to be on my side, okay?"

Toby looked confused. "Why would Daddy argue with you?"

Losing her patience slightly, she brushed off the question. "Just some grown-up work stuff. You wouldn't understand even if I told you. All you need to remember is that it isn't Mommy's fault."

Toby nodded earnestly. "Don't worry, Mommy. I'll definitely help you. I won't let anyone bully you."

Vivienne smiled in satisfaction and patted his head. "Good boy, that's my son. Always remember, Mommy is the one who loves you the most in this entire world. Go on now, go have some candy."

"Really? I can have candy?" Toby couldn't believe his ears. Sweets were strictly banned in their house. Usually, he had to cry for hours or do a mountain of chores just to earn a single piece. He never expected it to be this easy today.

"How many pieces can I have?" he pressed eagerly.

"As many as you want," Vivienne replied, wearing the perfect mask of a doting mother.

"Really? You're the best, Mommy!" Toby spun around her in pure joy.

Vivienne chuckled, waving him off. "Go on. Tell the nanny to get them for you."

The moment Toby was out of sight, her expression went ice-cold. The warmth in her eyes vanished without a trace.

In truth, she couldn't care less if Toby's teeth rotted, let alone about his general health. All those times she had played the strict, attentive mother in front of Julian were merely to build a perfect image and win his favor.

But the situation had changed. That strategy was no longer working, so she naturally had to switch tactics.

Vivienne spent the entire afternoon on edge, waiting until just past six when Julian finally walked through the door.

The second he arrived, she stood up, putting on a meek and timid act. She kept her eyes lowered, avoiding his gaze. "Julian, you're home."

To make her pitiful act more convincing, she had bandaged her foot and purposefully leaned heavily on a crutch.

Unfortunately for her, the elaborate setup barely registered with Julian. He gave her a single, flat look before pulling his gaze away. Without uttering a word, he headed straight upstairs toward his study.

Seeing his utter indifference, Vivienne bit her lip in resentment. But with no other options, she trailed after him, limping her way up the stairs.

When she reached the study, she found the door firmly shut. It was painfully clear that Julian had absolutely no intention of speaking to her.

A wave of sheer indignation swelled in Vivienne's chest. When had she ever been treated with such coldness? For the past few decades, no matter where she went, she had always been the center of the universe. If anyone was giving the cold shoulder, it was her. Who dared treat her like this?

Ultimately, she blamed Willow. It was all that woman's fault she was stuck in this suffocating predicament.

Still, she had to fix the crisis staring her in the face. Taking a deep breath, she knocked gently on the door. "Julian? Can I come in?"

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There was no response from inside.

Vivienne knew he was deliberately ignoring her. Not daring to knock again, she simply stood by the door, leaning heavily on her crutch.

She assumed he was just angry in the moment and would cool off after a few minutes. But to her dismay, twenty minutes dragged by with absolute silence from the study. Her patience was wearing razor-thin.

When she thought back to the freezing look he had given her upon arriving home, the reality of the situation became even harder to swallow.

Once upon a time, he had looked at Willow with those exact same eyes. Back then, it had filled Vivienne with a sick thrill; the colder he was to his wife, the happier Vivienne felt. She never imagined that one day, that freezing gaze would be turned on her.

She always knew Julian was ruthless. If he wasn't, he wouldn't have completely neglected Willow for three years, squeezing every last drop of value out of her before letting her go. She just never expected him to apply that same cruelty to her.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, she forced it away. She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't bear the consequences if it did. She had gambled absolutely everything to win Julian, and she absolutely refused to lose.

Making up her mind, she hobbled downstairs and grabbed Toby right in the middle of him playing with his toys. "Go upstairs and tell Daddy to come down for dinner."

Toby was annoyed at the interruption and instantly prepared to throw a tantrum.

Vivienne cut him off before he could start screaming. "Toby, do you remember what you promised earlier? Didn't you say you'd protect Mommy? It hasn't even been that long, and you've already forgotten?"

Kids were easy to manipulate, especially a simple-minded one like Toby. The challenge instantly flared his temper. "Of course I remember! I just have to go get Daddy for dinner, right? I'll do it right now!"

Vivienne looked at him with satisfaction. "Good boy. Go on. Once your daddy comes down, I'll give you more candy."

At the promise of more sweets, Toby ran even faster. Within seconds, he was at the study door, pounding his little fists against the wood. "Daddy! Come out and eat dinner!"

This time, Julian opened the door almost immediately. Seeing his son standing there, his expression remained relatively soft. But the moment he spotted Vivienne hovering in the background, his face turned to stone.

He looked down at Toby. "You go ahead and eat. I'll be down in a bit."

Toby had never encountered a situation like this before and didn't know what to do. Instinctively, he looked back at Vivienne for guidance.

Terrified of Julian catching on, Vivienne kept her face perfectly blank and stayed dead silent. Toby was out of ideas. He wasn't exactly the sharpest tool in the shed, and he usually got what he wanted by throwing a fit on the floor. Confronted with a slightly complex social dynamic, he was completely lost.

He resorted to repeating his earlier line. "Daddy, let's go downstairs and eat dinner together."

This time, Julian didn't answer him. Instead, he called down to the nanny, ordering her to come take the boy away.

Having failed the mission his mother gave him, Toby refused to leave, knowing Vivienne would definitely yell at him later. As the nanny scooped him up, he thrashed in her arms. "I'm not leaving! I want Daddy to come eat with us!"

But a second later, he accidentally caught Julian's eye and immediately froze in terror. His father looked furious, like a literal monster. As much as Toby cared about his mom, self-preservation kicked in. Shutting his mouth tight, he let the nanny carry him downstairs without another peep.

Once Toby was gone, the awkwardness thickened. Vivienne had genuinely believed Julian would listen to the boy, given how much he usually spoiled him. She hadn't expected this tactic to fail too. "Julian..."

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Before she could even finish her sentence, Julian cut her off. "Are you resorting to using the kid now?"

Vivienne's fingers curled into tight fists. Her forced smile nearly slipped, because he had seen right through her. But there was no way she could ever admit it.

"Julian, how could you say something like that? Is that really the kind of person you think I am?" Instead of crying this time, she straightened her spine. She knew that in moments like this, projecting stubborn defiance made her lies far more convincing.

"Toby is our son. You've seen exactly how I treat him over the years. I dote on him constantly. How could I ever use him?"

"Furthermore, I have never once dragged our child into any issues between us. The reason Toby said what he said was simply because he's a good boy and didn't want to see us fighting. Are you seriously blaming me for our son's own innocent thoughts?"

Julian stared her down, his dark eyes searching hers, silently calculating the truth of her words.

Vivienne struck while the iron was hot. Toby was her ultimate shield; he was the only reason she had managed to tie Julian down for so many years, and she couldn't afford to let him doubt her devotion as a mother.

"When he came home today, Toby told me himself that his kindergarten teacher said children are only truly happy when their parents don't fight. He's growing up. He has his own thoughts, and he's becoming highly sensitive to everything around him. Even if it's just for his sake, please don't be angry with me in front of him anymore. Okay?"

Her delivery was flawless, laced with absolute sincerity and maternal concern. She refused to believe he could remain unmoved by that.

Sure enough, Julian's expression shifted slightly. The freezing hostility in his eyes thawed just a fraction. He turned back into the study, but this time, he didn't close the door.

Seeing that his anger had subsided, Vivienne hurried in after him, leaning on her crutch, and gently shut the door behind her.

Without waiting for him to speak, she launched into her defense. "I know you're furious with me about Leo's team, but I can explain."

"Explain? With what exactly? I've listened to too many of your explanations, and that's exactly why we're in this mess today." Julian stepped toward her, his presence suffocating. "Did I or did I not ask you if Leo's team was a problem? What did you tell me? You said everything was fine, that you had it entirely handled, and that I didn't need to worry. And now? Is this your version of 'handled'? The entire team walking out?"

"Do you have any idea how much damage their resignation will inflict on the company? They are the backbone of the entire gene-editing project. With them gone overnight, what the hell is supposed to happen to the Sinclair Group's operations?"

Vivienne stood in silence and absorbed his harsh reprimand without fighting back. When it came to manipulating emotions, she was an expert. She knew better than to clash with him when he was this enraged. She waited until he had vented his frustration before she made her move.

"The only reason I didn't tell you earlier was because I didn't want to add to your stress. You have enough on your plate as it is, and I couldn't bear to burden you with this. I had a

full plan in place. If nothing unexpected had happened, I would have resolved the whole thing perfectly."

Julian let out a dark, mocking laugh. "Resolved it? How exactly? Do you have any idea what the rumors are saying? The entire firm knows they left because of you."

"They're lying!" Vivienne snapped back defensively. "Leo and his team left because they got headhunted by a better offer!"

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"What do you mean?"

"I mean this mass exodus was premeditated. They were bought out with massive salaries, and they chose to abandon the Sinclair Group. They've been slacking off and completely checked out of their work ever since Willow left. I didn't want to assume the worst before, but looking back, all the red flags were there," Vivienne stated with absolute conviction.

Julian watched her closely. Though he remained silent, it was evident her words had planted a seed of doubt in his mind.

Sensing the shift, Vivienne poured more fuel on the fire. "People like that have zero loyalty. For all we know, they've already taken our classified data to hand over to their new employer."

After dropping that bomb, she kept her eyes fixed on his face, praying his anger would finally dissipate. She had played every card in her hand and exhausted every lie she could invent.

But a second later, Julian's expression hardened again. He offered her no mercy. "Even if that's true, you should have informed me immediately. You shouldn't have waited until the damage was completely irreversible to force my hand."

Realizing he wasn't going to let her off the hook, panic flared in her chest. "So, what? Are you saying you're never going to forgive me?"

Julian's tone was ironclad. "My mistake was forgiving you too many times; that's what led us to this disaster. People need to pay the price for their actions. Effective immediately, you are suspended from all your current projects. Don't bother coming into the office."

He was effectively stripping her of her power. Even if she returned later, the corporate gossip would be relentless. Unable to accept this blow, Vivienne lost her composure completely. "On what grounds? At the end of the day, they left because of their own greed! Even if they hadn't quit today, they would have walked tomorrow! Why am I the one being punished for their betrayal?"

That was her nature—cunning one moment, volatile the next. Her performance was entirely dictated by her emotions. She could be meticulously calculating a second prior, and explode into a rage the minute her own interests were threatened.

Naturally, Julian wasn't going to indulge her temper. "On the grounds that you were their manager, and your leadership was a catastrophic failure. Shouldn't you be held accountable?"

Vivienne glared at him, her eyes bloodshot with a volatile mix of fury and grievance.

It was the first time they had clashed this violently, and Vivienne was equal parts furious and terrified. Just as the suffocating tension reached a breaking point, a knock sounded at the door. It was Susannah Sinclair. "Julian? Vivienne? Are you two in there? Come down for dinner."

At the sound of her voice, Vivienne sagged with sheer relief. Her savior had arrived.

Anticipating Julian's explosive anger earlier, she had discreetly called Susannah to come over, knowing she couldn't handle him alone. It turned out to be the smartest move she made all day.

Forcing two fresh tears to well up in her eyes, Vivienne turned and opened the door. The moment it swung open, she threw herself into Susannah's arms. "Mom!"

Seeing Vivienne sobbing, Susannah didn't even ask what happened—she already knew everything from the drive over. She shot Julian a disapproving look. "Julian, are you bullying Vivienne again? Honestly, she just got back from a grueling business trip. If you won't show her some care, the least you could do is not terrorize her."

Julian hadn't expected his mother to show up and had no desire to air his professional grievances in front of her. He seamlessly deflected. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

"Vivienne just got back today. I came to check on her," Susannah replied, putting on a show of maternal outrage. "Thank God I did, or you would have bullied the poor girl to death."

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Vivienne seized the perfect opening. "Mom, please don't be mad at Julian. It's my fault. I messed up at work."

"A few employees quit, so what? Why is he blowing it so out of proportion? With the way he's acting, people would think the Sinclair Group is going bankrupt just because a handful of staff walked out," Susannah shot back, waving a dismissive hand.

Her tone was laced with absolute contempt. She patted Vivienne reassuringly on the shoulder. "Go downstairs for a bit. I need a private word with Julian."

That was exactly the dismissal Vivienne had been praying for. Relieved of her burden, she immediately headed downstairs. Since someone else was stepping into the ring for her, she didn't need to keep up the exhausting performance.

Once Vivienne was gone, Susannah cut straight to the chase. "I heard those employees used to work under Willow. Honestly, it's a blessing they're gone. Keeping them around would have been a ticking time bomb anyway."

Julian wasn't blind to that angle, but the operational reality was entirely different. "We already have a severe shortage of talent in the gene-editing division. They were the only ones holding it together, and now they're all gone. Have you stopped to consider what's going to happen to our ongoing projects?"

"What's going to happen? You hire new people. What else?" Susannah sneered, genuinely bewildered that he viewed this as a crisis. In her world, problems were solved by throwing money at them. There were millions of desperate people out there; all they had to do was dangle the bait, and the masses would swarm.

"If they don't want the jobs, someone else will. As long as the salary is right, I refuse to believe you won't find replacements."

Julian shook his head, thoroughly disagreeing. "You don't understand this industry. Do you have any idea how rare specialized talent is in this field? Recruiting one or two experts is difficult enough. Trying to replace an entire high-level team simultaneously is not as simple as you think."

"Simple or not, and how you recruit them—that's your job as the CEO. You cannot dump the blame on Vivienne."

"I am not dumping the blame on her. The fact remains that she is responsible for this mess. She made a catastrophic management error, and she needs to face the consequences."

"She can face the consequences later, but not right now," Susannah warned sharply. "Don't forget that the Sinclair Group's stock is currently highly volatile. We cannot afford any more internal chaos or scandals."

At the mention of the stock price, Julian's expression tightened. Seeing her leverage working, Susannah pushed harder. "Even if you don't care about anything else, you should at least think of Toby. No matter what happened, Vivienne gave you a son. She is the greatest benefactor to the Sinclair family, and you need to treat her right."

"Besides, you know perfectly well what your own condition is. If it weren't for Vivienne, you would likely never have had a child in this lifetime."

At that mention, Julian's face turned lethal. A dark, visceral reaction flashed in his eyes. "Can you stop bringing that up? Do you honestly think I wanted things to be this way?"

Seeing that she had genuinely struck a nerve, Susannah wisely backed down. She offered a final piece of firm advice. "The matter is settled. Your father and I are in agreement on this. The staff left, so hire new ones. There's absolutely no reason to turn the house upside down over something so trivial."

With that, she turned and walked downstairs.

That night, Julian never came down for dinner. But Vivienne was no longer afraid. Susannah had given her the ultimate reassurance, promising the crisis was averted. Her only instruction to Vivienne was to lie low and avoid provoking Julian for a while.

Vivienne already knew that. Even without Susannah's warning, she planned on staying entirely out of Julian's sight until the dust settled.

However, the mass resignation of Leo's team still gnawed at her. Something about the timing felt distinctly suspicious, and she wasn't about to let it go that easily.

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On Willow's end, she had naturally heard about the mass resignation. Leo had reached out to her almost the exact second they submitted their paperwork.

Initially, Leo was anxious. He thought they had acted too impulsively and fully expected Willow to scold them. To his surprise, Willow didn't say a single negative word. Instead, she assured him that she completely understood and fully supported their decision.

She knew exactly what kind of nightmare Vivienne was to work for; enduring her management was a special kind of hell. Willow wouldn't dream of forcing anyone to stay in a toxic environment she herself had escaped.

Willow had already spoken to Silas Thorne about onboarding them. Silas had been incredibly straightforward—there was no need for them to fly to New York City for separate interviews. They could bypass the red tape and head straight into the contract phase. As for their start dates and project assignments, he left it entirely in her hands.

Because of that, when Willow spoke to Leo, she offered her own advice. "I recommend you take two weeks off before officially joining. First, you've just survived a deeply oppressive work environment, and you need time to decompress. Second, once you move to New York, the workload is going to be intense. You won't have much free time to spend with your families. Take this opportunity to be with them."

Leo and his team enthusiastically agreed. Willow had considered every possible detail for them, and they accepted her offer with overwhelming gratitude.

After hanging up, Willow walked over to Silas's office to report the update. He was reviewing some documents, but the moment she walked in, he set them aside. "Everything sorted?"

"Yes. I told them to take two weeks off before coming in. It's the perfect chance for them to rest up," Willow explained.

Silas didn't say anything, but his expression grew noticeably serious. Willow's heart skipped a beat, suddenly worried she had overstepped. "What's wrong? Is two weeks too long? Will it delay the company's project timeline?"

"Of course not," Silas quickly reassured her, noticing her sudden panic. "They're your team now. You can manage them however you see fit; you don't even need to run it by me. As for the project timeline, Merit isn't going to collapse over a couple of weeks, and I can easily cover for any delays. Don't worry."

"Then why did you look like that?" Willow asked.

"I just realized something, and I feel like I completely failed you."

"Failed me how?" Willow found his reaction bizarre. Everything had been going perfectly fine; why was he suddenly so upset?

Silas looked at her, his deep eyes heavy with an unreadable emotion. He confessed, "When you transferred over from the Sinclair Group, I didn't give you a single day off."

Willow was stunned that he had connected the two completely separate events. But seeing how genuinely bothered he was by it, she softened. "My situation was entirely different. I

didn't have the luxury of taking time off. Besides, skipping a break was my own choice. What does that have to do with you? You can't possibly blame yourself for that."

Silas was stubbornly unyielding. "It was my oversight."

Willow had no desire to argue with him over something that was already in the past. It felt pointless. She smoothly pivoted the conversation. "It's already done. There's no use dwelling on it now."

