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Having achieved her goal, Vivienne Sinclair stopped her incessant nagging and seized the opportunity to change the subject. "Julian, I understand all the concerns you just mentioned, but the fact remains that Professor Smith is willing to collaborate with us. We accomplished what no one else could—isn't that a success? Right now, we should be figuring out how to leverage his expertise and resources to pull Sinclair Group out of this slump and accelerate our growth."

Julian Sinclair shot her a glance and finally relented. "That's all we can do for now. Where are you taking him for dinner?"

Hearing this, Vivienne knew the hurdle had been cleared. She let out a quiet sigh of relief, her expression brightening. "Don't worry about the reservation. I've already confirmed it with the professor. It's flawless."

Vivienne wasn't lying. She had just finalized the details with Professor Smith. She had chosen The Gilded Lantern, a vintage-style New York bistro that offered authentic charm without being excessively ostentatious.

Initially, she had booked a much flashier, high-end establishment. But after the fiasco at the airport and the icy reception at the entrance earlier, she had quickly deduced Mr. Smith's understated preferences and made a rapid pivot.

This time, she was absolutely certain she wouldn't mess up.

Once the meeting concluded, the group piled into a fleet of cars and headed to the restaurant Vivienne had booked. Tucked away in a bustling downtown district, The Gilded Lantern offered a serene oasis of tranquility amidst the urban chaos.

Stepping through the ornate mahogany doors felt like walking into a bygone era of old-world elegance. The interior was sophisticated and muted, featuring heavy oak tables, vintage cityscape oil paintings, and delicate porcelain accents nestled among lush, understated greenery.

Warm, amber lighting spilled softly across the dining room, completely shutting out the noise of the city. A faint, inviting aroma of tea and roasting meats drifted through the air.

Professor Smith, being a foreigner, rarely encountered such authentic aesthetics, and he was visibly impressed. His entourage was equally enchanted, with a few even pulling out their phones to snap photos of the intricate decor.

Watching their reactions, a smug smile tugged at the corners of Vivienne's lips.

Naturally, she took charge of the menu. She ordered the Imperial Peking Duck, alongside premium caviar, butter-poached lobster, and a variety of signature appetizers. Keeping their Western palate in mind, she also added seasonal salads and cold cuts. She had truly poured her heart into curating the perfect meal.

The atmosphere at the table was remarkably harmonious. Glasses clinked in cheerful toasts, and the delicate fragrance of Dragon Well Tea mingled with the rich scent of the food, creating a deeply relaxing vibe.

But halfway through the meal, Vivienne's gaze snagged on a sight that made her stomach churn. Willow Horgan was here? And she was with Leo Yardley?

In a flash, Vivienne connected the dots to the airport incident that morning. She guessed Leo had arrived in New York today, and Willow had been the one to pick him up.

Her unresolved fury from earlier surged back with a vengeance. Bumping into Willow again so soon? It was almost laughable.

If she had previously chalked it up to a small world, she was now convinced Willow had orchestrated this on purpose. She must have caught wind of Professor Smith's arrival and positioned herself here to conveniently bump into him and strike up a conversation.

Furthermore, the fact that Willow was sitting right across from Leo was the absolute proof that she was the one who had poached him from Sinclair Group.

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Vivienne's mind raced. Though she was furious, she instantly recognized this as a golden opportunity to salvage her image in Julian's eyes. She needed him to believe that Leo's departure had nothing to do with her mismanagement—that Leo had betrayed the Sinclair Group because Willow had poached him.

But for the maximum impact, the target needed to discover the truth with his own eyes.

Leaning close to Julian, she whispered that she had left something important in the car. Since the parking garage was a short walk away, she asked if he would accompany her.

Julian found the request odd, but assuming she had something confidential to tell him away from the guests, he agreed.

The moment they stepped out of the private dining room, Vivienne began subtly guiding his line of sight toward Willow's table, while pretending to rummage through her designer bag. Once she was certain Julian's eyes had landed on them, she snapped her purse shut. "Alright, let's go."

Julian didn't respond. His entire focus was already locked onto the sight of Willow and Leo sitting just a few tables away.

Vivienne seized her cue. "Julian, what's wrong? Did you see—"

She feigned following his gaze, stopping mid-sentence with a perfectly calculated gasp. "Wait, isn't that Willow? What is she doing here? And if I'm not mistaken... is that Leo sitting across from her?"

She layered on the shock. "I always suspected Leo's sudden resignation from the company had something to do with Willow, but I didn't think it was actually true! She really did poach him!"

"Julian, how could she do something like this? We treated her like family when she was at Sinclair Group. Even after she left and joined Merit Biotech, we never made things difficult for her or badmouthed her. But the second she gets her footing, she immediately starts stealing our talent? That's just completely shameless, isn't it?"

Julian was already seething at the sight before him, and Vivienne's calculated venom only fanned the flames. She had dropped hints before about Willow being behind Leo's departure, but he hadn't taken them seriously.

For one, relocating a team from Seattle to another city, uprooting them from their families, was a massive logistical hurdle. More importantly, he had still clung to the delusion that Willow harbored some lingering affection for him. After all those years of devotion, feelings didn't just vanish into thin air. He had convinced himself she was just throwing a tantrum. Given enough time, he believed he could maneuver their relationship back to how it used to be.

But seeing her and Leo together, thick as thieves, shattered that illusion. Julian was forced to swallow the bitter truth: Willow was far more ruthless and calculating than he had ever imagined.