"You're right." Silas abandoned his stubborn streak with a sudden, jarring whiplash that left Willow momentarily speechless.

Before she could process the shift, Silas continued smoothly. "We can't change the past, but we can start fresh right now. How about this? You go on vacation starting today. Is fifteen days enough? If not, take a month."

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He wanted to make sure she had the exact same perks he was giving everyone else.

"Wait, wait, hold on a second," Willow said, her brain scrambling to keep up. How did she suddenly end up being forced onto a mandatory vacation?

She addressed the most glaring issue first. "Leaving aside the fact that we have a massive workload, I don't even have fifteen days of accrued PTO, let alone a month."

"You don't need to worry about the work, and the PTO is even easier. I'll personally approve it. You can take as much time as you want," Silas offered generously.

"By the way, is there anywhere specific you want to go? How about France? Switzerland is gorgeous this time of year too. If you prefer avoiding tourist traps, I own a few private islands. They're completely isolated with incredible scenery. I'm sure you'd love them."

Silas didn't even give her a chance to breathe, enthusiastically planning the itinerary himself. "I can fly out with you. It's always better to travel with someone else; we can decide what to do together. It'll be a lot more fun than going alone."

Willow was completely derailed by his rapid-fire pacing. How did they jump straight to international travel? And with him?

She quickly declined. "I'll have to pass. I really don't have any plans to travel right now."

Silas's initial burst of excitement cooled as rationality kicked back in. He realized he was coming on entirely too strong. He smoothly backpedaled. "No rush. Just let me know whenever you feel like going."

Not wanting him to get the wrong idea, Willow clarified gently, "Even if I do decide to take a trip later, I'll probably go with Jade."

Silas remained undeterred. "Of course. You two are close; it makes perfect sense. But two young women traveling alone can be risky. If I tag along, I can make sure you're safe. Plus, those private islands I mentioned are very spacious. You can invite all your friends if you want."

Hearing that, Willow actually felt a twinge of temptation. A long time ago, Jade had practically begged her for the chance to visit a billionaire's private island, claiming that experiencing that level of luxury just once would make her life complete.

But that was a daydream for the future. Right now, she had just joined Merit, and the project was barely off the ground. She couldn't justify abandoning her responsibilities for a lavish getaway.

"I really appreciate the offer, but I haven't been here long. I don't want to think about vacations just yet. I need to focus entirely on my work for now."

Silas let out a barely audible sigh. Sometimes he genuinely felt she was too dedicated to her job. If she redirected even half of that intense focus onto him, he couldn't fathom how happy he would be.

There were moments when he couldn't help but wonder—if he wasn't the CEO of Merit Biotech, if he lacked all the wealth and power he currently possessed, would he have ever crossed paths with her? Would he have the right to stand by her side?

But the dark thought was fleeting. He quickly shoved it away, profoundly grateful that he did, in fact, possess everything she needed to succeed.

Silas couldn't help but urge, "Work is important, but so is your personal life. Are you free tonight? A fantastic new restaurant just opened downtown. We should check it out. Consider it a reward for all your hard work on the Seattle trip."

At the mention of her personal life, Willow smiled apologetically. "I actually can't tonight. I already made dinner plans with Jade."

Silas felt a sharp pang of disappointment, but knowing she was spending the evening with her best friend took the sting out of it. He couldn't monopolize her time; she needed her own life outside of him.

"Alright. Next time, then."

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Willow and Jade hadn't seen each other in a few days, so the moment they met up, the conversation flowed endlessly.

Their first stop was the hospital to visit Martha Mercer. Her stem cell transplant was a success, and she was recovering beautifully in the sterile ward. Assuming her numbers remained stable, she'd be cleared to leave the isolation room soon.

After leaving the hospital, they headed straight to Crimson Hearth, chatting animatedly over the bubbling broth.

Willow filled Jade in on everything that happened in Seattle. Naturally, she conveniently omitted the part where she went to Silas's house—and the kiss they shared. She knew Jade would lose her mind and blow it entirely out of proportion if she found out.

But even without the juicy details, the edited version of the trip was more than enough to leave Jade utterly shell-shocked.

"Are you seriously telling me Silas Thorne personally flew out with you, and he used his Gulfstream G650ER?"

Willow quickly corrected her. "He didn't fly out specifically to accompany me. He was just heading back home."

Jade wasn't buying it for a second. "He's the CEO of Merit. He can go home literally whenever he wants. You really think it's a coincidence he chose the exact time you were traveling? Please. Do you honestly think billionaires have to rigorously schedule their PTO like the rest of us slaving away in the trenches?"

"You're half right." While it was true Silas wasn't bound by strict corporate policies, Willow knew he was a relentless workaholic. He wasn't the type to drop a massive workload on a whim.

Because of that, she still believed he hadn't made the trip entirely for her sake.

"Half right, my ass," Jade said, ignoring Willow's vague deflection. Her eyes gleamed with curiosity. "I have never been on a private jet in my entire life. Spill. What was it like? Was it insanely luxurious? I heard billionaire jets are basically flying five-star hotels with everything you could ever imagine on board."

Willow thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, that pretty much sums it up." Silas's jet was, in fact, devastatingly opulent.

"What about the food?" Jade pressed eagerly. "Did they have Michelin-starred chefs cooking ultra-premium, freshly imported ingredients from around the world?"

"Probably. But I didn't really eat any of that."

"You didn't?" Jade's jaw dropped. "Then what did you eat?"

Willow blushed slightly. "I had the Golden Truffle Risotto."

"You had what?" Jade stared at her in utter disbelief. "You were on a Gulfstream jet, surrounded by world-class chefs and the finest luxury ingredients flown in from across the globe... and you asked for a risotto?"

"Uh..." Willow honestly didn't know how to defend herself. Hearing it out loud, she realized how ridiculous and unnecessarily difficult her request had been.

"And Silas just agreed to that?"

"He didn't really say much at the time."

Utterly floored, Jade threw her hands up. "He spoils you completely rotten. The fact that he actually accommodated that is insane."

Willow was used to Jade's dramatic exaggerations, but her words made her realize that she might have genuinely pushed the boundary. "You think it was too much, right? I'll definitely be more mindful next time."

"No! God, no! Don't let me get in your head. Keep doing exactly what you're doing. The way you two interact is perfect," Jade quickly backpedaled. While their dynamic was a slow burn and slightly unconventional, Jade wasn't the one living it.

They had their own rhythm. If one was willing to ask and the other was endlessly eager to provide, they were a match made in heaven.

Jade understood Willow perfectly. After enduring years of emotional abuse from a controlling scoundrel like Julian, Willow naturally had lingering trauma and defensive walls. Jade didn't know Silas well, but based on Willow's stories, the man clearly adored her. Whether it was out of deep respect or raw affection, one thing was undeniable: Silas gave Willow absolute, unconditional freedom.

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"You guys have your own dynamic, so just stick to your own pace. Seriously, don't let my big mouth ruin it," Jade stressed again. She'd hate herself if her meddling accidentally caused friction in what was clearly a great thing.

"What pace?" Willow asked, genuinely confused.

"Nothing," Jade laughed, waving it off. "I'm just saying, Silas is a really good guy. He's totally different from the ruthless rumors in the corporate world."

Willow completely agreed with that assessment. "Exactly. Sometimes rumors are pure fiction. He's a total gentleman—low-key, cultured, and undeniably the most exceptional man I've ever met."

"And isn't he insanely hot?" Jade teased.

"True. I can't believe I left that out. Yes, he's the most handsome man I've ever seen."

"So, how do you actually feel about him?" Jade pressed smoothly, seizing the opening.

Willow avoided her gaze, her expression turning unnaturally stiff. "How am I supposed to feel? I have a million things to deal with right now. Besides, he already has someone he likes."

Jade remained highly skeptical about this mysterious "someone else" Silas supposedly liked, but since Willow didn't seem to be lying, she let it slide. She couldn't force a romance, but she could definitely help with the practical mess. "Don't stress too much. I'll handle the situation with Julian. I'll get it sorted sooner or later."

Willow didn't want to burden her friend. "Just follow the standard legal procedures. Please don't put too much pressure on yourself. You just started a new job at Sterling & Faircrest, and you have enough on your plate. Focus on your own life first. Speaking of which, how is work going? I've been talking about myself this whole time and haven't even asked about you."

"I'm doing great! Just the usual—taking on cases, drafting legal docs, occasionally appearing in court. Nothing crazy," Jade deflected. When it came to her own life, Jade suddenly wanted to change the subject. She hadn't told Willow about her secret crush on Hugo Harrington, and she had no idea how to even bring it up.

But the universe always seemed to push the exact buttons people wanted to avoid. Willow specifically asked, "How are things with Hugo? I've asked you a few times, and you always dodge the question. Don't tell me you two are clashing and you're just hiding it from me?"

"What? No way. We get along perfectly fine," Jade bluffed, forcing a bright tone.

"Really?" Willow narrowed her eyes, clearly unconvinced. "Then how about I pick you up from the firm one evening? I'd love to meet him in person. We can treat him to dinner. Who knows, maybe Merit and your firm could collaborate in the future."

"I highly doubt Merit needs us for collaboration. A giant like Merit definitely has a top-tier, in-house legal team. You'd never outsource out to a firm like ours."

"You never know. Even the best teams have turnover. Plus, Merit is expanding rapidly. There's a high chance we'll need to bulk up our external counsel soon. Besides, when you were struggling to find a job, he stepped up and gave you an offer. I really should thank him on your behalf."

"You seriously want to meet him?" Jade asked.

"Yeah." Willow nodded. She hadn't been terribly insistent at first, but seeing Jade stumble and make excuses told her everything she needed to know. Jade wasn't the type to complain or ask for help; she was the kind of friend who silently endured her struggles alone. Willow knew she had to intervene.

"Alright. In that case, I'll text him right now."

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"Right now?" Willow did want to meet him, but she hadn't meant this very second. Looking at the time, she worried it was too late. "Isn't it a bit late? He probably won't come out."

Jade, however, was strangely confident. "Don't worry. He'll come."

If it were just her asking, Jade would have zero confidence that Hugo would show up. But with Willow involved, it was an entirely different story.

Over the past few weeks working at the firm, Jade had quietly pieced things together. Although Hugo had never explicitly said it, she knew he had hired her largely because of

her connection to Willow. What she didn't know was exactly how deep his feelings for Willow ran.

There had always been clues. Back in college, Hugo was always the one stealing lingering glances at Willow. Unfortunately, Willow had been so blindly devoted to Julian that she never even noticed he existed.

Honestly, if Willow hadn't already met Silas, Jade would have been perfectly happy to play matchmaker and set them up. But she knew Willow too well; Willow didn't have a single romantic spark for Hugo.

Feeling a slight buzz from the drinks she'd had, Jade let her liquid courage take the wheel. She pulled out her phone and immediately fired off a text to Hugo.

[Mr. Harrington, have you eaten yet? If you're free, would you like to grab dinner? My treat, as a thank-you for looking out for me lately.]

Then, paranoid that he would politely decline, she instantly followed up with a second message: [I'm with Willow.]

When the text chimed, Hugo was still stuck at the office, slaving over casework. He had actively avoided hanging out with Julian and that crowd lately. Part of it was his crushing workload, but mostly, he found their elite social gatherings mind-numbingly superficial.

Reading Jade's name on his screen, his first thought was of the sharp, fiercely independent woman who marched into the office every day. She had moments of awkward panic—especially when dealing directly with him—but whenever she stepped into a professional setting, she was an absolute force to be reckoned with.

Hugo willingly admitted that his initial decision to hire her had been heavily influenced by Willow. But over time, he had realized Jade was brilliant in her own right. Her legal instincts were razor-sharp. If he had to make the choice again today, even without Willow as a factor, he would hire Jade in a heartbeat.

Only after filtering through his thoughts about Jade did his mind shift to Willow. Yes, he had harbored feelings for her once. It had infuriated him to watch Julian treat her like garbage. He always believed her pure, unwavering loyalty deserved so much better than being ruthlessly discarded just because she fell for the wrong man.

But ever since Willow cut ties with the Sinclair family and flourished at Merit, Hugo's urge to reach out to her had faded. Knowing she was finally thriving and working in a healthy environment was enough for him. He no longer held onto any lingering fantasies.

He hesitated for a fraction of a second. Knowing how intimidated Jade usually was by him, he figured it must have taken immense courage for her to send the invite tonight. He tapped his screen and replied: [Sure. Send me the address.]

Staring at his confirmation, Jade was hit with a conflicting wave of emotion. She didn't know whether to be thrilled that he said yes, or heartbroken that she had to use her best friend as bait just to get him out of the office.

"Hugo said yes. He's on his way," she told Willow.

"Really?" Willow looked pleasantly surprised, as her impression of Hugo was that he wasn't exactly a fan of casual socializing. "Wow, you two really do get along great! One text and he's heading over. And here I was worried you guys were having issues. Guess I was overthinking it."

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Jade smiled, letting the comment slide.

Knowing Hugo Harrington was on his way, they switched tables out of respect. They ordered a fresh round of dishes, planning to add more once he arrived.

Even though Jade was the one who invited him, her nerves spiked the closer it got to his arrival. At the office, it was fine—work provided a buffer, and she didn't have to dwell on her secret crush. But out here, away from the corporate safety net, it was the only thing on her mind.

"Willow, I'm a little nervous."

"What's wrong?" Seeing Jade's flushed cheeks, Willow grew concerned. "What are you nervous about? You see him every day at work. Did you mess something up? Are you worried he's going to yell at you?"

She offered a comforting smile. "I don't know him that well, but he seems like a perfect gentleman. I doubt he agreed to dinner just to chew you out."

"Do you get nervous when you see Silas?" Jade asked, completely ignoring Willow's logic.

Willow replied honestly. "Sometimes, yeah."

When he got too close, or said things she didn't understand.

"What do you usually do when you get nervous?"

Willow usually changed the subject or pretended not to hear, but that was embarrassing to admit. "It depends on the situation. If you're really that worked up, maybe have a drink to take the edge off. It might help."

Jade was a decent drinker, but Willow didn't realize how much she had already thrown back when she wasn't looking.

"You're right. Alcohol takes the edge off. I need a drink."

Then Jade started drinking non-stop. Willow tried to stop her.

"That's enough. You can stop."

"You can't be this nervous."

"Maybe we just shouldn't see him. Tell him to go home. If I knew you were going to be like this, I wouldn't have suggested it."

"Jade..."

"Jade..."

"Don't stop me, I can keep going..."

Finally, Jade passed out gracefully on the table.

Willow couldn't believe it. Who invited someone to dinner and passed out before they even arrived?

But Hugo was probably close, and she couldn't leave, so she waited.

Hugo arrived, saw the scene, and was shocked.

"What happened to her?" he asked Willow.

"Nothing, she's just feeling a little under the weather." Willow was too embarrassed to say she was drunk.

"Under the weather?" Hugo immediately tensed. "Where? Is it serious? Should we take her to the hospital?"

This was the first time Willow had seen him this anxious. Usually, he was calm and collected. He didn't seem strict at all—why was Jade so terrified of him?

"No need. She just had a little too much to drink. She'll be fine once she goes home and sleeps it off."

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"Drunk?" Hugo looked bewildered. "Didn't she invite me to dinner? How did she manage to pass out before I even got here?"

Willow let out an awkward laugh, scrambling to cover for her friend. "Jade didn't do it on purpose. She was just a little nervous and accidentally overdid it."

"Nervous?" Hugo smoothly caught the key word. "She was nervous to see me?"

Realizing she was digging a deeper hole, Willow firmly changed the subject. "I'm so sorry. We were supposed to treat you to dinner, but given the circumstances, I need to get her home. Do you want to stay and eat, or should we leave together and take a raincheck?"

Hugo obviously decided to leave; he hadn't come for the food anyway. "I drove. I'll give you two a ride."

"That's okay, we can just grab a cab," Willow quickly declined. Even though Hugo wasn't her boss, making an invited guest act as their chauffeur felt incredibly rude.

But Hugo wasn't taking no for an answer. He walked straight over to Jade and pulled her up. "In her condition, you're not going to be able to handle her alone."

Looking at Jade, Willow realized he had a point. It was better to rely on someone they knew. She stopped fighting it. "Thank you for the trouble."

Jade was an absolute handful. On the way to the parking garage, her hands were everywhere—poking here, grabbing there. A short walk ended up taking over ten minutes. Plus, she had a surprising amount of drunk strength. Willow noticed Hugo struggling to keep her upright a few times. She was suddenly very grateful she had accepted his help; she never could have managed Jade on her own.

Because Willow was entirely focused on wrestling her friend, she didn't notice the familiar license plate of the Rolls-Royce Cullinan parked on the street not too far away.

Inside the car, Silas Thorne ran his fingers over the steering wheel, his eyes a bottomless, silent void behind his custom gold-rimmed glasses. He didn't step out, nor did he call out to Willow. He just sat there in absolute stillness.

He had actually gone to visit Martha Mercer today. At the hospital, Martha had mentioned that Willow and Jade had just left and asked why he wasn't with them. Silas hadn't known

the women were going to be there; he only knew they had dinner plans, so he made up an excuse about scheduling conflicts.

After leaving the hospital, he hadn't gone straight home. Figuring Willow hadn't been gone long, he thought he might bump into them in the area.

He did bump into them, but it turned out it wasn't just the two of them having dinner.

Silas watched the man walking with them. Nice suit, handsome, carrying an undeniable air of old money. He clearly came from a good background.

Even though the man kept his distance from Willow and focused entirely on holding up Jade, just seeing an unfamiliar male within a ten-foot radius of her made Silas's blood boil.

He stared for a moment longer, then casually turned his head, raised his phone, and snapped a crisp photo through the window.

He sent the picture to Arthur Vance. "Run a background check on the man in this photo."

Meanwhile, with Hugo's help, Willow finally managed to wrangle Jade into the car.

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Just as Willow was about to breathe a sigh of relief, Jade started acting up again. "I feel awful."

"I know, you're drunk. It's normal to feel bad. Just hang in there, we'll be home soon." Willow smoothed the loose hair away from her friend's face, speaking in a soothing voice.

At the mention of going home, Jade threw a fit. "I don't want to go home. I have to buy Hugo dinner. Is he here yet?"

"He's here, he's here. He already ate and left," Willow coaxed, using the tone one might use on a toddler.

In the driver's seat, Hugo's gaze instantly darted to the rearview mirror the moment he heard his name.

She usually seemed so sharp and professional. He never expected her to be like this when she was drunk. Leaning against Willow's shoulder, all her prickly defenses were gone. Her

eyes were soft and unfocused, like a little beast that had let its guard down. The contrast was startling.

He grabbed a wet wipe from the center console and handed it back to Willow. "Wipe her face. It might help her feel better."

"Thank you." Willow took it, but the second the wipe touched Jade's cheek, she swatted it away. "What is that? It feels weird. Get it off me."

Before Willow could calm her down, Jade blurted out, "So annoying. Almost as annoying as Hugo. I am never buying him dinner again."

Willow had completely failed to anticipate that outburst. By the time she scrambled to cover Jade's mouth, the damage was done. She offered Hugo a deeply apologetic smile. "I am so sorry. She's just drunk and talking nonsense. Please don't take it personally."

Hugo glanced at Jade in the rearview mirror, his expression unreadable. "Just take care of her."

Hugo might not have reacted to Willow's apology, but Jade certainly did. Even drunk, her hearing was perfectly fine. She immediately fought back. "I am not talking nonsense. He's just awful. He is the most annoying man alive."

"Jade, stop talking." Willow clamped her hand over Jade's mouth, whispering frantically. "Hugo is sitting right in front of us. Not another word."

Willow had thought Jade's earlier nerves meant she would be too scared to say anything out of line. She hadn't realized that while sober Jade was timid, drunk Jade was utterly fearless.

Jade wrenched herself free from Willow's grip and yelled, "Where? Where is he? I want to say it right to his face."

Seeing the situation spiraling out of control, Willow slapped both hands over Jade's mouth and refused to let go.

Jade spent the rest of the ride heavily gagged. She fought it at first, muffled protests escaping Willow's fingers, but eventually, the alcohol won, and she passed out against the seat.

The car finally descended into silence.

Willow sneaked a cautious peek at Hugo in the front. Seeing that he looked relatively unfazed, she let out a long breath.

When they arrived, Hugo helped Willow get Jade inside the apartment.

Willow felt terrible about the whole ordeal—making him act as a chauffeur, only to have him get insulted for his trouble. "I am so incredibly sorry. She was out of her mind tonight, you can't believe a word she said. I'll make sure she gives you a proper apology when she's sober."

Hugo was still hung up on Jade's words. She had called him annoying. She had said he was the most annoying man alive. He racked his brain but couldn't think of a single thing he had done to offend her.

"I'll get going. Take good care of her."

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After Hugo left, Willow helped Jade wash up and change. By the time she was done, it was already ten o'clock at night.

She checked her phone and realized Silas had texted her two hours ago, asking if she made it home safely.

Lying in bed, the tension of the evening finally draining from her bones, Willow didn't overthink her reply. She just typed out exactly what she was feeling. "Just got home and into bed. I'm exhausted."

Almost instantly, Silas replied—not with a text, but with a phone call.

Without hesitation, Willow answered. "Hello."

Silas's voice was low and gentle, but laced with undeniable panic. "What's wrong? What happened? Do you need me to come over right now?"

Willow had only meant it as a casual complaint; she hadn't expected him to be so on edge. She quickly clarified. "No, everything is fine. I had dinner with Jade, and she got completely wasted. Trying to wrangle her home took everything out of me."

As the words left her mouth, she realized she sounded like she was whining, almost acting spoiled. She quickly pivoted. "But at least it's all handled now."

Silas absolutely picked up on that soft, complaining tone, and he loved it. The knot that had been sitting in his chest all night vanished.

He offered soothingly, "Since you had such a rough night, don't bother going into the office tomorrow. I'm giving you the day off."

Willow laughed. "That's a bit extreme. I'm just tired, a good night's sleep will fix it. I don't need to skip work."

Silas didn't want her pushing herself. With him, she never had to. "Just stay home tomorrow."

"I really don't need to. I'm not that fragile."

"It's settled," Silas said, refusing to debate the issue. He changed the subject. "I thought you were just having dinner with Jade. How did she end up so drunk?"

"She invited her boss, and accidentally overdid it before he even got there." Willow kept the details vague, trying to preserve what little dignity her friend had left.

"Who's her boss?" Silas pressed. Even though he had already received Hugo's entire dossier and knew his family background inside and out, he wanted to hear it from Willow.

Her telling him meant she trusted him. It proved he held a different place in her heart.

Not sensing any underlying motive, Willow spilled the whole story—how Hugo showed up, how Jade threw a tantrum in the car, and how he eventually drove them home.

After hearing the whole ordeal, Silas only had one question. "Why didn't you call me?"

"What?" Willow was caught off guard.

"When you were struggling, why didn't you call me?" Silas repeated, his tone firm and completely self-righteous. He didn't think there was anything inappropriate about demanding this, given where they stood.

Surprisingly, Willow didn't find it inappropriate either. She thought back to the chaos of the evening. It wasn't that Silas hadn't crossed her mind, but it was late, and she hadn't wanted to bother him.

"It was too late," she tried to explain.

"You think I wouldn't have come just because it was late?" Silas asked. "Have I ever turned you down because of the time?"

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Willow thought about it. No, he really hadn't.

"But I thought you were too far away, and it would be inconvenient," she offered as another excuse.

"What if I told you I went to visit your mother after work today?" Silas countered. "I do things you don't even ask me to do. Do you really think I wouldn't have shown up just because of the distance?"

Willow was speechless. The line went silent for a moment.

"The truth is, you just don't trust me, do you?" Silas said, purposely lowering his voice to sound wounded and broken. "You don't trust me, you don't think I can handle it, which is why I'm never the first person you think of when you're in trouble."

Hearing the pain in his voice, Willow's chest tightened. She immediately rushed to defend herself. "No, that's not true. I didn't mean that at all. Why would I ever think you couldn't handle it?"

"Then prove it."

"Prove what?"

"Prove that you trust me."

"I don't know how," Willow admitted, feeling entirely cornered.

Silas gave her the answer point-blank. "Next time you run into any kind of trouble, promise me you'll call me first."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

Willow hesitated. Work issues were one thing, but personal problems were a completely different territory. Some things were inconvenient, others felt inappropriate. She had her reservations.

Sensing her hesitation, Silas's newly calmed nerves flared back up. He knew she had no romantic connection to the man from tonight—her tone made that abundantly clear—but he couldn't stop the anxiety from gnawing at him.

She was incredible, she was beautiful. If he could see it, someone else surely would. Tonight it was a man named Harrington. Tomorrow it could be a Smith or a Johnson. The line of suitors would only grow, and it infuriated him.

But he couldn't control her life or dictate who she spent time with. All he could do was make her trust him, make her rely on him, and ensure he remained irreplaceable in her eyes.

He kept his voice low, playing the victim perfectly. "If you don't want to, forget it. I can wait. I'll just sit around until you've dealt with everything yourself and finally remember to text me back. I'll just wait in agonizing panic, like I've been doing all night."

Willow had been on the fence, but the sheer dejection in his voice broke her resolve. "Okay, I'll call you. Next time I'm in trouble, I promise you'll be my first call."

Having secured exactly what he wanted, Silas dropped the act. His voice brightened considerably as he claimed his victory. "Good. I trust you to keep your word."

"Are you feeling a little better now?" Willow asked tentatively, genuinely caring about his feelings. She would feel awful if her mess had ruined his night.

"Of course," Silas murmured softly. "As long as you promise me, I won't be sad."

Moving past the heavy stuff, they chatted for a bit longer. Before hanging up, Silas reminded her one last time. "Remember, do not go into the office tomorrow."

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Thanks to Silas's specific orders the night before, Willow didn't go into the office. But even though she stayed home, she didn't get to sleep in. First thing in the morning, before she was even out of bed, a shriek tore through the apartment.

"Ahhhhh!"

The scream was loud enough to blast the roof off.

A second later, Jade threw herself onto Willow's bed, burying her face in the mattress.

"Willow, I can never show my face again. My life is over," Jade wailed. It was her first time inviting Hugo to dinner, and it had turned into an absolute catastrophe. If she had known this would happen, she never would have asked him. She had wanted to bridge the

gap between them and leave a good impression. Instead, her image was completely shattered.

Willow figured the alcohol had finally worn off and the memories were flooding back. She felt terrible for her, but what was done was done.

"You remember everything?" she asked.

Jade's voice was muffled by the blankets. "Getting drunk, you guys dragging me home, you covering my mouth."

She remembered the broad strokes, even if the exact details were fuzzy.

"That's pretty much the gist of it." Willow patted her friend's back, trying to soothe her. "Honestly, it's not a big deal. Everyone gets drunk sometimes. And aside from being a little loud, you weren't that bad. It's much better than the people who throw full tantrums in public."

Jade knew Willow was just trying to be nice, but the words provided zero comfort. She shouldn't have been anything less than perfectly poised in front of him. Even if she was going to get blackout drunk, she could have picked literally any other night.

"You don't understand. I couldn't afford to get drunk last night," Jade groaned, refusing to emerge from her cocoon. It was as if staying completely hidden under the covers would make the reality of the situation disappear.

Willow couldn't bear to see her like this. She was still half-asleep herself, but she forced herself to sit up and rub Jade's shoulder. "Is this about Hugo?"

She remembered how frantic Jade had been before he arrived—she had only started drinking to calm her nerves. Willow tried to rationalize the fear away. "He honestly seemed fine. He was completely level-headed the whole time. Plus, he doesn't exactly seem like a tyrant. Do you have some sort of misunderstanding about him? Why are you so terrified of the guy?"

Mentioning Hugo only made things worse. Jade practically hyperventilated. "Did I say anything offensive to him last night?"

Given Jade's current mental state, Willow didn't dare tell the truth. "No, you were pretty well-behaved. You didn't say much."

"You're lying, aren't you?" Jade was panicked, but her logic was still intact. "If I didn't say anything, why did you have to cover my mouth?"

Willow froze, letting out an awkward laugh. She was trapped.

Jade finally lifted her head from the blankets, her expression grim. "Just tell me. The damage is already done, I can handle whatever it is."

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes." Jade nodded emphatically. "Tell me. I can take it."

Since she insisted, Willow decided to come clean. Because there was a third party involved, she worried that if she kept it a secret and Hugo brought it up at work, Jade would be completely blindsided.

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Taking a breath, Willow laid it out. "You told him you hated him. You said he was the most annoying man alive and that you were never going to buy him dinner again."

Jade sat frozen, staring into space. It was over. Her life was officially over.

She had been terrified she might have drunkenly confessed her love, but honestly, that would have been better than this. At least a love confession could be brushed off as drunk affection. Telling someone they were the bane of your existence was just insulting. Any idiot knew which one was worse.

"How did he react?" Jade asked frantically.

Willow thought back. "He seemed fine. He didn't look particularly angry. He probably just chalked it up to you being wasted and decided to let it slide."

Hugo might have let it slide when she was black-out drunk, but a sober Jade was a different story. The thought of facing him at the office sent a fresh wave of panic through her. "Willow, what am I going to do?"

Willow felt a surge of sympathy. "Do you want me to call him and test the waters?"

"No, forget it." Despite her panic, Jade's mind was clear. Even if Willow called him now, she still had to face him in person at the office later.

There was no hiding from this.

She had originally come to Willow's place for emotional support, and now that she had processed the sheer horror of the situation, it was time to get moving. She got up to wash her face and get ready.

While Jade was getting ready, Willow threw together a quick breakfast for her. That was just who Willow was—she supported her friends' decisions unconditionally and helped however she could without overstepping boundaries.

The entire commute to work, Jade was mentally preparing herself, rehearsing her apology over and over in her head. She even caught herself praying that Hugo would magically be out of the office today, sparing them both the awkwardness.

But the moment she walked through the doors, she saw him sitting in his office. Not only was he there, but he actively greeted her and told her to come to his office in a bit.

A cold sweat broke out across Jade's back.

Was this it? Was the retaliation happening this fast? They weren't even waiting a full twenty-four hours?

Whatever her fears were, she had to face the music.

After dropping her bag at her desk and chugging a glass of water to steel her nerves, she knocked on his door.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Harrington?"

"Yes." Hugo looked up from his paperwork. "Have a seat."

"That's alright, you can just tell me what this is about," Jade declined quickly. She just wanted to get her punishment over with and escape.

Hugo didn't push the issue, but he didn't get straight to the point either. "Did you sleep well last night?"

Jade practically shook. He was clearly setting the stage, reminding her that he hadn't forgotten a single second of last night's disaster.

Taking a deep breath, she replied, "Yes, I slept fine."

"So, you're completely sober right now?"

Her heart hammered against her ribs. "Yes, completely sober."

Hugo nodded. "Good. Then let's discuss what happened last night."

Jade was ready. She had accepted her fate. No matter what Hugo said next, she was prepared to drop to her knees and beg for forgiveness.

But then Hugo asked, "Are you operating under some sort of misunderstanding about me?"

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"Huh?" Even with all her mental preparation, Jade was completely blindsided by the question. What did that mean? Wasn't he going to yell at her?

"Why would you ask that?"

Hugo had his reasons, and he laid them out logically.

"From your first day here, I noticed you seem to be terrified of me. Outside of standard work discussions, you avoid speaking to me. If we cross paths, you duck away, and you refuse to make eye contact."

"Last night, you texted me to come to dinner, but by the time I arrived, you were already completely incapacitated. Is it fair to assume you simply didn't want to see me?"

"And in the car, you made it explicitly clear that you hate me, that I am the most annoying person you've met in decades, and that you never want to eat with me again."

Having laid out the evidence, Hugo offered his conclusion. "I consider myself a reasonably emotionally intelligent person. Based on your behavior, the only logical takeaway is that you deeply dislike me. But I've reviewed our interactions, and I can't recall a single instance where I've offended you. Therefore, the only remaining explanation is that you have a fundamental misunderstanding of my character."

Jade couldn't argue with a single point. Every piece of evidence was entirely factual. From his perspective, it painted a perfectly coherent picture.

She figured this was just a really long, polite way of telling her she was out of line. But that was fine—she was ready with her apology.

"So, what do you want to happen now?"

"I don't want anything to happen," Hugo said, meeting her eyes. "I just want to clear the air. If I did something to offend you unintentionally, please tell me. I am more than willing to apologize."

Jade froze. This was not how the script was supposed to go. Why was he apologizing? Wasn't she the one who was supposed to be groveling?

"Wait a second." Jade held up a hand. "What did you just say? You want to apologize to me?"

"If I'm at fault, absolutely," Hugo explained calmly. "You're incredibly capable, highly experienced, and a rare legal talent. I don't want any personal failing on my part to negatively impact you, or drive you to leave the firm."

"I'm not leaving the firm," Jade shot back. The thought had never even crossed her mind. She had fought tooth and nail just to be in the same orbit as him; she wasn't about to throw that away.

Still, she hadn't expected the conversation to take this turn. She thought even if he didn't fire her, he'd at least give her a stern dressing down. She had stood him up and insulted him, after all. His professionalism was completely throwing her off.

Hearing that she wasn't planning on quitting, Hugo seemed visibly relieved. "Then what is it about me that bothers you so much? What makes you so nervous that you drink yourself into oblivion just to deal with me?"

Jade stared at him, unable to form a single word. She didn't have a problem with him. Every single erratic behavior he listed was just the agonizing side effect of harboring a massive, secret crush. She was terrified of looking stupid in front of him.

She got nervous because she was desperately trying to be perfect—to prove her competence and secure his approval. She lived in constant fear of making a bad impression.

As for calling him annoying, it was only because he was the source of all her bittersweet, unspoken longing. A secret she couldn't share with anyone, forced to swallow the feelings all on her own. Every smile, every minor gesture dictated her entire emotional state.

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The feeling of being in love was wonderful, but the reality was mostly just a sour, suffocating ache. Her emotions weren't her own anymore; they were completely controlled by someone else. When that dragged on for long enough, a person started to lose themselves. Jade hated that feeling. She hated that he had the power to make her forget who she was.

That was why she had called him the most annoying man alive.

But the truth was, she was completely in love with him.

When Jade remained silent, Hugo assumed he was pushing too hard. He softened his tone. "You don't need to stress. You don't have to give me an answer right now. Take some time to think it over. Whenever you're ready to talk, my door is open."

"I don't need time to think," Jade countered, rejecting the olive branch. No amount of time was going to change the answer. It wasn't about needing time; it was about the fact that the truth was completely unspeakable.

"Honestly, I don't have any misunderstandings about you, and you've never done anything to offend me," she finally managed to say.

"Then why the hostility?" Hugo asked.

She obviously couldn't tell him the real reason. It would terrify him, or worse, make him think she only took the job to hit on him, getting her fired on the spot.

Searching for an out, her eyes landed on his somewhat serious expression, and she decided to go with a half-truth. "Because you look really intimidating. I just get nervous around you."