A suffocating wave of anger hit him, but he couldn't exactly throw a tantrum in a high-end restaurant. Instead, he directed his frustration at Vivienne. "I thought we were going to get something. Are we going or not?"

Vivienne flinched at his harsh tone, but since her objective was complete, she didn't care. One look at Julian's dark expression told her he had bought her story completely.

She offered a sheepish smile. "I just double-checked, and it looks like the item is in my bag after all. We don't need to go."

Julian's face turned to ice. "You're constantly scattered. Can you pull yourself together for once?"

"I'm sorry, that was my mistake," Vivienne apologized, her tone entirely devoid of sincerity. "Why don't you head back inside? Since I'm already out here, I'll just use the restroom before I join you."

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Julian was still fuming. "Suit yourself."

Throwing the words over his shoulder, he stormed back into the private room without looking back.

Watching his retreating figure, a triumphant smirk spread across Vivienne's lips. The angrier Julian got, the more he believed the narrative she had just spun.

Once he was out of sight, she didn't head for the restroom. Instead, she marched straight over to Willow's table.

Willow had actually done her research before bringing Leo here. The Gilded Lantern perfectly showcased the vintage charm of New York, and the food was both phenomenal and distinct. It was the ideal spot to welcome a colleague who had just moved to the city.

She just hadn't expected to run into Vivienne. Given the woman's desperate need to show off, shouldn't she have taken her VIP guests to some obscenely expensive Michelin-starred trap?

It truly was a small world.

Thankfully, Willow couldn't care less about her. When Vivienne marched over, Leo immediately tried to stand up and confront her, but Willow pressed a hand to his arm, stopping him. She simply placed a piece of food on his plate. "Try this. It's a New York specialty. See if you like it."

Watching the blatant dismissal, Vivienne let out a sharp scoff. "Willow, you really have some nerve. I guess I underestimated you. I didn't realize you were so skilled at stabbing people in the back and stealing employees. This isn't your first time, is it?"

Both Willow and Leo knew exactly what she was insinuating. Leo couldn't stay seated. He wanted to scream that Willow hadn't poached anyone—that he had quit the Sinclair Group entirely because he couldn't stand working under a fraud like Vivienne for one more second.

But Willow cut him off, her voice light and utterly unbothered. "Well, compared to you, I've still got a long way to go."

The calm, breezy delivery—completely devoid of anger or defensiveness—was like punching a cloud. Vivienne deflated instantly, her manufactured outrage finding no traction.

But she wasn't about to give up that easily. She pivoted back to her current obsession. "Don't think I don't know what you're plotting. Showing up in front of us twice in one day? You're stalking us, hoping to find a chance to cozy up to Professor Smith. Let me tell you, you're delusional! Professor Smith would never give a nobody like you the time of day, and you will never get that chance!"

Hearing this, Leo hit his boiling point. Yes, Professor Smith was a globally renowned expert, but he wasn't some deity that everyone needed to grovel before.

"Do you think everyone is a desperate lapdog like you?" he snapped at Vivienne.

Before he could go on, Willow raised a hand. She met Vivienne's glare with a cool, indifferent smile. "Since you value the professor so highly, you'd better keep a very close eye on him. Don't give me any openings. Otherwise, if I end up snatching him away too, you'll be left with absolutely nothing."

"You!" Vivienne choked on her fury. Unable to formulate a comeback that could pierce Willow's armor, she spun on her heel and stomped away.

Once she was gone, Leo sighed in frustration, wishing he could have defended Willow properly. Now that they were free from the Sinclair Group, they didn't have to walk on eggshells around Vivienne anymore. They should have torn into her and demanded payback for all the grievances they had suffered.

But Willow simply shook her head. Dealing with a narcissist like Vivienne meant that fighting back only gave her the attention she craved. The absolute best punishment was sheer apathy—leaving her completely in the dark, wondering what they were plotting.

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After dinner, Willow took Leo shopping for essentials. They combed through the aisles, picking out everything from comfortable bedding to high-quality kitchenware. She had a sharp eye for detail, making sure everything they bought would make a new apartment feel like a real home.

Hours slipped by as they browsed, and before they knew it, the sun was setting. Feeling guilty for monopolizing her entire day, Leo rubbed the back of his neck. "You've spent the whole day babysitting me. You haven't gotten any real work done."

"Helping you settle in is real work," Willow replied with a soft smile. She considered Leo and the team true friends, not just subordinates. "You packed up your entire life and moved across the country. You don't have anyone else here yet. It's my job to look out for you."

Leo appreciated the shopping trip, but he drew the line at being a burden. "I'll handle the apartment hunting myself from here on out. I'll grab a hotel tonight and start looking first thing in the morning."

Willow shook her head. "No need. I already found a place for you." She explained that it wasn't in her current luxury building—which was far too expensive and a bit further from the office—but she asked if he was open to checking it out.

Truthfully, she had initially looked at units in her own building. She had always known real estate in that area was pricey, but until she actually saw the numbers, she hadn't truly grasped the meaning of astronomical.

Forget Leo's salary; even on her executive pay, it was a massive financial drain. While she could front the cash for the first few months, the ongoing rent would put unbearable pressure on him as he adjusted to a new city.

Instead, she had found a fantastic middle ground: a beautifully maintained complex that was slightly further out, boasted reasonable rent, and had a great environment.

She pulled up the listing on her phone and slid it across the table. "It's a bit further away, about a thirty-minute commute to Merit Biotech. But the neighborhood is gorgeous, and it's right on a direct subway line. It's perfect for a short-term transition. Once you're settled and know the city better, you can always move. I'll forward you the lease agreement."