"Intimidating?" Hugo was genuinely shocked. Never in his life had anyone applied that word to him. He wouldn't necessarily call himself a warm and fuzzy guy, but he was always polite and civil. Maybe a little aloof, but 'intimidating' felt like a massive stretch.

But if that was her perception, there had to be a reason. He nodded slowly. "Understood. I'll make an effort to be more approachable."

Jade had literally just pulled the excuse out of thin air, and she was stunned that he actually accepted it. Terrified of her own lie unraveling, she just wanted to escape. "Is there anything else? If not, I'm going to get back to work."

Hugo didn't press her further. "That's all. You can go."

Hugo remained perfectly still as she walked out. Once she was out of earshot, he pulled out his phone, opened the camera, and stared at his own reflection. "Do I really look that intimidating?" he muttered to himself.

Back at her desk, Jade saw a message from Willow checking in. Willow wanted to know if she was okay, what Hugo had said, and if she needed her to come down to the office.

Thinking about Hugo's bizarre reaction, the whole thing still felt like a fever dream. Regardless, the crisis was temporarily averted.

She texted Willow back. "I'm fine, don't worry. He didn't really say much."

Seeing the response, Willow finally relaxed. Jade had been such a wreck that morning, she had genuinely been worried. "Okay, good. Have a good day at work."

Willow put her phone down. Since she didn't have to go into the office today, she decided to catch up on her own life. Between taking care of Martha and managing her workload, she hadn't had a second to breathe. Just as she was about to head into the study to get some things done, her phone rang. It was Silas.

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Willow put her things down and answered. "Mr. Thorne."

"Yes," Silas's voice came through the line. "Are you at home?"

"I am. What's wrong?" Assuming it was an emergency at the office, she rushed to add, "I'm not doing much. If you need me, I can head to the office right now."

"It's not about work," Silas clarified smoothly. "It's good that you're home. Stay there, I'll be there in a minute."

"In a minute?" Willow was stunned. "You're coming to my place?"

"Yeah. I'm about five minutes out."

His abrupt visit made Willow assume the worst. She stood up instantly, her heart racing. "What is it? Did something happen?"

"No, it's nothing major, but it's easier to explain in person."

The truth was, Silas didn't have anything important to tell her. He had simply bought fresh groceries and wanted to come over and cook her some soup. But saying that over the phone felt a bit too intimate, so he kept it vague.

He also knew that if he asked for permission, she would probably say no, so he opted for the 'ask for forgiveness, not permission' route.

Even though he said it wasn't a big deal, Willow was still anxious. She didn't even bother to change out of her pajamas before hurrying downstairs.

By the time she reached the lobby, Silas's car was pulling up. Seeing him step out with several large grocery bags, she looked utterly confused. "What is all this?"

Silas walked toward her, his eyes anchored on her.

She must have just rolled out of bed. She was wearing soft, loose cotton pajamas, her face completely bare of makeup. Her hair was swept up in a messy bun, with a few stray strands framing her face, giving her a soft, sleepy look.

Her features looked incredibly clean and bright, her skin luminous, her eyelashes resting softly against her cheeks. She looked a bit dazed.

Even though she normally wore light makeup, this completely natural state was different. She looked pure, untouched, like disturbed moonlight—quiet, delicate, and devastatingly beautiful.

Silas felt a profound flutter in his chest. As he stepped closer, his voice was unbelievably soft. "I brought some groceries. You said you were exhausted last night, so I bought some ingredients for a restorative soup. I'm going to cook for you."

Willow was stunned. He had driven all the way over here first thing in the morning just to make her breakfast?

Before she could process it, Silas spoke again. "Let's not stand out here. Let's go upstairs. It's not freezing, but there's a breeze, and I don't want you catching a cold."

It suddenly hit Willow that Silas was expecting to come up to her apartment. This had happened once before—he had waited downstairs and offered to come up for a meal. She had made up a terrible excuse to turn him down, and they ended up eating at his place instead.

Now, they were in the exact same situation, except this time he had shown up with bags full of groceries. Rejecting him now would be incredibly rude.

She hesitated for a second. "Give me just a minute. I need to make a phone call."

Silas immediately assumed she was going to call Julian Sinclair. As much as he hated to admit it, it was an undeniable fact: she was still legally married to Julian.

He could pretend he didn't care when it was just the two of them, but he couldn't force her to live in that same delusion.

Silas didn't say a word. He simply took two steps back, silently giving her the space to make the call.

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Willow dialed Jade's number. Since she was staying at Jade's place, it wouldn't be right to invite Silas inside without giving her a heads-up.

Jade was ecstatic. She would have had reservations if it were anyone else, but this was Silas. She'd been praying for Willow and Silas to get together. A quick visit was more than fine with her.

Willow hung up and turned to Silas. "All set. Let's go up."

She reached for the heavy grocery bags in his hands, but he smoothly sidestepped her. "Your roommate agreed?" Silas asked, his tone dropping a fraction of a degree.

Willow assumed he knew she was staying with Jade, perhaps from a passing comment she'd made earlier. "Yeah, she was fine with it."

Yet, Silas's demeanor seemed a bit colder than a moment ago. Willow brushed it off, figuring the bags were just heavy.

At the apartment door, she asked him to wait while she grabbed some slippers. A moment later, she returned with an apologetic smile, handing him a flimsy pair of disposable hotel slippers. "I'm so sorry, we don't have any men's slippers. Can you make do with these?"

"It's fine," Silas said, stepping inside. He didn't mind the footwear, but his analytical mind was already spinning. Not a single pair of men's slippers in the house? Even if she wasn't living with Julian, surely she'd have something. And the way she had spoken on the phone just now—it hadn't sounded like she was talking to a distant landlord or a stranger.

He carried the groceries into the kitchen, his gaze sweeping the space.

From the living room to the dining area, the apartment was impeccably clean and distinctly feminine. The decor was light, breezy, and dotted with cute, pastel accents. It looked exactly like a place shared by two young women. There was zero trace of masculine energy.

"Silas, come have some water," Willow called from the living room.

He walked over and took the glass she offered. "It's just Jade and me living here," she explained, gesturing to the cozy space. "We rarely have guests, so everything is pretty basic. I hope you don't mind."

Silas barely heard the second half of her sentence. His mind zeroed in on the most crucial detail. "You and Jade live here?"

Willow looked at him, puzzled. She thought he already knew. "Yes. When I first moved back to New York, I didn't have a place lined up. Between work and taking care of my mom, I didn't have time to apartment hunt, so Jade let me crash here."

A sharp pang of regret hit Silas. If he had known she was scrambling for a place when she returned, he would have stepped in immediately and handled everything.

He also felt a surge of foolishness for his earlier bout of blind jealousy. She had explicitly told him her marriage with Julian was completely fractured.

But logic was a fragile thing. When you truly loved someone, rationality often took a backseat to raw emotion.

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When he remained silent, Willow shifted uncomfortably. "What's wrong? Did I say something to upset you?"

"No, I'm not upset," Silas said, his dark eyes fixed on her. "I was just thinking about a few things."

"Bad things?" Willow asked.

"No. Just reflecting on where I fell short."

"Oh." Willow didn't push. It sounded personal, and she wasn't one to pry. She wanted to pivot the conversation.

But Silas beat her to it. "I promise you," he said, his voice dropping to a serious, resonant timbre, "that will never happen again."

Willow didn't entirely understand what he was promising, but she nodded anyway. She trusted him implicitly. Whatever his reasons were, she knew they were grounded.

After finishing his water, Silas moved to the kitchen to unpack. Willow finally got a good look at the sheer volume of groceries he had brought.

The first bag held the makings of a rich, restorative broth: an organic free-range chicken and a bundle of fresh herbs and root vegetables. It was the ultimate comfort meal.

The second bag was packed with premium ingredients for healthy entrees—asparagus, jumbo shrimp, fresh greens, and high-quality cuts of meat, all perfectly portioned for maximum nutrition.

The final bag was filled with high-end wellness supplements and organic vitamins, neatly stacked in elegant boxes along the counter.

Seeing the feast he was preparing, Willow felt a twinge of guilt. She wanted to contribute, but she knew offering to pay for the groceries would only insult him and ruin the mood.

"How about I cook today?" she offered.

Silas chuckled softly. "Do you even know what I'm making?"

Willow nodded. "I have a good guess. You've got everything paired up so perfectly."

"Smart girl," he teased, a fond smile touching his lips. "But I'm not letting you near the stove. Go relax in the living room. I'll call you when it's ready."

"I'm not leaving you alone in here. You're the guest," Willow insisted, crossing her arms stubbornly. "It's bad enough you're cooking; I'm not going to abandon you."

"Fine. Then you can stand right there." He pointed to a spot near the wall, far enough from the stove to keep her safe from any splashing oil or heat.

Willow obediently took her position. "Can I at least do something to help?"

"No need. I already prepped the difficult stuff at home. I just need to cook it."

Willow pressed on. "I can chop the garlic and onions."

He shook his head. "The smell is too strong. I don't want it clinging to you."

Willow sighed in defeat. "Come on, there has to be something I can do."

"You really want to help?"

"Yes."

Silas glanced down at his wrists. "Then come roll up my sleeves. My hands are wet."

"Okay."

Willow stepped close, her fingers gently grasping the fabric of his cuffs. Up close, the first thing she noticed was how beautiful his hands were. His fingers were long and elegantly structured, the faint blue veins tracing across the back of his hands adding a touch of rugged masculinity to his refined aura. His wrists were lean but undeniably strong, moving with a restrained, aristocratic grace.

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Standing this close, she was enveloped by his signature scent—a clean, crisp woodsy aroma with deep notes of sandalwood and amber.

She held her breath as she folded the fabric back twice. "Is this good?"

"A little higher," he murmured.

She gave it another roll. "How about now?"

"Perfect." Silas extended his other arm. "Now this one."

Willow repeated the process. Because they were standing mere inches apart, every time she lifted her eyes, she was met with the sharp line of his jaw, his sensual mouth, and his intense, magnetic gaze. Her heart hammered against her ribs, her eyelashes fluttering nervously as she kept her head bowed, her ears burning red.

When she finally finished, a rush of reckless adrenaline hijacked her brain. "Do you often have other people roll up your sleeves for you?"

The words tumbled out before she could stop them. She instantly regretted the question, not expecting him to dignify such a bold inquiry with an answer.

But Silas didn't brush it off. He looked down at her, his expression utterly sincere. "No. You're the only one who's ever done this for me."

Willow couldn't meet his eyes. She took a hasty step back, ducking her head to hide her flushed cheeks.

Seeing her flustered state, Silas mercifully let the subject drop and focused on the stove. He kept her involved with small tasks—asking her to hand him a plate or pass a spice jar—just enough to make her feel included.

Because of the slow-simmered broth, the meal took some time. By noon, he had plated three gorgeous dishes and a deeply fragrant soup. The spread looked like it belonged in a five-star restaurant.

Willow couldn't resist snapping a quick picture with her phone.

Silas didn't rush her, waiting patiently until she tucked her phone away before ladling a bowl of soup for her. "Try it."

It was rich, savory, and perfectly balanced. Willow finished it in record time and held out her bowl. "That's incredible. I want another."

Silas chuckled at her eagerness. "Pace yourself. It's rich."

Despite the warning, he filled her bowl again, making sure to let it cool slightly before handing it back.

The rest of the meal was just as spectacular. The meat was tender, the vegetables crisp and perfectly seasoned. If she hadn't watched him cook it with her own eyes, she never would have believed a corporate titan like Silas Thorne possessed such culinary talent.

"Is there anything in this world you can't do?" she marveled.

"Of course there is," Silas replied. While he loved her admiration, he didn't want her placing him on an impossible pedestal. He wanted her to see him as a man, not an untouchable idol. "Plenty of things. I can't do lab research, and I don't know how to fly a plane."

He left out the most important one: he still hadn't figured out how to win the heart of the woman sitting across from him. But he kept that to himself, not wanting to pressure her.

Willow laughed. "Most normal people can't do those things either."

"Exactly. I'm just a normal person."

"If you're normal, then ordinary doesn't exist."

"It does," he said softly, his gaze locking onto hers. "To me, you are anything but ordinary."

Willow smiled, assuming he was just charming her, and went back to her food.

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Near the end of the meal, Willow stared at the last piece of chicken on her plate. She was completely full but felt terrible wasting it.

She raised her fork, fully intending to force it down, when Silas intervened. "If you're full, don't eat it. Give it to me."

Willow blinked, thinking he misunderstood. "This is from my plate. If you want more, there's plenty in the kitchen."

"I know." Silas didn't miss a beat. "You're full, aren't you?"

Without waiting for an answer, he reached across the table, his large hand gently wrapping over hers, and guided her fork to deposit the leftover chicken onto his own plate. "You never have to force yourself around me. You can always pass your leftovers to me."

Before Willow could protest, he casually ate the piece of chicken. She pulled her hand back, her heart doing a strange little flip.

Silas ate with ruthless efficiency. He had spent the first half of the meal focused entirely on her—serving her soup, placing choice cuts of meat on her plate, ensuring she was catered to. When he finally focused on his own meal, he cleared his plate in minutes.

When it was time to clean up, Willow absolutely refused to let him do the dishes. Fortunately, the apartment had a dishwasher, so it was a simple matter of loading the plates.

Silas didn't fight her on it, instead leaning casually against the counter, watching her work. "Have you thought about moving?"

The question came out of nowhere, but since it was Silas, Willow answered honestly. "I have."

Living with Jade indefinitely wasn't a sustainable plan. Jade refused to take a dime for rent, which made Willow feel incredibly guilty. Plus, she knew Jade had cut work trips short just to check in on her.

On top of that, when her mother was finally discharged, Martha would need to live with her. They couldn't both crash in Jade's guest room.

"I've looked at a few places, but nothing felt right," Willow continued. "I'm planning to do some more apartment hunting this week."

A subtle gleam sparked in Silas's eyes. "Oh? What exactly are you looking for?"

He already knew he could fulfill any requirement she named.

Treating it like casual conversation, Willow listed the criteria she had been obsessing over for days. "I need something with a bit more space so I can bring my mom in when she's discharged. It has to be in a quiet, green neighborhood—a good environment for her recovery. And ideally, it shouldn't be too far from the office, so I can commute easily and check on her."

She trailed off, feeling suddenly self-conscious. "Saying it out loud makes it sound like an impossible wish list."

Finding a place in New York City that met all those demands was like searching for a unicorn, which was exactly why she hadn't found anything yet.

Silas's expression didn't change. He looked completely unfazed. "Is that it? Nothing else?"

"Yeah," Willow nodded. "That's a lot to ask for."

"It's not that complicated. I actually own a property right near your office that hits every single one of those marks."

Willow's eyes lit up. "Really?"

She had been stressing over finding a home before Martha left the hospital. If Silas had a solution, it was the answer to her prayers.

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"Where exactly is the apartment?" Willow asked.

Silas paused for a fraction of a second. "I have quite a few properties. I don't remember the exact details of this one. Arthur Vance handles my real estate portfolio. Let me give him a call."

"Of course, go ahead," Willow said, stepping back to give him space.

Silas pulled out his phone and walked toward the hallway, putting some distance between them.

Willow found it slightly odd. In the past, he had never hesitated to take calls in front of her. Even during their business trip to Seattle, he had conducted a board meeting with her sitting right there in the room. Why the sudden need for privacy?

She quickly rationalized it. Real estate details were private, financial matters. It made perfect sense that he wouldn't want to broadcast them.

The reality, however, was entirely different.

The moment the call connected, Silas fired off Willow's exact list of requirements. "Can you find a property that matches this within a half-hour radius of Merit Biotech?"

He had lied to Willow. He owned plenty of luxury real estate in New York, but none that perfectly matched her highly specific needs.

Arthur Vance was caught off guard by the sudden demand, but as the ultimate executive assistant, he didn't skip a beat. "Please give me a moment to verify, Mr. Thorne."

Ten minutes later, Arthur called back. "Sir, I've located a property that fits perfectly. However, the owner is only looking to sell, not rent."

"Buy it," Silas ordered without hesitation.

"There is one complication. Because of the rushed timeline, the seller is demanding three times the market value."

Silas didn't even blink. "Give him three times the value. But I have one condition: the current occupants need to vacate today. By midnight tonight, I want that property fully furnished, sanitized, and ready for immediate move-in."

"Understood, sir. I'll handle it immediately."

Silas ended the call and strolled back to the kitchen. "All set. You can move in tomorrow."

Willow stared at him, stunned by the sheer efficiency. "That fast?"

"It was just a quick arrangement."

"Can I go take a look at it now?"

"Let's wait until tomorrow," Silas said, gently rejecting the request. "Tomorrow is Saturday. You can just move straight in."

Even though he deflected, Willow didn't push. She trusted Silas's judgment implicitly. If he said the place was perfect, it was perfect. Still, her head was spinning. One second she had been drowning in housing stress, and the next, the problem was miraculously solved.

When Jade got home from work that evening, Willow was still reeling. She recounted the whole story, and Jade was equally floored.

Jade knew Willow had been stressed about the apartment hunt and had even told her to just stay permanently. To have the entire crisis resolved in a single afternoon was mind-blowing.

But then again, this was Silas Thorne. Of course, he got it done.

While Jade was sad to lose her roommate, she was thrilled to see Silas making his move. She wasn't about to stand in the way of two painfully slow-burn lovers finally making some progress.

"Jade, are you upset?" Willow asked cautiously. "I know I'm springing this on you out of nowhere."

"If it were anyone else, I'd be annoyed," Jade grinned. "But since Silas is the one who found the place, I'm all for it."