Before Leo could worry about the deposit, she quickly added, "Oh, and I've already covered the first three months' rent. If you like the photos, I'll drive you over right now. You can just drop your bags and move in. You don't have to worry about a thing."

How could Leo possibly have any complaints? She had orchestrated everything perfectly. All he had to do was show up. Having a boss like her felt like he had won the lottery.

"Chief," he murmured. He hadn't used that title in a while, but right now, it was the only word that fit. His voice was thick with emotion. "You've done so much for me. I don't even know how to begin repaying you."

Willow waved him off. She didn't see it as a favor; she saw it as her responsibility. Leo and the team had abandoned their stable jobs and left their hometowns simply because they believed in her.

Compared to their immense sacrifice, writing a check was nothing.

"You guys gave up a lot to come to New York," she said quietly. "Right now, my resources are limited, and I can't promise you the moon. But I firmly believe we're on the right path, and things will only go up from here."

Leo knew Willow's personality well. She was a woman of action, not words, and she absolutely despised making empty corporate promises. Hearing her lay out her anxieties like this meant she was genuinely terrified of letting them down.

He looked her dead in the eye and offered his own promise. "Chief, don't worry about us. We chose to follow you, and we are going to give this everything we've got."

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"I know."

That night, after dropping Leo off at his new place, Willow returned to her apartment, took a hot shower, and collapsed into bed.

She had been running around the city all day. Logically, she should have been dead on her feet, ready to pass out the second her head hit the pillow. Instead, she was wide awake, her mind racing with startling clarity. And the root of her insomnia was one person: Silas Thorne.

Silas had left on a business trip. It had been three full days since he departed, and she hadn't received a single text from him.

The darkness of the night saturated the room, broken only by the warm, amber glow of the bedside lamp.

Willow lay on her side, sinking into the plush mattress, her thumb mindlessly tapping open their chat history.

The conversation had stalled days ago. His final message was a simple, curt okay.

She scrolled up, her eyes tracing their past exchanges. The higher she scrolled, the more an undeniable emptiness clawed at her chest. She hadn't realized it until now, but she and Silas used to talk a lot.

There was always a good morning and a good night. He would casually ask what she had for lunch, or offer sharp, insightful advice when she vented about work problems. She hadn't thought much of it then, but reading them now brought a sudden, suffocating ache to her throat.

Thousands of miles away, Silas stood alone before the floor-to-ceiling windows of his hotel suite.

The city skyline outside was dense and unfamiliar, a sprawling sea of alien lights.

He had just wrapped up a grueling, hours-long networking dinner, and exhaustion clung to his features. His fingers gripped his phone tightly. The screen illuminated, then faded to black, over and over as his thumb hovered over their chat box. He just couldn't bring himself to hit send.

It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to her. It was that the memory of her voice kept echoing relentlessly in his skull. I don't have those kinds of feelings for him.

He was terrified that pushing his presence on her now would only irritate her.

His throat felt unbearably tight. The man who notoriously despised smoking finally cracked open a fresh pack and pulled out a slender cigarette. The lighter sparked, and a thin plume of pale smoke drifted upward, obscuring the heavy, turbulent emotions in his predatory gaze.

He didn't take a deep drag; he simply let the sharp scent of tobacco wash over him, using it to dull the sharp ache in his chest.

With his free hand, he pulled up his photo gallery. The screen glowed with a candid picture of Willow—her features soft, her aura elegant and serene. He had secretly saved it a while ago.

Eventually, he couldn't take the silence anymore. He made a call, but it was to Arthur Vance.

He had deliberately left Arthur behind at the office, specifically so the assistant would be on hand if Willow ran into any emergencies.

"How was she today?" Silas demanded the second the line connected.

Even though no name was mentioned, Arthur knew exactly who his boss meant. He immediately launched into a detailed report. "Director Horgan didn't come into the office today. She took the day off to pick someone up at the airport."

"Pick someone up?" Silas's brow furrowed sharply. "Who? Who is so important that she had to go personally?"

He had never even let her exert herself picking him up.

"It was Leo Yardley. He flew in to start his onboarding early."

"Oh." Silas went silent. Of course it was Leo. He had already witnessed firsthand how fiercely protective she was of her old team back in Seattle. She cared about them infinitely more than she cared about him.

But he had no right to be petty. She didn't harbor any romantic feelings for him anyway. If he started acting like a possessive tyrant now, it would only breed resentment, and that was a risk he absolutely could not take.

He forced himself to pivot, firing off questions to distract himself. "How has her appetite been? Is she healthy? How is work? Has anyone been giving her a hard time?"

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Bombarded with the rapid-fire interrogation, Arthur briefly panicked over which question to answer first.

Honestly, he felt these inquiries skirted a little too close to Willow's privacy. If Mr. Thorne wanted to know all this, it would be infinitely easier to just text her himself.

But Arthur kept those thoughts strictly to himself. He wasn't blind; he had noticed the glaringly abnormal dynamic between the two of them over the past few days.

From what Arthur had observed, ever since Willow joined Merit Biotech, Silas had stopped traveling for business entirely. The only exception was his trip to Seattle—which he had specifically taken with Willow. It was painfully obvious that the boss was orchestrating his schedule to remain glued to her side.

Yet this time, Silas had flown out alone, and it was clear he hadn't even told Willow where he was going. She had literally asked Arthur a few days ago about Silas's whereabouts.

The whole situation was bizarre.