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"You think he's that reliable too, right?" Willow smiled, assuming Jade meant Silas was trustworthy when it came to real estate.

Jade laughed out loud. "Oh, he's extremely reliable. I trust his judgment completely. Plus, you two are going to thank me for this later."

Willow was confused. "I'm already thanking you for letting me stay here. Why later?"

Realizing Willow was entirely oblivious, Jade waved it off. "Never mind, you'll get it eventually. Anyway, tell me more about his visit today. How was it?"

Willow gave her a full rundown of the afternoon, right down to the gourmet meal and the perfectly simmered broth. Even though Jade claimed she didn't mind having Silas over, Willow still wanted to be respectful of her friend's space.

Jade, however, couldn't care less about the apartment boundaries. Her jaw was practically on the floor. "Wait, let me get this straight. The Silas Thorne came over, brought his own groceries, and cooked you a homemade meal?"

Holy hell. Was this really the cold, ruthless corporate king she had heard terrifying rumors about? He sounded more like a devoted househusband.

"Are you absolutely sure you two aren't dating?" Jade demanded. If they weren't, she couldn't fathom a man going to these ridiculous lengths for a woman.

Willow shook her head. She admitted that Silas treated her exceptionally well, but he had never once confessed any romantic feelings. Besides, Willow clearly remembered him mentioning that he already had someone he deeply loved. She didn't want to overthink it. Overthinking only led to disappointment.

Desperate to change the subject, she offered, "His cooking really is amazing. Maybe next time he makes something, you can join us?"

"Hard pass," Jade instantly rejected the idea. "I am not playing third wheel. He's only gentle with you. If I show up, he'll probably freeze me out."

"He wouldn't do that. He's very much a gentleman."

"No, thank you. I know when to stay in my lane," Jade smirked. "Oh, by the way, I got the official word on your divorce case today. The judge denied the petition."

The news had been weighing on Jade, and she wanted to deliver it directly. "But don't panic. We are filing an immediate appeal for the second trial."

Even though Willow had braced herself for this outcome, hearing it made her stomach drop. She took a deep breath, forcing the disappointment down. "Then let's file the appeal right away."

"Exactly," Jade said, shifting into sharp lawyer mode. "Overturning a 'denied' ruling in the first instance is statistically tough, but it's not impossible. Don't lose hope. We're going to take Julian Sinclair down together."

"I trust you," Willow said firmly.

The next morning, Jade received an urgent call from a client and had to rush out, leaving her unable to help Willow pack.

Feeling guilty about leaving her friend to move alone, Jade had a brilliant idea. "Why don't you call Silas? He can help you move. It'll save you so much effort, and since he found the place, he knows all the logistics."

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"He already texted me the address," Willow replied, shaking her head. "He has his own life. I don't want to bother him with my chores."

"It's not a bother," Jade countered with a knowing smirk. "It's giving him an opportunity. Trust me, he's probably dying for an excuse to come over right now."

Right on cue, the doorbell chimed.

Jade practically skipped to the door and pulled it open. She froze, her eyes widening. Talk about perfect timing.

Silas stood in the hallway. He had traded his usual imposing corporate suits for something effortlessly stylish. He wore a light gray, high-thread-count knit sweater, the collar casually open to reveal the sharp lines of his collarbone. Tailored charcoal trousers hung perfectly on his long legs, paired with bespoke leather derby shoes. Gold-rimmed glasses rested on the bridge of his nose. He looked clean, restrained, and dripping with quiet, old-money wealth.

No matter how many times Jade saw him, she was floored by how unfairly attractive the man was.

Before Jade could find her voice, Silas spoke. "Hello. I'm looking for Willow. Is she in?"

"Yes! Yes, she's here," Jade spun around, yelling down the hall. "Willow! Get out here!"

Willow, who was in the middle of taping a box, hurried toward the foyer. "What's wrong?"

When she saw Silas standing in the doorway, she stopped dead in her tracks. The casual elegance of his outfit caught her completely off guard. He looked incredibly handsome, a breath of fresh air compared to his boardroom persona.

"Why are you here?" she asked, a spark of unmistakable delight in her voice.

"I'm here to help you move," Silas said plainly.

"You really didn't have to. I don't have that much stuff. I can manage it myself."

"It's fine. I didn't have any plans today anyway."

They fell into a natural rhythm, completely ignoring the fact that Jade was standing right between them.

Feeling like the world's brightest third wheel, Jade quickly grabbed her purse. "Alright, well, I've got to run to this meeting! Have fun moving!"

Before she slipped out the door, Jade shot Willow a thumbs-up and mouthed, 'Go get him!' Thankfully, Silas had his back turned and missed the frantic pantomime. Willow's face burned hot, not even knowing how to explain her friend's behavior.

Once inside, Silas proved to be a model of polite restraint. He stayed in the living room and didn't step foot near her bedroom until she explicitly invited him in.

Willow's bedroom was awash in pale blues, soft grays, and crisp whites. It was impeccably clean and serene, much like Willow herself. The low-profile oak bed was made with cool-toned linens, free of any clutter. A sheer curtain drifted gently in the breeze by the window, softening the morning sunlight. The vanity held only a few essential skincare bottles. Standing in the room felt like stepping into a peaceful sanctuary.

"I've got everything packed," Willow told him. "I just need to call a cab."

"No need for a cab," Silas said. "I've already arranged transport."

He pulled out his phone and made a brief call. Minutes later, heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway, and several men appeared at the door.

The lead man, dressed in a sharp uniform, bowed respectfully. "Mr. Thorne, are we cleared to begin?"

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Silas turned to Willow. "Are you ready?"

Willow didn't answer immediately. She was still trying to process the scene in front of her. She had assumed Silas might hire a couple of guys with a box truck. She hadn't expected a full-scale tactical operation.

The crew standing in the hallway belonged to a premium VIP relocation service. They wore immaculate dark uniforms, white gloves, and protective shoe covers. The foreman presented his ID and a strict non-disclosure agreement to Willow in a hushed tone, then stepped back, eyes lowered, waiting for her command.

Behind them, the crew carried thick quilted padding, custom wardrobe boxes, industrial shock-absorbing foam, and heavy-duty wooden crates. It looked like they were preparing to transport priceless museum artifacts, not her modest belongings.

Willow swallowed hard. The labor costs for this crew were definitely worth more than everything she owned combined.

Feeling awkward addressing the intimidating team, she reached out and grabbed Silas by the wrist, pulling him gently to the side.

The moment her fingers wrapped around his arm, a jolt of heat shot straight to his chest, causing him to freeze mid-step.

When he didn't move, Willow gave his arm a tiny tug. "Can you come here for a second? I need to talk to you."

Snapping out of his daze, Silas immediately followed her, his hand naturally lifting to gently brush her cheek in a comforting gesture. "Don't stress. What's on your mind?"

Willow had grown so accustomed to his casual, tender touches that she didn't even flinch. She leaned in and whispered, "Isn't this moving crew a little... excessive?"

"Not at all. This is the standard service we use."

"I understand that's standard for you," Willow reasoned. "You have massive, expensive estates. But I don't need this. My things aren't worth anything. The moving fee is probably higher than my entire net worth."

Silas frowned, his dark eyes flashing with disapproval. "Who told you your things aren't worth anything?"

"It's just the truth."

"Not in my reality," Silas said firmly. "To me, everything that belongs to you is priceless. Besides, I have the money. I don't care what it costs."

"Having money doesn't mean you should just burn it," Willow muttered.

Silas caught the whisper. "Spending it on you is never a waste."

"But—"

"Enough," Silas interrupted, cutting off her protests with a soft smile. "We're not debating this. Go tell them what needs to go in the truck."

With the crew standing at attention, Willow realized it was too late to send them away. She gave up and started directing them to her boxes.

Thanks to the sheer manpower, the apartment was cleared in record time. Willow went to grab her overnight bag of toiletries, but Silas stopped her. "Leave it. The new place is fully stocked."

Under Silas's meticulous direction, Willow found herself walking out the door without breaking a single sweat.

Sitting in the passenger seat of his car, the reality of the situation finally hit her. Time had flown by. Just a few months ago, she had returned from Seattle absolutely shattered—dealing with her mother's terrifying diagnosis, a toxic work environment, and a brutal divorce battle.

Now, her mother was stabilizing, her career was flourishing, the divorce was progressing, and she was moving into a beautiful new home. For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, she could finally breathe.

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She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that none of this would be possible without Silas. Regardless of what his true feelings for her were, he had been her steadfast protector. That was an undeniable fact.

"Where did you go just now?" Silas asked, noticing her staring out the window, lost in thought.

"I was just trying to figure out how to properly thank you," Willow answered honestly.

Silas let out a low chuckle. "Just for helping you move?"

"For today, yes. But for everything else, too," she said. "For helping me at work. For saving my mother at the hospital."

Silas didn't like it when she kept score. When he did things for her, he never viewed it as a favor. It was instinct. He didn't want her gratitude.

But since she was so determined, he decided to indulge her. "Have you come up with a plan yet?"

"No," Willow sighed. "You have everything. A standard 'thank you' dinner feels cheap, and I definitely can't afford the kind of luxury gifts you're used to."

"Maybe you should focus on what I actually like," Silas suggested smoothly.

"What do you like?" Willow tilted her head, studying him. "You always seem so detached. Like nothing really phases you."

It was true. Because Silas could buy anything the world had to offer, he radiated an effortless, untouchable calm.

"I'm human. I desire things just like anyone else," Silas said, turning his head slightly to lock eyes with her, his gaze intense and warm. "You just haven't figured out what it is yet."

"Can you just tell me?"

"No," Silas smiled, turning back to the road. "That's something you have to discover on your own."

"That could take me forever."

"There's no rush. We have all the time in the world for you to figure it out."

Before long, the car pulled up to the new apartment complex.

Willow had only seen the address on her phone, but seeing it in person took her breath away. The environment was spectacular.

It went above and beyond every requirement she had listed. The neighborhood was tranquil, lined with lush greenery and elegant water features—a perfect, healing sanctuary for her mother. Better yet, it was shockingly close to Merit Biotech, no more than a ten-minute walk. It was the absolute ideal location.

"What do you think?" Silas asked as they walked into the lobby.

"It's unbelievable," Willow beamed. "I can't believe you found a place this perfect."

Seeing her smile sent a wave of satisfaction through him. "As long as you like it."

They rode the elevator up and Silas unlocked the door to give her the grand tour. It was a spacious two-bedroom apartment with a beautiful master suite, a guest room, a sunlit

living room, and a quiet home office. It wasn't overwhelmingly massive, but it was flawless.

True to his word, the apartment was fully furnished and stocked down to the towels and silverware. It was entirely move-in ready.

Willow was thrilled. It was the perfect size—anything larger would have felt like too much upkeep and likely shattered her budget.

Which led to her one lingering concern.

"How much is the rent?" she asked, turning to him.

Silas had anticipated the question. "It's free."

"Why?"

"It's my property. If I'm letting you stay here, do you really think I care about a monthly rent check?"

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He wasn't wrong. Willow knew that to a man of his immense wealth, the rent—hell, the entire purchase price of the property—was pocket change.

But she cared. She needed an equivalent exchange to feel comfortable. She couldn't just live in a luxury apartment for free.

"You have to give me a number, Silas. I can't live here in good conscience if I'm freeloading."

"Money is the most meaningless thing in the world to me," Silas replied evenly. "If you're so determined to pay rent, you can pay me in a different currency."

"A different currency?" Willow frowned. "What else do you accept?"

"Anything. As long as it comes from you, I'll take anything but money."

Willow was thoroughly confused. "For example?"

"For example, you could take me out to dinner tonight. You could go somewhere with me tomorrow," Silas said, watching her reactions closely. "Or, you could develop a few more high-level patents for Merit Biotech. Like I said, money is useless to me. I value those things much more."

He framed it strategically. He knew that if he just told her to pay him with dates, she would panic. He had to include the patents—a professional, tangible output—to balance the scale.

He had spent an agonizing amount of time analyzing her boundaries. Willow was fiercely independent and highly sensitive. Silas had no intention of bulldozing her logic or trying to change who she was. His only goal was to protect her and keep her safe from the wreckage of her past.

If she was a delicate, bruised flower, he was more than happy to build the greenhouse. He would nurture her, stand guard against the storm, and wait for her to bloom on her own terms. Love wasn't about forcing her into a mold that suited him; it was about giving her a safe harbor where she could finally be herself.

His strategy worked flawlessly. Presented with the options, Willow's practical mind instantly latched onto the patents. Earning her keep by driving innovation for his company made perfect logical sense to her.

Since the VIP movers were currently hauling her boxes upstairs, the apartment was a flurry of activity. Silas suggested they step out for a bit.

Willow assumed they were heading down to a cafe. Instead, Silas casually strolled over to the door directly across the hall. He tapped a passcode into the smart lock, the door chiming as it unlocked, and pushed it open. He stepped aside, gesturing for her to enter.

Willow stood rooted to the spot, completely baffled. She looked at the open door, then back at Silas. "What is this?"

Silas offered a slow, devastating smile. "Exactly what it looks like. This is my apartment. Starting today, we're neighbors."

The previous afternoon, the moment Arthur secured Willow's unit, Silas had ordered him to buy the adjacent penthouse as well. The owner of this unit had also gouged them, demanding an astronomical sum far beyond three times the market value.

Silas hadn't even blinked. He finally had a legitimate excuse to live steps away from her. He would have paid ten times the price just to share the same hallway.

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"Neighbor?" Willow was still a bit confused. "I don't remember you living here before."

She had been to Silas's previous villa; the decor and environment were a step above this place. Most importantly, it was a quiet sanctuary tucked away in one of New York City's most famous luxury neighborhoods.

"I have too many properties. I forgot I even owned this apartment in The Obsidian Heights until I started looking for a place for you," Silas explained smoothly. "Since it was just sitting empty, and it's so close to Merit Biotech, I figured it would make a convenient spot for me to crash on workdays."

"But don't you think living here is a bit... modest for you?" Willow asked.

It was more than perfect for her, but for Silas Thorne, it felt like a downgrade.

"If it's good enough for you, why isn't it good enough for me?" Silas countered.

Willow wanted to point out that their statuses were entirely different. She was used to roughing it, but he had grown up surrounded by wealth and privilege. However, she could already guess how he would react. He clearly hated it when she treated him differently because of his background.

"Alright, then. It's up to you," she finally conceded.

Silas invited her in, setting out fresh fruit and desserts. They hung out together until the movers finished unloading her things.

True to their reputation, the professional moving company had everything unpacked and arranged exactly to Willow's liking by the time she walked into her new apartment. It looked even tidier than her old place. That night, Willow officially settled into The Obsidian Heights.

Meanwhile, across town, Jade Yates arrived home late after dealing with a client at Sterling & Faircrest Law Group. As she parked her car, she spotted a familiar figure standing in the shadows.

At first, Jade thought she was hallucinating from exhaustion. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. No, it wasn't a hallucination. Julian Sinclair was standing right in front of her building.

Jade had absolutely zero desire to deal with him. Feigning ignorance, she walked straight past him.

Seeing her ignore him, Julian stepped into her path. "What is your problem? I'm standing right here. Are you blind?"

"Oh? Is someone there?" Jade exaggeratedly looked around the empty street before letting her gaze land on him. She scoffed. "Are you talking about yourself? I'm sorry, I assumed you lacked basic human traits."

"Jade!" Julian snapped, his temper flaring. But he knew exactly how sharp-tongued she was, and picking a fight wouldn't get him anywhere. Besides, he was here for something much more important.

Swallowing his anger, his voice dropped to a cold demand. "Is Willow staying here with you?"

Hearing this, Jade felt a wave of relief. Thank God Willow had moved out today. Running into him here would have been a nightmare for her. Julian's presence was more of an annoyance than a real threat, but it was still incredibly sickening.

"Is that any of your business?" Jade shot back.

"Of course it is. Don't forget, we are still legally married."

"Not for long."

"That's not up to you to decide. Just answer the question: is she staying in your apartment?"

"And why the hell would I tell you?"

"If you don't tell me, I'll just follow you upstairs and see for myself."

"Go ahead and try. See how fast I call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing."

Jade was quick on her feet, and Julian quickly realized he was outmatched in a war of words. Left with no other options, he resorted to a harsh ultimatum. "Tell her this: if I had the power to make the court deny the divorce in the first trial, I have the power to ensure the second trial maintains the exact same ruling."

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"Go tell the judge that, not me," Jade said, rolling her eyes like she was looking at an absolute idiot. "Who gives a damn about what you think?"

Julian swallowed his mounting fury, barely holding himself back from storming off. He was desperate. He hadn't seen Willow in days, and she had blocked him on every single platform. After finally tracking down Jade's address, he had rushed over and waited for hours, only to find Jade instead of his wife.

"The only reason she has the nerve to act like this is because she hooked up with Arthur Vance," Julian sneered. "I suggest you tell her to think carefully. No matter how capable Arthur is, he's just an executive assistant at Merit Biotech. To put it bluntly, he's nothing but Silas Thorne's lapdog. And he's practically a middle-aged man. She really has no standards if she can stomach someone like him."

He adjusted his cuffs, his tone dripping with arrogance. "If you have the time, knock some sense into her. Instead of fooling around with some old man, she'd be much better off dropping the divorce. Anyone with half a brain can see how I stack up against Arthur Vance. As long as she's willing to come home and withdraw the lawsuit, I'm not entirely heartless. I can let her keep the title of Mrs. Sinclair."

Jade barely registered half of what he said, treating his words like a dog barking at a passing car. But when he mentioned Willow and Arthur, she couldn't hold back a burst of genuine laughter. "You actually think Willow and Arthur are involved?"