Arthur deduced they must be in the middle of a massive cold war. As for the catalyst, he had no idea, and there was a zero percent chance Silas would tell him. Survival in the corporate world meant doing your job and keeping your nose out of the billionaire's personal drama.

He cleared his throat and answered methodically. "Director Horgan has been eating well. She's been going to her usual lunch spots and finishing her meals."

Arthur knew this for a fact because he had spent the last few days inventing excuses to crash her lunch breaks, purely to observe her routine and report back to his boss.

"Good."

Hearing the tension dial back slightly in Silas's voice, Arthur continued. "As for her health... it might just be the changing seasons, but I did hear her cough a couple of times."

The words had barely left his mouth before Silas snapped, "She coughed? Where? In her office or at the restaurant?"

"In her office, during a meeting," Arthur replied, not daring to omit a single detail.

Silas immediately issued a hard directive. "Contact the People & Culture Department and Facilities. Tell them the seasonal shift is causing colds. I want the temperature and humidity levels strictly regulated across the entire building."

Arthur didn't miss a beat. "Understood. I'll notify them immediately."

"What else?" Silas pressed, his mind latching onto her career.

Arthur quickly relayed the rest. "Her work is proceeding as usual. No major roadblocks. If I had to guess, the only source of stress might be that the Sinclair Group officially flew in Professor Smith. That might put some pressure on her project."

Silas was already aware of the development. "Tell her not to stress over it. She can do whatever she wants, however she wants to do it."

Professor Smith was a titan in the genomics field, but to Silas Thorne, that specific sector was just a microscopic fraction of his global empire. Even if Willow's project completely tanked, it wouldn't make a dent in his bottom line.

To put it bluntly, he was perfectly willing to hand her millions of dollars just to let her play around and experiment.

"Understood, I'll pass that along," Arthur said. He hesitated for a fraction of a second. "There is... one more thing. I'm not sure if I should mention it."

Silas's tone went dangerously flat. "Does it involve Willow?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you hesitating?"

Sensing the imminent danger in his boss's voice, Arthur rushed to explain. "It's just... I've noticed that Director Horgan seems to be in a really low mood these past few days."

He wasn't exaggerating. He had watched her closely. Willow barely smiled lately, and when she did, it never reached her eyes. She was clearly weighed down by something heavy.

The information made Silas tense up instantly. "What happened? Is someone harassing her in the lobby again?"

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Silas didn't explicitly name Julian Sinclair. He didn't want the staff catching wind of her past with the Sinclair heir and sparking nasty rumors that could damage her reputation.

"No, nothing like that," Arthur clarified, having seen no sign of the ex-husband downstairs. "I just think she might be dealing with some personal stress. She just seems unhappy."

Arthur kept it vague, desperately hoping his boss would read between the lines and reach out to Willow himself.

But Silas's mind was locked in a completely different spiral. He was still convinced that keeping his distance was the only way to avoid suffocating her.

"Maybe you should give her a call and ask?" Arthur finally suggested, emboldened by the long silence on the line.

Silas rejected the idea instantly. "No. She wouldn't want me prying." He added a swift, harsh command, "And do not breathe a word to her that I was checking up on her."

"Uh, yes sir," Arthur agreed instantly, though he was deeply bewildered by the self-sabotage.

"So, Mr. Thorne... when will you be returning to New York?" Arthur asked before wrapping up the call.

"We'll see. There are still a few matters here that need my attention," Silas replied evasively.

The brutal truth was that he had no idea when he was flying back. He was simply waiting to see how long he could survive the agonizing withdrawal before he cracked and rushed back to her.

After hanging up, Silas didn't go to bed. He sat in the darkness of the hotel study for hours.

This had been his routine for days—staring at the walls until at least 2:00 AM. Because of the sheer distance between them, he was consumed by a quiet terror that if she had an emergency, he wouldn't be able to reach her in time. He refused to sleep early, and even when he finally passed out, his phone remained on loud, inches from his head, just in case she needed him.

Tonight was no different. Only when the clock struck two and he was absolutely certain she wouldn't call did he force himself to shower and try to rest.

Back in New York, Willow was having an equally miserable night. Her sleep was shallow and fractured, plagued by dreams that revolved entirely around Silas.

In the dreams, they were working together, sharing meals, and reliving the trip to Seattle—the way he had brought her to his childhood home, the quiet moments, and the burning intensity of that kiss.

Dream-Silas was just like the man she knew: infinitely patient, deeply protective, and always asking for her consent before making a move. It was a jarring contrast to the absolute radio silence of reality.

The more Willow tossed and turned, the darker her thoughts became. She started spiraling, convincing herself that his sudden shift in behavior had to be connected to the woman he had loved for years. Why else would he ghost her like this?

He didn't tell her where he went because he was going to see the love of his life.

He didn't have time to text her because he was completely engrossed in spending time with someone else.

Framed like that, his sudden coldness made perfect, agonizing sense.

After all, he had loved this mystery woman for a decade. In his heart, no one could ever compete with her.

Her chest tightened until she couldn't breathe. Willow threw off the covers, marched into the bathroom, and splashed freezing water over her face. The icy shock forced her racing mind to slow down.

Who he went to see and what he did were entirely his business. She had absolutely no right to interfere, and she certainly had no ground to be jealous.

Just landing a job at Merit Biotech was a massive stroke of luck. On top of that, Silas had greenlit her bringing Leo and the team onboard. She was being ungrateful. She had no right to demand his personal time.

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Having ruthlessly boxed up her emotions, Willow arrived at the office the next morning projecting absolute, unshakable energy. Today was dedicated to onboarding Leo, and she couldn't afford to be off her game.