"Aren't they?" Julian retorted coldly. "I looked into her mother's hospital arrangements and her sudden job transfer. Arthur Vance orchestrated all of it. Why would he go to such lengths for her if they weren't sleeping together?"

He crossed his arms. "Besides, who else at Merit Biotech has that kind of power? Silas Thorne, obviously. But do you honestly expect me to believe Silas is the one pulling the strings?"

Julian let out a mocking laugh. "Even a fool knows a man like Silas wouldn't look twice at her. Setting aside the rumors that he has zero interest in romance, even if he did, he'd never pick her."

Warming up to his own flawless logic, Julian seemed to gain a burst of arrogant energy. "He's worth billions, flawlessly handsome, and practically controls the entire economy of Seattle. Are you seriously trying to tell me that a man who can have any young, single, stunningly beautiful woman in the world would suddenly fall for a divorced woman? Do you think anyone would actually buy that story?"

Hearing this, Jade laughed even harder.

Julian frowned. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I'm just laughing at your brilliant analysis. Keep up that exact line of thinking. It suits you."

Without giving him another glance, Jade turned on her heel and walked into her building.

She was secretly thrilled by Julian's delusions. The deeper he buried his head in the sand, the harder reality was going to smack him in the face. She couldn't wait for that day to arrive.

Once inside, Jade immediately called Willow to see how the move went.

Willow recounted all the thoughtful arrangements Silas had made. Jade was deeply satisfied, silently comparing Silas's reliability to Julian's pathetic display downstairs. Julian had been right about one thing: even a fool would know who to choose.

"I ran into Julian downstairs just now," Jade mentioned casually.

Willow's immediate reaction was pure panic. "Are you okay? Did he give you any trouble?"

"No, he doesn't have the guts," Jade reassured her. "But he was definitely looking for you. I have no idea how he found my address, but thank God you moved out today. Running into him would have ruined your night."

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"New York City is only so big. If he really wanted to dig, he was bound to find it eventually," Willow said, unsurprised. She had known what kind of man Julian was for a long time.

"I'm just sorry I dragged you into this."

"It's nothing. He didn't get a damn thing out of me except a solid verbal trashing before he scurried away. Oh, by the way, he said something else today." Jade decided to spare Willow the rest of Julian's narcissistic barking, but she felt she needed to mention the Arthur Vance situation.

"What did he say?"

"He seems to be under the delusion that you and Arthur are dating."

Willow found the whole thing utterly ridiculous. "Let him think whatever he wants. As long as he stays out of my face, I don't care."

"That's exactly what I thought. Don't even give him the time of day," Jade agreed, scoffing. "Honestly, he's so stupid. All that investigating, and he targets the wrong guy. How could you be dating Arthur when you're clearly dating Silas Thorne?"

Willow had been calmly sipping her water, but at the mention of Silas, she nearly choked. She quickly pulled the glass away, coughing. "Jade, stop talking nonsense! I am not dating him. He already has someone he likes."

"Alright, alright, you're not dating. Just let me enjoy shipping you two in peace," Jade teased, not willing to argue. In her eyes, it was only a matter of time. It all depended on how they navigated things.

"Anyway, just be careful commuting from now on. The way he looked tonight, he's not going to just let this go. He might not know where you live right now, but he knows exactly where you work. Who knows when he'll snap and show up at the office," Jade warned.

"Yeah, I'll be careful," Willow murmured, a knot of worry forming in her chest. A man like Julian was absolutely capable of causing a scene. She was finally settling into her role at Merit Biotech, and the last thing she wanted was her personal drama affecting the company that had taken a chance on her when she was at rock bottom.

The next morning, Willow got ready for work. Since her new place was so close to the office, she didn't have to wake up at the crack of dawn and sprint to catch the subway anymore. She woke up naturally, took her time with her skincare and makeup, and planned to enjoy a leisurely walk to the office.

Just as she was about to throw together a quick breakfast, her phone rang. It was Silas.

"Hello?" Willow answered, setting down her utensils, assuming it was a work emergency. "Is something wrong? I haven't left for the office yet. Give me a minute, I can be there right away."

But Silas didn't mention work at all. "Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

"Not yet," she answered, a bit bewildered.

"Perfect. I made too much. Come over and eat with me."

Figuring she could help him finish off some leftovers and save herself the trouble of cooking, Willow agreed and headed over to his apartment.

But the moment she walked in, she realized Silas's definition of 'too much' was wildly different from hers.

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In Willow's mind, making 'too much' breakfast meant an extra bowl of oatmeal or a few too many slices of toast. But when she saw the dining table, she realized how painfully limited her imagination was.

There was oatmeal, sure, but it was surrounded by a massive spread of artisanal bacon, imported cheeses, an array of delicate pastries, a perfectly seared steak with eggs, and an assortment of fresh fruits. It looked less like a home-cooked meal and more like a luxury brunch buffet at a five-star hotel.

"This is a bit exaggerated, don't you think?" Willow gasped, staring at the feast.

"It's fine," Silas said calmly. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I prepared a little bit of everything."

"I'm really not picky. I eat whatever," she replied.

Staring at the table, another thought struck her. "You didn't make all of this by yourself, did you?"

"Some of it yes, some of it no," Silas answered honestly.

"Oh, good. Thank goodness." If he had cooked the entire spread himself, he would have been up all night.

Seeing the visible relief on her face, Silas decided to have a little fun. "What? So cooking a whole table of food is exhausting, but making just a few dishes isn't?"

"That's not what I meant," Willow hurried to explain. "Cooking a few dishes is still hard work, but compared to all this, it's at least a bit more manageable."

Knowing full well what she meant, Silas continued to tease her. "I actually burned my hand making this for you."

He extended his right hand. His fingers were long, elegant, and usually immaculate. But now, a stark, angry red burn marked the back of his hand, contrasting sharply with his pale skin.

Willow's heart lurched. She immediately stepped forward and gently grasped his wrist, her voice dropping to a soft, anxious whisper. "How could you be so careless? Does it hurt?"

She lightly hovered her fingertips over the burn, pulling away instantly as if afraid of causing him more pain. Her eyes were filled with unconcealed distress.

These were hands meant to sign multi-million dollar contracts, hands that had always been perfectly cared for. Seeing them injured just because he was cooking for her made her chest tighten with guilt.

Silas had only shown her the burn because he wanted to see if she cared. But seeing the genuine panic in her eyes and the deep furrow in her brow, he suddenly felt guilty. "It's fine. It really doesn't hurt. It's just a small burn," he quickly reassured her.

But Willow wasn't having it. "Do you have a first aid kit?"

"I'm fine, it really doesn't need treating."

When he refused to tell her, she started searching the apartment herself. Finally unable to watch her scramble around, Silas relented and fetched the kit for her.

Willow guided him to the sofa and sat him down. She quickly retrieved the burn ointment and cotton swabs, kneeling in front of him and gently supporting his wrist. His hand was large and striking, and resting in her palm, it suddenly felt incredibly intimate.

Growing up, apart from his family and the household staff, Silas had never been cared for like this by a woman. It was a strange, intoxicating feeling—a mix of joy and a sudden, quiet vulnerability. So this was what it felt like to be truly looked after.

"This might sting a bit. Try to bear with it," Willow murmured, her eyelashes fluttering as she looked down. She applied a tiny dab of ointment to the swab and spread it over the red skin with agonizing slowness, terrified of pressing too hard.

"Does it hurt?" she asked softly.

Silas looked down at her serious expression, feeling a helpless sense of affection. "It doesn't hurt. You don't have to be so careful. I'm not that fragile."

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Willow ignored him, keeping her eyes lowered as she meticulously applied the cream, making sure to cover the surrounding skin as well.

Silas gazed at her delicate profile, then down at his hand resting securely in hers. The minor sting of the burn had long vanished, replaced by a warm, tingling sensation that spread all the way to his chest.

When she finally finished, Silas suddenly wrapped his fingers lightly around her wrist. His voice was slightly hoarse, carrying a trace of anticipation he hadn't even realized was there. "Are you really this worried about me?"

"Of course I am," Willow said, still checking to make sure she hadn't missed a spot. "You got hurt making this meal. Technically speaking, you got hurt because of me. Why wouldn't I be worried?"

She sighed. "Besides, you've lived a privileged life since you were a kid. Forget being burned, you've probably barely stepped foot in a kitchen. If your parents saw this, they'd be way more upset than I am."

Listening to her earnest logic, Silas wanted to laugh, but the overwhelming feeling was pure happiness. She really did care about him.

"If a little burn gets me this kind of treatment, I'd say it's completely worth it."

"Don't say that," Willow immediately chided him, looking up with a frown. "Nothing is more important than your health."

Seeing her distressed expression, Silas quickly surrendered. "Alright, alright. You're right. I'll listen to you."

Despite the massive spread, Willow didn't eat much. Once they finished, she prepared to head to the office. Worried that walking in together might spark office gossip, she suggested she leave first and he follow a bit later.

Silas wasn't thrilled about the idea, but for her sake, he agreed. He silently promised himself that this arrangement was only temporary. It wouldn't stay like this forever.

The walk to work was wonderful. Avoiding the suffocating subway commute and actually having time to appreciate the spring morning in New York City was a luxury she couldn't have imagined a month ago.

Unfortunately, her good mood evaporated the moment she approached the Merit Biotech building. There, standing near the entrance like an absolute nightmare, was Julian Sinclair.

Even though Jade had warned her last night, seeing him here so early in the morning was a nasty shock. He was like a leech she just couldn't scrape off.

Willow marched straight up to him. "Get out of here. You're not welcome."

Julian sneered. "Why are you so panicked? Afraid someone will see us? Is it because of that Arthur Vance guy? Does he know about us? Did you ever bother to tell him you're a married woman?"

Willow treated his barrage of questions like garbage. "Get the hell out."

Julian acted like he hadn't heard a word. "I assume Jade already relayed my message from yesterday. Think about it carefully. You know what the smart choice is."

"And if I refuse?" Willow retorted coldly.

"Then we'll just have to wait and see. I have plenty of ways to make you choose."

"Are you even a man, Julian? If you are, just sign the damn papers and get it over with," Willow spat, thoroughly disgusted by him.

"Reverse psychology doesn't work on me," Julian mocked, his eyes dark. "All you need to know is that until I say this game is over, you don't get to quit. I'm the one who sets the rules."

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Before Willow could fire back, she caught sight of Silas approaching in the distance. He had left his apartment later, specifically staggering their arrival times so they wouldn't run into each other at the office. Neither of them had anticipated this confrontation.

Julian saw Silas too. Instantly, he reached out and grabbed Willow's arm, jerking her close so that from a distance, it looked like they were locked in an intimate embrace.

"Your boss is here," Julian whispered maliciously. "Take a wild guess. How do you think he'll react to an employee whose messy private life is damaging the company's image?"

Willow hadn't even thought of that. She only knew that being manhandled by Julian, especially with Silas watching, made her skin crawl. "Let go of me."

"What? Are you scared?" Sensing her panic, Julian smiled darkly. "You clawed your way into this job. You definitely don't want to lose it. How do you think Silas Thorne will react when he finds out you're screwing Arthur Vance? Do you think he'll get pissed and fire you both?"

As Silas drew closer, Willow's desperation to break free intensified. She lowered her voice into a lethal threat. "If you don't back off right now, I'm calling the cops. Let everyone see the great CEO of the Sinclair Group acting like a lunatic on the street. If you feel like Sinclair's stock hasn't plummeted enough lately, by all means, keep pushing me."

"Even if the cops show up, this is a domestic dispute," Julian scoffed, though he finally released his grip on her arm. "No rush. I'm giving you time to think it over. I have all the time in the world to drag this out. But hear this: I will never agree to a divorce, and your appeal won't change the court's mind."

The second Julian walked away, Silas approached, his face like a thundercloud. "What was he doing here?"

"Nothing. Just some irrelevant nonsense," Willow deflected. She didn't want him dragged into her chaotic mess, and she definitely didn't want it affecting Merit Biotech.

But Silas wasn't letting it go. The image of Julian standing so close to her was burning a hole in his brain. "Tell him to stay away. Merit and the Sinclair Group might have a partnership, but it's not an unbreakable bond. If he keeps parading around here and pisses me off, I have no problem killing the contract."

Alarmed that he might actually make a rash business decision because of her, Willow quickly intervened. "There's a breach of contract clause. If one party terminates without cause, the penalty fees are astronomical."

"Do you honestly think I care about the money?" Silas asked sharply. He had never cared about the financial fallout; the only reason he had agreed to work with the Sinclair Group in the first place was to respect her wishes.

"Of course I know you don't care about the money," Willow said softly. She realized his reaction was strange—he wasn't just angry, he was sulking. It was as if he felt emotionally slighted and was acting out.

Gently, adopting a tone usually reserved for coaxing someone down from a ledge, she said, "This project needs a supplier. Right now, there isn't a better match on the market than the Sinclair Group. Besides, we're already halfway through the development phase. Terminating the contract now is incredibly risky. Let's just hold off and see how things go, okay?"

Silas didn't actually give a damn about the project's risks. He had more than enough capital to absorb the loss of a single contract, or even an entire subsidiary, without feeling

a dent. But her soft, gentle coaxing worked wonders on his mood. He could feel her trying to pacify him, and he completely bought into it.

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His tone softened marginally. "I was just throwing it out there. You're the Project Lead; you have the final say. But I am dead serious about Julian Sinclair. I never want to see his face again, and you need to keep your distance from him."

Preferably, Julian would just vanish from her life completely.

"Alright, alright. I'll try my best to avoid him from now on."

Soothed by Willow's gentle assurances, Silas's mood finally lifted. But at the same time, a stark realization hit him: his possessiveness was spiraling out of control.

Julian was legally her husband, yet Silas had just laid down demands about who she could see, and she had agreed without hesitation. Silas was genuinely confused. Driven by this surging territorial instinct, he desperately needed to know where he stood with her.

Ever since she had pulled away from their near-kiss in Seattle, he hadn't brought it up again. He had quietly retreated to his designated safe zone, maintaining a respectful distance.

But deep down, the urge to break through that barrier and move forward was consuming him.

"Don't work overtime tonight," Silas said suddenly. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay, no overtime," Willow promised. At this point, she would agree to anything he asked.

For the rest of the day, Silas couldn't focus on anything else. He mentally drafted and re-drafted his confession, trying to find the perfect words that wouldn't scare her off.

Willow, on the other hand, was less preoccupied, though she kept her promise. As the workday drew to a close, she packed up her desk, fully intending to head straight home.

Just as she was grabbing her bag, her phone buzzed with a call from an unknown number. Assuming it was a client, she answered it without a second thought. But the moment she heard the voice on the other end, her face twisted in revulsion.

Julian had used a burner number to get past her block. "Off work yet?"

Just the sound of his voice made her stomach turn. She immediately moved to hang up, but Julian was faster. "Don't even think about hanging up. I'm standing right outside the Merit building. If you cut this call, I'm walking through the front doors and coming up to your floor."

Willow suppressed a surge of fury. "What the hell do you want?"

"To pick you up from work," Julian replied, a smirk evident in his tone.

Willow found the entire charade laughable. "Take your little performance somewhere else. I don't have time to play pretend with you."

Ignoring her venom, Julian stated calmly, "If you don't come down, I'll wait right here. I have all the time in the world."

"Then wait."

"Fine. Assuming you don't mind me stopping every single one of your coworkers to ask about you. And while I'm at it, I might just have a chat with Silas Thorne."

Willow didn't care about the coworkers, but mentioning Silas struck a nerve. Silas had explicitly stated that morning how much he loathed seeing Julian, and the last thing she wanted was to drag him into this mess and ruin his mood again.

"Where are you?"

"Come downstairs, walk out the front, and take a right. You can't miss me."

Glancing at the clock, Willow figured she had a few minutes before Silas finished up. If she hurried, she could handle Julian and be back before Silas even noticed. She hung up and sprinted for the elevators.

Stepping out of the Merit building and following his directions, she spotted him instantly. Truth be told, it would have been impossible to miss him.

Julian was dressed to the nines, leaning against a gleaming Rolls-Royce, holding a massive, ostentatious bouquet of red roses. He looked like a walking billboard for arrogance.

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As Willow approached, Julian held out the flowers. "For you. Do you like them?"

Willow didn't even look at them. She shoved the bouquet away. "Are you out of your mind?"

Julian acted as if the rejection never happened, keeping the charming smile plastered on his face. "Ah, so you don't like roses. I'll get something else next time."

"Julian, can you act like a normal human being?" Willow glared at him like he was a lunatic. Eager to get this over with, she cut straight to the chase. "I came down here like you asked. Now get out."

Julian shook his head. "Did you forget? I'm here to pick you up from work."

"I've really given you too much leeway," Willow said, her voice ice-cold. "Don't flatter yourself by thinking I came down because your little threats worked. I just don't want to make a public scene. At the end of the day, I'm just an employee. You're the CEO of the Sinclair Group. I have nothing to lose, but you do. If you push me and this turns into a massive public scandal, do you honestly think you'll walk away unscathed?"

She took a step closer, her eyes blazing. "Forget Vivienne. I guarantee the Sinclair family elders will skin you alive if you drag the company's name through the mud."

Having lived among the Sinclairs, Willow knew exactly how that family operated. Beneath the glittering facade of immense wealth and power lay a rotten core of greed and vicious power struggles. Every polite conversation was laced with poison; every alliance was built on calculated betrayal.

It was the only environment that could have produced twisted people like Julian and Vivienne.

Sure enough, her words struck a nerve. Julian froze.