When she walked in, Leo was already there. After exchanging warm greetings, she asked how he had slept. Leo beamed, telling her it couldn't have been better. Thanks to the quiet neighborhood she had chosen, he hadn't heard a single siren and had slept like a rock until sunrise.

A brief pang of envy hit Willow, but she masked it with a bright smile. "That's great. A good night's sleep makes all the difference."

She personally escorted him to the People & Culture Department to finalize his paperwork, then gave him a comprehensive tour of the facilities. Once everything was sorted, they arrived at his new workspace.

Leo's desk was strategically placed just outside her office, separated only by a sleek glass partition. If he needed anything, he was just a few steps away. She had also reserved the adjacent cubicles for the rest of the Seattle team, ensuring they could slot right in when they arrived.

Even though Leo practically begged to start grinding on actual projects immediately, Willow firmly handed him a stack of internal documentation instead. She wanted him to familiarize himself with Merit Biotech's corporate structure and give him a brief grace period to adjust to the new environment.

Leo, fiercely loyal, didn't argue. Whatever Willow commanded, he executed.

Thanks to the distraction of getting her friend settled, Willow's mood lightened considerably throughout the day. The dark cloud that had hovered over her all week finally lifted. Arthur Vance, naturally, noticed the shift immediately.

That evening, during his daily briefing with Silas, Arthur eagerly reported the good news. He genuinely thought the update would put his boss at ease. Instead, the moment the words left his mouth, the silence on the other end of the line dropped to sub-zero temperatures.

"Mr. Thorne? Are you still there?" Arthur ventured cautiously.

"Yes," Silas replied, his voice terrifyingly calm. He was relieved she was happy, of course. But knowing that her joy had absolutely nothing to do with him—and everything to do with another man—ignited a vicious jealousy in his gut.

"What did you just say? Leo Yardley came into the office today?" he asked coldly.

"Yes, sir. He officially onboarded today, and Director Horgan personally guided him through the entire process," Arthur reported, blissfully unaware of the landmines he was stepping on. "They seem very close. She's extremely protective of him."

Silas already knew she was protective. She viewed Leo as a true friend, and friends looked out for each other. Logic dictated he shouldn't be angry.

But logic had no place in the suffocating jealousy gripping his chest. Looking for a flaw, he asked abruptly, "What do you think of this Leo Yardley? Objectively. What does he look like?"

"Huh?" Arthur was completely blindsided. He wondered if he had misheard. Why on earth was the notoriously aloof, ruthlessly pragmatic CEO of Merit Biotech asking for a physical assessment of a mid-level hire?

Was it just because the guy was close to Willow?

"I said," Silas snapped, his patience evaporating, "what does he look like?"

Arthur swallowed his shock and gave an honest, analytical assessment. "He's decent looking. Good build. Not exactly breathtaking at first glance, but he has a nice, clean-cut appeal. More importantly, he gives off a very genuine, straightforward vibe. No hidden agendas."

Silas had briefly met Leo in Seattle, so he knew Arthur's assessment was entirely accurate. But that only made him more irritated. "So, between him and me. Who is better looking?"

"That's... there's really no comparison," Arthur stammered, sweating bullets. They were two completely different archetypes. Silas was the epitome of devastating, mature authority, while Leo still had that earnest, boy-next-door energy.

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"Answer the question."

Backed into a corner, Arthur went with his gut—and survival instinct. "You are, sir. Definitely."

Silas pushed further, his tone unrelenting. "Is that your personal opinion, or the general consensus?"

Arthur frantically wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. He had no idea why a billionaire titan was obsessing over such a trivial metric. "I'd say... ninety percent of people would agree it's you, sir."

"What about the other ten percent?" Silas was utterly unsatisfied. He didn't actually care about a beauty contest with Leo. Prior to meeting Willow, he had never given a single thought to his own appearance.

His only fear was that she might find someone else more attractive.

He was terrified she was in that remaining ten percent. After all, she had once been madly in love with Julian Sinclair, which proved her taste in men could be wildly unpredictable.

Realizing there was no winning this conversation, Arthur clamped his mouth shut, praying Silas would lose interest and move on.

Thankfully, Silas dropped it, pivoting to his next obsession. "Did she eat lunch today?"

"Uh..." Arthur stalled, knowing this answer was going to drop a bomb.

"Spit it out," Silas demanded, his voice laced with venom. He despised hesitation.

Arthur braced himself. "Director Horgan didn't eat with me today, sir. She went to lunch with Leo."

Dead silence echoed through the receiver. The pause stretched on for so long that Arthur was convinced the call had dropped. Just as he pulled the phone away to check the screen, Silas's voice cut through the quiet like a blade.

"Book me a flight. I'm going back to New York first thing tomorrow morning."

Arthur was stunned. "But sir, the negotiations there aren't finished yet."

"It's nothing that can't be delegated."

"But you have a crucial sit-down with Mr. Sterling tomorrow morning at 10:00 AM. If you leave in the morning, you'll completely miss the summit." Arthur had personally orchestrated the meeting, so he knew exactly what was at stake.

Reginald Sterling was a massive heavyweight in the renewable energy sector, leading the most profitable domestic enterprise in the industry. Merit Biotech was aggressively looking to expand into that space, making this partnership vital.

Given Silas's god-like status in the corporate world, he usually forced people to come to him. But lately, Silas had been acting erratic, demanding Arthur arrange this out-of-state trip out of nowhere.

If Silas had just canceled initially, it would have been fine. But flying all the way out there only to ghost Mr. Sterling at the eleventh hour was a massive slap in the face.

Arthur tried to talk him off the ledge. "Mr. Thorne, since you're already there, couldn't you just attend the meeting and fly back immediately after? It's only a few more hours. Leaving right now... it's going to look incredibly disrespectful."

"I said, book the flight for tomorrow morning. Do it now." Silas was immovable. He was desperate to get back; he couldn't wait another second. He had arrogantly believed he possessed the self-control to stay away for at least a week. But hearing Arthur's reports had shattered his resolve.

She didn't love him to begin with. If he stayed away any longer, he was terrified she would forget he even existed.

"But what about Mr. Sterling..."

"I'll handle the fallout," Silas cut him off, ending the call.

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The next morning, Silas boarded the earliest flight back to New York.

Upon landing, he bypassed his penthouse completely and went straight to the Merit Biotech headquarters.

Since the trip was entirely impulsive, Willow had no idea he was back. Assuming he was still out of state, she froze when she saw him stride into the executive suite. "You're back?"

"Yes. Wrapped things up early," Silas replied smoothly, though his predatory gaze was instantly anchored to her face, hungrily taking in her features. Thank god. She remembered him.

But as he stared, his chest tightened. Had she lost weight?

Didn't Arthur swear she had been eating every single meal? How could she look this fragile?

Silas's Adam's apple bobbed slightly as a heavy, suffocating ache lodged in his throat. He studied her intensely.

She had always been slender, but there had been a soft, healthy fullness to her cheeks. Now, that softness was gone. Her jawline was sharp, almost painfully so. Wrapped in her tailored blouse, she looked delicate and insubstantial, as if a strong gust of wind could knock her over.

She had definitely lost weight.

Unable to restrain himself, Silas stepped into her personal space, the words tearing out of him before he could stop them. "Why did you lose so much weight? Have you not been eating?"

Willow blinked, entirely caught off guard. She hadn't expected his first words after days of radio silence to be a fierce, intimate interrogation about her health. She had braced herself for a cold brush-off or a polite, sterile greeting—something matching the sheer apathy he had shown her recently.

Yet here he was, his eyes dark with concern, his tone wrapped in that same intense, overwhelming protectiveness he had always shown her. For a split second, she felt like the agonizing distance of the past few days had just been a bad dream. But the lingering sting of rejection in her chest reminded her it was very real.

Instead of answering, Willow scrutinized him right back. If anyone looked like hell, it was him.

The sharp angles of his face were drawn and haggard. Faint, dark shadows bruised the skin beneath his eyes, and the typically composed, commanding aura he carried was frayed at the edges. The gentle, devastating warmth that usually softened his features when he looked at her was completely gone, replaced by sheer exhaustion.

Before she could speak, Silas let out a heavy sigh, the sound laced with frustration. "Why haven't you been taking care of yourself?"

"I have," Willow defended herself automatically. She had eaten every meal, but her stomach had been constantly tied in knots. She ate decently at the office to survive the workday, but the second she got home to her empty apartment, her appetite vanished completely.

She turned the question on him. "What about you? Did you stop eating entirely on your trip?"

Otherwise, how could he look this wrecked?

Silas hadn't just skipped meals; he had effectively starved himself. He hadn't felt hunger once. Whenever the urge for sustenance flared, he had crushed it with nicotine.

"I was buried in negotiations," he lied smoothly, offering the most convenient excuse.

As the apex predator of a global conglomerate, being busy was a given. But Willow had seen him operate at maximum capacity before, running back-to-back summits from dawn until midnight. Even then, he had never skipped a meal. Why was this time so different?

A thousand questions burned in her throat. She wanted to demand why he had left so abruptly, and why he had rushed back. She wanted to know why he had iced her out for days, only to return and look at her with that same, suffocating intensity.

But the words died on her tongue. She had no right to demand answers. More than that, she was terrified that if she pushed, he would casually mention the woman he had gone to see, and the truth would shatter her completely.

Just then, Leo walked over with a stack of files, effectively killing the moment.

Seeing Silas standing there, Leo quickly offered a respectful greeting.

Though jealousy flared hot and vicious in Silas's veins, his iron-clad self-control took over. He gave a curt, polite nod, formally welcoming Leo to the company.

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Chapter 411

With Leo Yardley present, Silas Thorne couldn't say much to Willow Horgan. Before leaving, he simply told her not to worry about heading out for lunch, as he would handle the arrangements.

After Silas left, Leo looked perplexed by the brief exchange. "Are the perks at Merit Biotech always this good? The CEO personally arranges your lunch?"

Willow wasn't in the mood to explain the complicated truth, and frankly, she didn't know how. She deflected with a quick excuse. "It's probably just a welcome gesture since you just joined."

"Really?" Leo chuckled in disbelief. Did Mr. Thorne really like him that much? He hadn't gotten that impression at all.

A second later, he realized something. "Wait a minute. When Mr. Thorne was speaking earlier, he was looking right at you. He didn't say a word to me."

"It doesn't matter who he looked at; the point was to welcome you," Willow insisted, eager to shut down his suspicions. "He clearly values you. Otherwise, he wouldn't have offered you such an incredible compensation package."

"That's true." Thinking about the astronomical salary Silas had offered—multiples above the market rate—made Leo feel a bit more confident. "If Mr. Thorne values me that much, I'll just have to work twice as hard to repay his faith in me."