Pressing her advantage, Willow continued, "But we can avoid all of that. If you just sign the divorce papers, I swear you'll never hear from me again. And I'll keep my mouth shut about everything else."

Hearing the word 'divorce' snapped Julian out of his daze. "I will never agree to a divorce. Get that out of your head. We are going to be tied together forever."

He looked her up and down, his expression morphing into one of genuine bewilderment. "But there is one thing I'm dying to know. You've cleaned up well; you're actually stunning now. Why on earth would you settle for an old man like Arthur Vance?"

Knowing full well that Julian's intelligence was fundamentally flawed, Willow didn't even bother correcting him. "None of your business."

Ignoring her hostility, Julian let out a low chuckle. "If you had fallen for Silas Thorne, I could at least understand it. In terms of looks and money, he's the only one who can actually rival me. So tell me, how did you overlook a guy like Silas and end up with someone like Arthur?"

At the mention of Silas's name, Willow's gaze turned glacial.

Catching the shift in her demeanor, Julian narrowed his eyes. "Did I hit a nerve? Is Silas the one you actually like?"

Willow's primary instinct was to protect Silas. She didn't want him dragged into the toxic wasteland of her marriage, and she certainly didn't want Julian ruining Silas's pristine reputation. Without thinking, she fired back, "I don't have those kinds of feelings for him."

She effectively shut Julian up, but what she didn't realize was that Silas was standing just a few feet away, entirely hidden from view.

He had come downstairs specifically to find her. After a coworker mentioned she had rushed out, he followed, only to walk out the front doors and see her standing with Julian.

Because of the angle of the building's massive stone pillars, Silas was completely obscured. Unless they were looking directly for him, they wouldn't see him. But Silas, who was actively looking for Willow, had spotted them instantly.

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When Silas first spotted her with Julian, a flare of anger ignited in his chest. She had promised that very morning to keep her distance, yet here she was, standing with him again. He had marched over, fully intending to interrupt them, fueled by a jealous edge. But as he drew closer, he heard the exact words he had been dreading.

I don't have those kinds of feelings for him.

Silas froze. The air around him seemed to plummet in temperature. The nervous anticipation he had carried all day slowly drained away, leaving behind a hollow, suffocating wave of despair.

All his careful planning, the speeches he had rehearsed in his head since breakfast—it all evaporated into thin air.

She didn't have feelings for him. Which meant there was absolutely no point in asking the questions he had prepared. Pushing the issue now would only make her uncomfortable and complicate their working relationship.

He reasoned that maybe she had just been too polite to reject him outright in Seattle. Given his position as her boss, she probably felt pressured to keep things vague to avoid professional awkwardness. But the brutal truth was undeniable: she wasn't interested.

He silently blamed himself. He had been too arrogant, assuming that just because she despised her husband, she would automatically fall into his arms. A broken marriage didn't guarantee she wanted a new relationship, and it certainly didn't mean she wanted one with him.

Silas didn't stay to hear the rest of the conversation. He didn't call out to her. He just turned on his heel and walked away. He refused to force his feelings on her or pressure her to move at his pace.

Instead of crowding her, he would retreat back behind the boundary lines. Back to being just her boss.

Once Silas was gone, Willow quickly wrapped up her confrontation with Julian. Her final message was crystal clear: if he kept harassing her, she would make his life a living hell. If he wanted to do this the easy way, he would sign the papers. If not, she would fight the appeal until the bitter end. One way or another, she was getting that divorce.

After Julian drove off, Willow pulled out her phone and called Silas. When he finally answered, his voice sounded heavy and distant.

"Is everything okay?" Willow asked, sensing the shift. "Are you feeling sick?"

"I'm fine," Silas replied, forcing his tone into its usual polite neutrality, desperate to block out the memory of what he had just witnessed. "Are you off work?"

"Yeah. I got held up for a few minutes by something, but it's handled," Willow said, looking around the empty plaza. "Are you done? I'm right downstairs."

Silas was standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office. Looking down, he couldn't make out her exact figure, only the general area where she stood. "Something came up. You should head home first."

Willow paused, a sudden sting of rejection hitting her. It felt like they had made a promise, only for him to abruptly cancel on her without warning. "But this morning you said you had something important to tell me after work."

"It wasn't anything important. Forget it. We can talk about it some other time if I remember," Silas said flatly.

"Oh. Okay."

Willow wanted to ask more, but Silas cut her off. "It's getting late. Go home."

The line went dead.

Willow stared at the screen, a profound sense of loss washing over her. Instinctively, she looked up toward the top floors of the Merit Biotech building, but the glass was too dark, the distance too great.

Right then, one high above and one standing below, they were separated by more than just physical space. Clouded by misunderstandings, neither could see the truth in the other's heart.

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Julian returned to the Sinclair mansion in a foul mood. Being publicly humiliated by Willow meant he needed somewhere to vent his frustrations the moment he walked through the door.

Because of the recent incident with Leo Yardley, Vivienne Sinclair had been walking on eggshells around the house, terrified of stepping out of line in front of Julian. Even young Toby Sinclair had become noticeably quieter.

The moment Julian walked in, Toby dropped his toys and scrambled to fetch his father's slippers. "Daddy, you're home!"

Julian absentmindedly patted the boy's head, saying nothing.

Seizing the opportunity to please his mother, Toby piped up again. "Daddy, have you eaten yet? Mommy made a bunch of really good food. Come eat with us!"

"You guys eat. I'm not hungry." With that, Julian bypassed them and headed straight for his study.

Having failed his mission, Toby froze in place. He slowly turned his head and caught the absolutely venomous glare Vivienne was shooting his way. Terrified, the little boy immediately covered his head with his arms.

Toby knew his parents were fighting lately, but he didn't actually care. Their arguments didn't affect his life; he still got to eat whatever he wanted, play with his toys, and go about his day.

But his mother's beatings were another story.

Vivienne constantly ordered him to act cute and coax Julian. If he forgot his lines or failed to get Julian's attention, she punished him. Sometimes it was a hard smack on the backside; other times it was a vicious pinch to the thigh that left deep purple bruises. She was merciless. It felt exactly like the times he used to beat the stray puppies in the yard—always striking with maximum cruelty.

Every time he endured a beating, Toby couldn't help but think: *Thank God I used to take this out on the dogs. It hurts so much more when it's happening to me.* And every time she finished hitting him, he would go out and kick the dogs again just to vent his own rage.

Faced with Vivienne's familiar, terrifying glare, Toby started trembling violently. "Mommy, I'm sorry! I'll go get Daddy right now! I'll go to the study and make him come down for dinner! Please, please don't hit me!"

Hearing this, Vivienne's expression instantly softened—not out of any maternal affection, but because Julian was currently in the house. She couldn't risk him hearing a commotion. If she was going to punish the boy, it had to happen when Julian was gone.

She plastered on a sickly-sweet, motherly smile. "Toby, sweetie, what are you talking about? Why would Mommy ever hit you? Mommy loves you more than anything. Go on now, go eat your dinner."

Toby was too young to fully comprehend the terrifying speed at which his mother could switch faces, but the trauma of her abuse was deeply ingrained. She had played this exact trick before, acting sweet only to lash out moments later.

He looked at her, his voice shaking. "Are you sure? Can I really go eat?"

"Go," Vivienne said, her patience thinning. She needed to focus on how she was going to handle Julian. "Hurry up. Eat whatever you want. You can have all the soda you want, too."

At the mention of soda, Toby abandoned his caution. Carbonated drinks were his absolute favorite thing in the world, and chugging them was his only way to cope with his suffocating anxiety. Thrilled by the rare permission, he sprinted toward the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Vivienne had the kitchen staff prepare a delicate tray of food, carrying it upstairs to Julian's study herself.

When she slipped through the door, Julian was pacing behind his desk, deep in a phone call. He didn't even glance in her direction. Vivienne stood by the doorway like a scolded schoolchild, gripping the serving tray, barely daring to breathe.

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When Julian finally finished his call, Vivienne didn't dare get too close. Keeping a safe distance, she asked tentatively, "Julian, please eat something. Even if you're furious with me, don't punish your own body."

Julian acted as if she hadn't spoken at all. Treating her like empty air, he walked right past her and sat down in a chair.

Humiliation flushed Vivienne's cheeks, but she swallowed her resentment and tried again. "I know you're still blaming me for Leo leaving, but I've already explained that wasn't my fault. Besides, I've found a solution."

That finally earned her a direct look. It was the first time he had truly looked at her in days, and the small victory almost brought tears to her eyes.

"A solution?" Julian repeated, his tone dripping with skepticism. "Do you have any idea how massive this void is? You couldn't find a team of that caliber anywhere in the domestic market."

Julian had been doing his own research. If it were just one or two people, he could have poached them with a fat paycheck. But they were missing an entire integrated team. Not to mention, gene editing was still a highly niche field. There were few experts, and even fewer who were actually competent. That was why he had been so enraged with Vivienne.

"Of course we can't find them domestically, but we can look abroad," Vivienne said, brimming with arrogant confidence.

She had his full attention now. Vivienne pressed her advantage. "You remember my time studying overseas, don't you? My mentor was Professor Smith. He is the leading expert in gene editing."

The reminder jogged Julian's memory. During her time abroad, Vivienne had indeed claimed to be Professor Smith's star pupil. Professor Smith's international reputation

spoke for itself; he was the undisputed pioneer of the genomic field. His team partnered directly with the Broad Institute and held the patents for countless cutting-edge technologies.

"Get to the point," he demanded flatly.

"The point is that Professor Smith has agreed to partner with Sinclair Group. He's bringing his entire team to support our project." With that revelation, Vivienne finally felt she could breathe again. After days of cowering, she could finally stand tall.

Even someone as notoriously composed as Julian was visibly stunned. He never imagined Vivienne had the clout to bring in a heavyweight like that.

If Professor Smith backed them, they would effectively have no rivals in the entire industry.

Julian wouldn't even need to spare a second thought for Leo's little crew, let alone Willow.

But the news was almost too good to be true. "Are you absolutely sure he's willing to come? I heard he rarely travels internationally, let alone flies out to personally back a corporate project."

"He would have rejected anyone else, but don't forget, I was his favorite student. He's doing this as a personal favor to me," Vivienne boasted, conveniently omitting the parts that didn't serve her narrative.

In reality, Professor Smith had a far more pressing reason for his visit. He was desperate to track down a mysterious figure who had once left him a message—a phantom known only as 'WR.' He had mentioned this to Vivienne, but naturally, she had no intention of sharing that detail with Julian.

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Julian bought her story a little more. "Did he make any demands?"

Heavyweights of his caliber usually had basic salary expectations but came with a laundry list of eccentric personal demands. Julian wasn't afraid of demands; demands meant there was room to negotiate. The worst-case scenario was when they asked for nothing at all.

"None," Vivienne replied without missing a beat. "Professor Smith said that out of affection for me, he wouldn't ask for anything extra. Even his compensation was standard; he just asked for the going market rate."

In truth, Professor Smith really hadn't asked for much—other than her help locating the elusive 'WR.' Vivienne kept her mouth shut about that, perfectly happy to hoard all the credit for herself.

"Good." Julian's expression finally softened. "When can they get here?"

"Next week."

"That fast?" Julian was caught off guard again.

Vivienne eagerly milked the moment. "He actually had prior engagements, but I knew you were stressing about finding a team. I begged him to bump up his schedule to help us out of this crisis. He's a sweetheart, so he agreed on the spot."

Vivienne always fed Julian half-truths. The real reason she had convinced Professor Smith to rush his flight was by promising him that arriving sooner meant they could start the hunt for the mystery person that much faster. She knew Smith well; outside of his academic obsessions, he had few interests and was notoriously oblivious when it came to reading people. She had preyed on that exact vulnerability to trick him into rushing to the States.

"Alright," Julian muttered, offering nothing else.

Vivienne seized the opening. "Julian, the problem is solved now. You don't have to worry anymore. Will you please eat something?" She deliberately let a fragile tremor slip into her voice. "You have no idea how sick with worry I've been these past few days. I know I can't undo what happened, and I know you won't believe my apologies, so I poured everything I had into finding a fix. I just wanted this sorted out so I wouldn't have to watch you lose sleep anymore."

"I did all of this for you. If it weren't for you pushing me, I might not have even pulled this off. So really, this victory belongs to you too."

Julian was mostly immune to her emotional theatrics by now, but they had been at each other's throats for days. Since the crisis was averted, he had no energy left to drag out the fight. He finally caved. "Fine. Leave the food. I'll eat in a bit."

The words hit Vivienne like a lifeline. She grew so frantic with relief that she started babbling. "Okay, okay. I'll just leave it right here. Eat when you're hungry. Oh, there's more downstairs. If you're craving anything specific, just tell me and I'll go fetch it."

"Got it. You can step out now."

Once the door clicked shut behind her, Vivienne immediately wiped away her tears. With Julian out of sight, the performance was over. Still, she needed to keep a tight leash on Professor Smith's arrival. This entire comeback hinged on him.

She fired off a text to Smith, confirming his exact arrival time for the following week.

Professor Smith was prompt, replying instantly with a screenshot of his itinerary. Looking at the ticket, a genuine, calculated smile finally spread across Vivienne's face.

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Their professional circle was inherently small, meaning gossip spread like wildfire—especially when it involved a titan like Professor Smith. It didn't take long for the news of his impending arrival to reach Willow and her team.

Silas Thorne was naturally the first to know. However, ever since he had accidentally overheard Willow's conversation with Julian, he had deliberately scaled back his contact with her. He figured if she wasn't interested in him romantically, he shouldn't suffocate her with his presence.

They only crossed paths today because they were attending the same summit. As it wrapped up, Silas pulled Willow aside to share the news, adding that Professor Smith would be officially partnering with Sinclair Group.

Willow obviously knew who Professor Smith was; nobody in their industry didn't. She also immediately connected the dots on why he was joining Sinclair Group. During her time abroad, Vivienne had been one of his students. She was undoubtedly the one pulling the strings.

"They're probably bringing him in to fill the void Leo's team left," Silas noted.

"Yeah, that makes sense," Willow agreed.

"I've heard this Smith guy is incredible. A real legend in the field," Silas added.

"Absolutely. Anyone in our line of work knows him. For a lot of people, working alongside him is the ultimate career dream."

"Maybe I can arrange a meeting with him when the time comes."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Since he's partnering with Sinclair Group, Merit Biotech's projects will inevitably overlap with theirs. We'll definitely cross paths."

A heavy silence settled between them after that.

Silas glanced at her, clearly wanting to say more, but the time and place were all wrong. More than that, he was terrified that once he started talking, he wouldn't be able to stop. He had promised himself he wouldn't pressure her, and he intended to keep that promise.

Instead, he opted for a safe pivot. "Did you have anything else you wanted to discuss?"

Willow did, actually, but she had no idea how to voice it.

She wanted to ask what he had been trying to tell her that day. She wanted to know what had interrupted him. She wanted to ask why it felt like he had been actively avoiding her all week. Had she done something wrong?

But she didn't have the right to ask any of that. From the very beginning, their relationship had only ever been defined by one clear boundary: boss and subordinate.

"Do you?" she asked softly.

Silas thought for a moment, then shook his head.

Willow mirrored the gesture. "Not right now."

"Alright. Let's get back to work then."

Back in her office, Willow felt a suffocating tightness in her chest. She couldn't pinpoint exactly why, but she knew it had everything to do with Silas.

She didn't have the luxury of dwelling on it, though. Professor Smith was arriving soon. Sinclair Group was undoubtedly gearing up for a massive offensive, and Willow needed to stay ten steps ahead.

She was deep into a stack of files when her phone buzzed with a call from Leo. "Hey, what's going on?" she answered.

Leo cut straight to the chase. "Director Horgan, did you hear? Professor Smith is flying in, and he's teaming up with Sinclair Group."

Ever since their last conversation, Leo had stopped calling her 'Chief.' Terrified he might slip up in public, he forced himself to use 'Director Horgan' even when they were alone, just to build the habit.

It was the smart move. Once they fully transitioned to Merit Biotech, keeping things professional would protect them both.

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Hearing him bring up the news, Willow bypassed the topic entirely and asked, "Aren't you supposed to be on vacation? Why are you tracking industry gossip?"

She hated the idea of him working during his time off. In all the years they had worked together, Leo had barely taken a breath, let alone a proper break. Now that he finally had a real vacation, she just wanted him to unplug and leave the corporate chaos behind.

Leo, however, was wired differently. "I might be on vacation, but my brain is still at the office. Honestly, resting for a day or two is great, but any longer than that and I start going crazy. I'd rather be in the trenches with you. Besides, when a titan like Professor Smith is flying in, I don't even have to look for the news—people are blowing up my phone with it."

Fair point. Since he was already in the loop, Willow didn't bother gatekeeping. She relayed the details Silas had shared with her earlier.

After digesting the information, Leo made a pitch. "How about I cut my vacation short and head back to New York?"

Willow didn't shoot the idea down immediately, offering a gentle counter. "You rarely get this kind of downtime. You should spend it with your family. Don't stress about the workload here; I can hold the fort."

"My family's all sorted. We did a big trip a few days ago, but now everyone's back to the grind—work, school—and I'm just sitting around an empty house. It's driving me nuts," Leo insisted. "I'm practically climbing the walls. I want to get back to New York where the action is."

"Plus, with Sinclair Group bringing in a heavy hitter like that, they're going to be unbearably smug. I need to get back and watch your six."

Willow refused to micromanage his choices. She gently reminded him to do what he actually wanted, assuring him again that she had the workload handled.

Whatever he decided, she would back him completely.

With her reassurance, Leo made the call. "I'm flying back next week."

Meanwhile, the news of Professor Smith's arrival hadn't just rocked the industry; it had practically caused a localized earthquake inside Sinclair Group. Everyone was dying to get a glimpse of the legendary academic.

As the architect of this massive coup, Vivienne was practically glowing with unearned superiority.

She had been forced to lay low after the fiasco with Leo's team, quietly swallowing the office's cold shoulders. Now, she was ready to make them all choke on it.

Clicking her stilettos across the floor in a pristine haute couture suit, she strutted into the main open-plan office, wearing an arrogant, predatory smile.

She stopped right in the center of the bullpen, casually flicking a lock of curled hair over her shoulder. When she spoke, her voice wasn't loud, but it dripped with authority. "Everyone, stop what you're doing. Pencils down."

Heads snapped up across the room, all eyes locking onto her.

Vivienne tilted her chin, her gaze sweeping over the staff with a toxic blend of triumph and disdain. "I assume you've all heard the news. We have a VIP arriving next week. Before he gets here, there are a few ground rules we need to establish."

She paused, soaking in the nervous, sycophantic anticipation radiating from the crowd. Satisfied, she continued. "Effective immediately, every single workstation will be spotless. I want strict 5S management protocols enforced. As for the catering, the welcoming committee, and the presentation materials—I expect flawless execution. Not a single mistake."

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"Professor Smith is not just any guest. This is a partnership, yes, but we are the hosts, and we will show him absolute deference. If any of you ruin his first impression with your sloppy details, don't say I didn't warn you."

The moment she finished, a tense, frantic energy swept through the bullpen as employees scrambled to organize their desks. Vivienne stood dead center, basking in the intoxicating rush of total control, her smugness practically radiating off her.

A known kiss-up immediately seized the opportunity. "You are incredible, Ms. Sinclair! Actually getting Professor Smith to fly out and partner with us? That is legendary!"

A chorus of flattery instantly erupted around her.

"Only Ms. Sinclair has connections like that. One phone call and she lands the biggest fish in the sea."

"Exactly! With Professor Smith on board, the company is untouchable. The sky's the limit."

"Honestly, it's a good thing Leo and his crew walked. Cleared out the dead weight for actual talent. Did they really think Sinclair Group would collapse without them? When they see the news, they're going to be crying themselves to sleep."

Listening to the relentless praise, Vivienne couldn't keep the smirk off her face. She practically vibrated with pride.

In her head, she was already mocking Willow's stupidity. Did that bitch really think she could outplay her? So what if she poached Leo? Vivienne could always find someone infinitely better to take his place.

Vivienne had fully convinced herself that Leo's departure was Willow's fault—a deliberate attack meant to ruin her life.

Well, this was her counter-strike. She couldn't wait to watch Willow crash and burn.

The week flew by, and the day of Professor Smith's arrival dawned.

Hours before the flight even touched down, Vivienne was a whirlwind of frantic micromanagement. The airport pickup, the corporate tour, the catered lunch—she obsessed over every single detail, demanding personal sign-off on everything.

When the time came, she headed to the airport, having orchestrated a welcoming spectacle fit for royalty.

Outside the VIP terminal, the display was so ostentatious it had the entire airport staring.

Vivienne was dressed to the nines in a designer gown and four-inch heels. Behind her stood a literal phalanx of men in black suits, a small army of hostesses clutching massive bouquets, and a row of hired photographers with their lenses primed. It looked like they were waiting for an A-list movie star.

A plush red carpet rolled straight from the exit doors to the curbside VIP parking. The perimeter was overflowing with obscenely expensive floral arrangements, and a live string quartet was actually playing in the middle of the terminal.

She stood tall, her eyes gleaming with barely concealed vanity, utterly convinced that this extravagant circus would flatter Professor Smith.

In reality, she was doing it all for her own ego. She wanted the spectacle. She wanted the entire world to see just how powerful she was for reeling in a giant.

Lost in her own vanity, it never occurred to her to check if this was something Professor Smith actually wanted.

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Before long, Professor Smith emerged.

Walking at a steady pace at the edge of the crowd, he pulled a simple black carry-on. Dressed in understated casual wear, he looked completely unassuming. Trailing behind him were seven or eight foreign colleagues of varying ages and genders, but a single glance revealed they all shared the same grounded, unpretentious aura.

The moment Professor Smith laid eyes on the obnoxious, blinding spectacle waiting for him, his brows locked into a hard frown. A flash of profound irritation crossed his face, and his footsteps visibly slowed.

Vivienne, completely oblivious to his disdain, remained trapped in her own fantasy. She plastered on a radiant smile and rushed forward. "Professor! You made it! It is an absolute honor to have you here. I welcome you on behalf of the entire Sinclair Group."

Smith's expression didn't thaw. His jaw remained tight. He spoke decent Mandarin, and he didn't mince his words. "This is a standard business trip. There was absolutely no need for this kind of wasteful extravagance. You know perfectly well I despise making a scene and inconveniencing others. This is entirely too much."

Vivienne's smile froze instantly. Having her meticulously crafted grandstand dismantled in front of an audience left her flushed with embarrassment.

More troublingly, Smith didn't seem to harbor an ounce of the warm affection she had bragged about to everyone. If he did, he wouldn't have publicly humiliated her.

Vivienne had been selling a massive lie. During her years abroad, she had indeed taken his classes, but she was never his star pupil. In fact, she had barely registered on his radar.

She had been utterly mediocre in lectures, yet miraculously submitted flawless post-class projects—mostly because she paid people to do them. Smith had always harbored a complicated skepticism toward her, but ultimately, he let her graduate.

Upon returning home, Vivienne weaponized his name to build her own brand. Claiming to be his prized protégé opened doors, and since no one could easily verify it, she had kept the grift going for years.

She knew that dragging him to the States was a massive gamble, but high risks yielded high rewards. For this kind of leverage, she was willing to roll the dice.

Besides, she truly believed her 'high emotional intelligence' could smooth over any bumps in the road.

So, despite the sting of his public reprimand, Vivienne forced herself to pivot. As long as it served her agenda, she could twist his cold scolding into the affectionate chiding of an old mentor.

Ignoring the harshness of his words, she kept her sugary smile fixed in place, pretending she hadn't heard the annoyance in his voice. She reached for his suitcase, laughing lightly to break the tension. "You're completely right, Professor. That was an oversight on my part. But you traveled so far, I just wanted to make sure you were properly taken care of! Please, don't hold it against me. I'll know better for next time."

Smith smoothly dodged her hand, keeping a firm grip on his own luggage. His tone remained frosty. "Let's go. Moving forward, dispense with the pageantry and just focus on the work."

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"Understood. You're absolutely right," Vivienne agreed frantically, leading them toward the parking lot.

Just then, Professor Smith's gaze drifted past her and landed on a quiet corner of the terminal.

There was no red carpet there. No bodyguards. No fleet of luxury cars. Just a single woman standing quietly.

She was alone, dressed in a sleek, professional outfit, casually reading over some documents while she waited. She stood with a calm, understated elegance—not trying to be seen, not making a fuss. Just waiting, simple and perfectly composed.

The ice in Smith's eyes thawed slightly. "Now that is how it should be done," he remarked casually, pointing toward the woman. "An airport pickup should be exactly that simple. Quiet, efficient, focused on the task at hand. It's infinitely better than this circus."

Vivienne had been smiling, perfectly willing to agree with whatever he said just to keep him happy.

But when her eyes followed his finger and landed on the figure in the distance, the blood froze in her veins.

It was Willow.

What the hell was she doing here?

Talk about a nightmare collision.

A toxic wave of pure jealousy crashed over Vivienne. She had poured insane amounts of money and effort into this grand spectacle, only for it to be used as a cautionary tale. And Willow—standing there doing absolutely nothing—somehow managed to win Smith's approval?

Was she doing this on purpose? Was her entire existence dedicated to making Vivienne look bad?

Fury wrapped around Vivienne's chest like barbed wire. She dug her manicured nails into her palms, forcing her polite smile to stay glued to her face, but her eyes darkened with pure venom as she stared at Willow.

When she finally spoke, her voice was painfully sweet. "You're completely right, Professor. It was a lapse in judgment on my part. Next time, I will prepare everything exactly to your tastes."

"Hmm," Smith murmured, dropping the subject.

The massive entourage paraded out of the airport.

Once they were in the luxury SUV, Vivienne immediately offered them artisanal drinks and snacks, desperate to salvage the mood and finally show off her hosting skills. But Smith didn't give her the chance. The second he sat down, he cracked open his laptop and buried himself in his files.

The only times he spoke to her were to ask clipped questions about Sinclair's current projects, and more importantly, whether she had made any progress on finding 'WR.'

Vivienne could fake her way through the project updates, but she knew absolutely nothing about 'WR.' Promising to look for the mystery person was just a bait-and-switch to get him on a plane; she hadn't lifted a finger to search. Caught off guard, she spun a lie on the spot.

"Rest assured, I have people working on it around the clock. It's just a bit complicated right now, but the second we have a lead, you'll be the first to know."

Surprisingly, Smith didn't get angry. He actually seemed sympathetic. "I imagine it is difficult. If they were easy to find, I wouldn't have been looking for years without a trace."

Sensing the tension easing, Vivienne eagerly leaned in, launching into a rehearsed pitch about the day's itinerary. She was a slick talker, and within a few minutes, the disastrous airport reception was temporarily glossed over.

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Shortly after they left, Leo's flight touched down. Willow was exactly where Professor Smith had spotted her, waiting to pick him up.

Catching sight of her from a distance, Leo immediately jogged over. Dressed in comfortable, unassuming clothes, he looked every bit the reliable right-hand man she knew him to be.

"Did you wait long?" Leo asked, rubbing the back of his neck apologetically. "We landed early, but we got stuck on the tarmac behind another plane, so it took forever to deplane."

"Not at all," Willow said, gesturing toward the gaudy floral arrangements and abandoned welcome banners nearby. "The flight right before yours was Professor Smith's."

Willow hadn't seen the man himself, but the massive welcome signs were impossible to miss, and she had heard passing travelers whispering about 'Sinclair Group.' It didn't take a genius to figure out Vivienne had orchestrated the circus.

Leo glanced around, spotting the leftover signs bearing Smith's name. He scoffed. "They really don't know the meaning of subtlety, do they? They have to scream it from the rooftops."

"But this is just embarrassing. A massive production just for an airport pickup? The whole point is just to get the person comfortably to their hotel. I'd bet money Professor Smith hated every second of it. He's an academic. This isn't catering to him; this is just them showing off."

"Let's not waste breath on them," Willow said, knowing full well that 'low-key' wasn't in Vivienne's vocabulary. And honestly, Julian was probably the one who approved it—they were two of a kind.

Leo had just landed, and she wasn't going to let Sinclair Group ruin his mood. She seamlessly shifted gears. "How was the flight? Everything smooth?"

"Super smooth. The weather here is a massive shock after Seattle, though. It's bone dry," Leo complained.

"Yeah, New York takes some getting used to. I'll take you to get a humidifier later," Willow offered, already mentally planning the errand. "By the way, did your family give you any grief for cutting the trip short?"

"Nah, you know my family. They always have my back," Leo said. "The rest of them are just going to fly back a little later since they're still on PTO."

"That's great," Willow smiled. "What are you craving? Let's grab food first."

"Has to be authentic New York pizza for the first meal. I literally made a checklist on the plane; I'm eating my way through this city."

"You got it."

They walked out side by side, chatting easily about the weather and life. The vibe between them was completely relaxed and natural—just two good friends catching up.

Meanwhile, back at Sinclair Group headquarters, Professor Smith was currently being subjected to a second round of sensory assault.

The entire corporate lobby had been transformed into a gaudy monument to his arrival. Another red carpet stretched from the sliding glass doors all the way to the executive conference room, flanked by two rigid rows of employees standing at attention.

Massive welcome banners and obnoxious balloon arches cluttered the hallways, the gold-leaf lettering practically blinding in the over-cranked lighting. Expensive floral centerpieces were shoved into every available corner. The sheer scale of the pageantry crossed the line from welcoming into aggressively tacky.

Worse, the employees looked terrified, standing stiffly in place. The air was thick with a suffocating, manufactured tension.

Smith loathed this kind of corporate theater. A deep scowl instantly etched itself into his face.

Vivienne, having learned her lesson at the airport, didn't wait for him to explode. She immediately started backpedaling. "I am so sorry, Professor. We just hold you in such high regard, but I promise you, this will never happen again. I'll have it all torn down immediately."

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The moment she ushered Smith into the conference room, Vivienne spun around, stormed back into the hallway, and snapped at the staff. "Tear all this garbage down, right now! When this meeting is over, I don't want to see a single trace of this left!"

The employees were totally blindsided. They had spent hours that morning setting up the massive display under her strict orders, only to be told to trash it immediately. One bolder employee couldn't hold back. "Ms. Sinclair, did we do something wrong? We set everything up exactly how you asked. Taking it down instantly... isn't that a massive waste of money?"

Vivienne's entire focus was on doing damage control with Smith. She didn't have the patience to coddle the staff, and explaining the real reason would be an admission of her own humiliating failure.

Her face twisted into a vicious glare. "I said tear it down, so tear it down! Do you want to keep your job or not? If you want a paycheck, shut up and work. If this hallway isn't spotless by the time I walk out of that meeting, you're all fired. Anyone who has a problem with that can get the hell out right now."

The threat silenced the room. Terrified, the staff immediately scrambled to pull down the decorations, muttering panicked agreements.

But the second she disappeared behind the conference room doors, the resentment boiled over. "What a psycho! Scream at us to build it, scream at us to trash it. She changes her mind five hundred times a day. It's exhausting!"

"Tell me about it. Working for her is a nightmare. It's not a job, it's babysitting a spoiled princess. No wonder Leo and his team walked."

A sharper employee quickly connected the dots. "I guarantee you, she pulled this 180 because Professor Smith hated the setup. Did you see the guy? He was dressed casually,

super grounded. He's clearly a hardcore academic who hates corporate kissing-up. She totally misread him and made a fool of herself."

Another scoffed, "So she screws up and takes it out on us?"

"What else is new? You gonna quit? Just keep your head down. Maybe she'll be the one out the door soon enough."

Julian arrived at the office just in time to see his employees frantically ripping down the elaborate displays. He had been tied up in a critical morning meeting and was just getting in. The chaotic scene left him frowning. "What are you all doing?"

Hearing the CEO's voice, the staff froze in terror. "Ms. Sinclair ordered us to tear everything down immediately, sir."

Julian took one look at the half-dismantled banners bearing Smith's name and instantly understood the situation. The VIP was still in the building, yet the welcome signs were being trashed. Clearly, the grand reception had backfired spectacularly.

Vivienne had been in complete control of the hospitality. She had practically sworn in blood that she had it handled and told him not to worry. It was glaringly obvious now that she had completely botched it.

Staring at the tacky, overblown remnants of the decorations, Julian felt a sharp headache piercing his temples. He couldn't fathom what was going through her head to authorize such an embarrassing circus.

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

Chapter 400

Julian didn't berate the staff or cause a scene. The damage was already done, and dragging Vivienne out to humiliate her wouldn't fix anything.

He waved a hand, signaling them to continue the teardown, and walked straight toward the conference room. A guest of Professor Smith's caliber required his personal attention.

Inside, Vivienne made the formal introductions, and Julian quickly dove into a high-level discussion with Smith regarding Sinclair's current projects.

As the meeting progressed, Julian couldn't shake a nagging suspicion. It wasn't that Smith was rude—on the contrary, he was perfectly willing to engage on the technical specifics of the project. But his demeanor was undeniably polite, clinical, and distant. It looked

absolutely nothing like the deep, devoted mentorship Vivienne had spent weeks bragging about.

During a brief coffee break, Julian cornered Vivienne. "He doesn't seem particularly fond of you. Are you absolutely certain you were his star pupil?"

Ever since the fallout from the previous crises, Julian had stopped sugarcoating his words with her. He didn't care about her feelings or her ego anymore; he just wanted facts, and he was tired of wasting energy playing her games.

Vivienne immediately felt the danger. Every time Julian questioned her lately, she felt like she was walking on a tightrope over a woodchipper. One wrong word, and he would shred her.

Keeping a poised, gentle smile on her face, her mind raced, quickly deploying the excuse she had prepared for this exact moment. "Academics are just like that, Julian. He's always been a bit cold and socially detached. The entire industry knows this about him. If he were a social butterfly, he wouldn't be so notoriously hard to book. Besides, the fact that I actually got him on a plane to partner with us proves how much he values our history, doesn't it?"

Her logic was airtight, leaving Julian momentarily without a counter-argument. But remembering the chaotic scene in the lobby, his skepticism flared again. "If you know him so intimately, how did you completely misread his preferences? Your grand welcome ceremony clearly disgusted him, considering you're having it ripped out of the walls."

Vivienne's heart skipped a beat. She realized he must have walked through the lobby and seen the teardown. She had no idea how much the staff had told him, but she knew Julian was far too sharp to be lied to directly. She had to lean into the skid.

"He used to tolerate that kind of protocol," she lied smoothly. "But people change over the years. I only realized today that his tastes had shifted. You can't honestly expect someone to stay exactly the same forever, can you? It's like you and me. I can feel how much you've changed toward me lately. Would it be fair for me to demand you revert to exactly how you used to be?"

Vivienne was dangerously manipulative. She knew exactly how to play him—when he pushed on business, she deflected with emotion. She constantly positioned herself as the tragic victim, expertly weaving a web of guilt to keep him off balance.

Predictably, the emotional pivot made Julian grimace. He had zero interest in spiraling into another toxic relationship argument. "We are talking about a multi-million dollar corporate partnership. Why are you dragging personal drama into this?"