When lunchtime rolled around, the delivery arrived. It wasn't standard takeout. Silas had ordered from New York City's most exclusive restaurant, a place that strictly offered dine-in service and famously never delivered. Getting a table there required months of waiting, leaving them to wonder just how Silas had managed to get the chef to agree to private catering.

Because Willow had convinced Leo this was all for him, he was sitting right there when the food arrived. Seeing the extravagant setup, Leo was utterly stunned. "Isn't this a bit too high-end?"

The meal came in customized black-and-gold gift boxes, with immaculate temperature-controlled packaging.

As they unboxed the layers, they found the courses meticulously separated: prime Wagyu beef, delicate appetizers, and a rich, slow-simmered consommé. Every ingredient was top-tier. There was no grease or cheap packaging here—only the quiet, refined luxury that belonged entirely to Silas's elite echelon.

Seeing the sheer volume of food, Leo finally believed Willow's earlier claim. Silas must have included him in the order; there was no way this massive spread was meant for Willow alone.

They sat down to eat, but barely a few bites in, Willow's phone buzzed with a text from Silas. He was asking if she wanted him to order anything else. He had originally ordered the meal just for her, so knowing she was sharing it with Leo made him worry it wouldn't be enough.

Willow hurriedly typed back: [This is more than enough. Even sharing with Leo, we can't finish it all.]

Silas didn't argue. He simply made another phone call and arranged for a second delivery to be sent up.

When the extra food arrived shortly after, Leo's jaw practically hit the floor. "Why is there more? Didn't you tell Mr. Thorne we already had enough? We don't need all this."

Willow couldn't bring herself to admit that Silas considered the first feast a single-person portion. She offered a diplomatic lie. "I did tell him, but he was worried we'd still be hungry, so he ordered a bit more."

The second delivery was just as exquisite, featuring several gourmet hot dishes that practically melted in the mouth. Taking a bite, Leo sighed in awe. "Mr. Thorne is seriously too generous. I used to think he was a cold, ruthless guy, but after dealing with him, he's totally different. I guess you really can't trust rumors."

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Chapter 412

Mr. Smith had spent two days at the Sinclair Group, thoroughly reviewing all their gene-editing initiatives. He paid special attention to the deep-dive research on their joint project with Merit Biotech.

In the conference room, Mr. Smith voiced his approval of the project's foundation. The theoretical approach was highly forward-thinking, the experimental design was rigorous, and the data samples were incredibly reliable. They had achieved breakthrough progress in gene sequencing and target research. It was the kind of work that wouldn't just benefit the Sinclair-Merit partnership, but would leave a massive mark on future patent development.

However, he quickly pivoted, noting that his praise only applied to the early phases of the project. The recent data, he pointed out, looked as though it had completely veered off course. Compared to the initial brilliance, the current state of the research was, in his words, an absolute disaster.

Confused by the stark drop in quality, Mr. Smith asked Vivienne Sinclair to explain how the exact same project could yield such vastly different results.

Vivienne knew the real reason perfectly well. The flawless early data had been produced by Leo Yardley and his team. The "disaster" Mr. Smith was currently reviewing was the result of Vivienne being forced to wing it after driving Leo away, hastily patching together experiments she barely understood.

But she couldn't admit that. She had to pivot the blame.

"Professor Smith, to be completely honest with you, the reason for the drastic shift is that we ran into a severe internal crisis halfway through."

"What kind of crisis?" Mr. Smith asked directly. He was a man who appreciated bluntness.

"The original project lead abruptly left the company."

"Left? Why?" Mr. Smith frowned. Their field was highly specialized and required an obsessive level of dedication. Once a researcher committed to a project, they rarely abandoned it, usually seeing it through to the bitter end.

"Since you're my mentor, I won't hide anything from you." Vivienne feigned a heavy sigh, her eyes brimming with calculated grievance and helplessness. "The truth is, the project was originally led by a man named Leo Yardley. He let his position as the core researcher go to his head. He was incredibly arrogant. Recently, he betrayed our trust entirely, got poached by a rival firm, and jumped ship without warning. But before he left, out of pure malice, he scrambled the core experimental data and completely ruined our ongoing gene-editing workflow. He didn't even leave behind the complete logs for the upcoming experimental phases. By the time I took over, the project was in absolute ruins. I've tried everything to salvage it, but the damage was already done. That's why it looks like this..."

Vivienne delivered the performance of a lifetime. She looked like an innocent victim pushed to the brink, taking the fall for someone else's sabotage. As she spoke, she carefully watched Mr. Smith's reaction. Seeing his brow furrow deeply and his expression darken, she knew she had hooked him.

She immediately laid on the flattery. "That's exactly why we were so desperate to invite you here. At this point, you're the only one who can help us fix this."

Mr. Smith was an academic purist. He spent his life in laboratories, largely sheltered from corporate malice. Seeing Vivienne look so wronged and frustrated, he didn't doubt her story for a second.

He had already been frustrated by the messy data, but hearing the supposed truth sent his anger boiling over. His face flushed red with indignation. "Leo Yardley, is it? I will remember that name. As a researcher, he threw the most basic professional ethics out the window. Jumping ship for personal gain is one thing, but to maliciously destroy a gene project that countless people poured their blood and sweat into? A man so devoid of loyalty and bottom lines doesn't even deserve to step foot in a laboratory. It is utterly despicable and infuriating!"

Standing off to the side, Vivienne lowered her gaze to hide the triumphant smirk playing on her lips. She immediately added fuel to the fire. "Of course, a betrayal of this magnitude isn't something he could pull off on his own. He definitely had backing from someone else."

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"Hmph," Mr. Smith scoffed coldly. "Who else? Whoever took him in and offered him a new position is undeniably complicit in this sabotage."

Vivienne tapped her chin, pretending to recall the details. "I heard he went to Merit Biotech. And the executive who orchestrated the whole thing is one of their VPs. A woman named Willow Horgan."

Mr. Smith was familiar with Merit Biotech. Rumor had it their financial backing was bottomless, controlling hundreds of billions in capital across various cutting-edge industries. In recent years, they had aggressively muscled their way into the gene-editing sector, using unlimited funding and poached top-tier talent to shatter the industry's established hierarchy in just a few short years.

But Mr. Smith couldn't care less about their wealth. "So what if it's Merit? The pursuit of gene editing isn't a highway you can pave overnight. It's an agonizingly long journey, full of thorns and unknowns. It requires patience and the resilience to survive endless trial and error. But them? They have zero respect for the field. They just steal the fruits of others' labor. People with such blatant disregard for professional integrity won't last long in this industry. And I, for one, will never recognize any research they produce."

Hearing this, Vivienne finally allowed herself a satisfied smile. She quickly smoothed her features into an expression of gentle understanding. "Professor, please don't let this upset you. People like that simply aren't worth your anger. Since you're based in New York City right now, it's inevitable that you might cross paths with them at upcoming industry events. When that happens, we just need to stand by our principles and hold our heads high."

"I'd prefer not to run into them at all. I won't give them the time of day," Mr. Smith said bluntly. As an academic, his view of the world was strictly black and white.

"Don't worry. We invited you here to focus on our joint research. I will do everything in my power to keep them away from you," Vivienne promised. But internally, her mind was already racing, plotting her next move. She couldn't wait to orchestrate a 'chance encounter' between Mr. Smith and Willow at the next event.

First, she wanted Willow and her team to see exactly what kind of power Vivienne wielded. So what if Leo left? She had immediately secured someone vastly superior.

Second, based on Mr. Smith's explosive reaction, Vivienne knew her groundwork had paid off perfectly. He was completely disgusted by Willow and Merit Biotech. Given his stubborn, fiercely righteous personality, a confrontation was guaranteed to be highly entertaining.

They discussed the project a bit more before Mr. Smith suddenly shifted the topic. "By the way, is there any update on that individual I asked you to track down?"

Vivienne hadn't bothered looking into it, but since she had already used her go-to excuse, she improvised. "I did look into it, but the information available on local servers is incredibly sparse. Could you share the specific forum link and the details of your correspondence with me? It would really help me dig deeper."

"Of course." Mr. Smith quickly forwarded her the requested information.

Vivienne glanced at her screen. The website was entirely foreign to her, and the highly technical academic discussion they had been having was completely over her head. But her curiosity got the better of her. "Professor, if you don't mind me asking... what exactly is your relationship with this person? You seem very eager to find them."

Mr. Smith paused, his eyes turning thoughtful. "We don't actually have a relationship. They simply provided a solution to a theoretical problem I posted. To me, they felt like a kindred spirit. Or perhaps even a mentor."

Vivienne had no idea what he was talking about. She thought he sounded completely insane—but then again, she figured all obsessed scientists were a bit unhinged. It didn't matter to her.

She put on her best professional smile. "Don't worry, Professor. Leave this to me. I won't let you down."

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Chapter 414

The Oncology Genomics Symposium was scheduled for the following week, and conveniently, it was being held right here in New York City.

Given that gene editing played a crucial role in modifying immune cells (CAR-T) to precisely target cancer, as well as editing cancer genomes to suppress proliferation, Merit Biotech had naturally received an invitation.

Sinclair Group was on the guest list as well. More notably, Mr. Smith—who had recently partnered with them—had been invited by the organizers as a VIP guest and keynote speaker.

As soon as Willow Horgan received the itinerary, she informed Leo Yardley. She planned to bring him along. Since he was new to New York City, it was the perfect opportunity for him to network and catch up on the absolute bleeding edge of industry technology.

Leo was thrilled. Anyone in their line of work would jump at the chance to hear about the latest patents and breakthroughs. Besides, ever since Willow had been forced out of Sinclair Group, he hadn't attended a single conference of this caliber. He had been starting to feel totally disconnected from the academic world.

Willow sent him a link. "Register your credentials on this portal. Let me know if you run into any issues."

"Will do." Leo clicked the link. The first thing that loaded was the symposium's promotional banner. Mr. Smith's portrait was featured front and center, emblazoned with the words: *Academic Titan, Industry Pioneer.*

Honestly, the title was entirely deserved.

Leo eagerly pitched an idea. "When we see Mr. Smith at the symposium, I'm going to try and ask him a few questions. We've hit a bottleneck in our current research phase, and I'd love to pick his brain about any advanced methodologies they might be using overseas."

"If the opportunity arises, absolutely." Willow nodded. The entire point of these summits was information sharing and high-level debate. She had heard that Mr. Smith was notoriously aloof and hated small talk, but when it came to pure academia, he was always willing to engage.

At eight o'clock on Thursday morning, Willow and Leo arrived at the venue.

The symposium was top-tier, and the aesthetic reflected it. The convention center was designed with minimalist elegance, utilizing deep, muted tones that felt grounded and professional. The main stage was striking, framed by a massive backdrop displaying the summit's logo. The aisles were wide and pristine, lined with manicured greenery and sleek digital displays.

The atmosphere crackled with quiet, academic intensity. Looking around, every attendee was dressed in sharp business attire, carrying themselves with professional gravitas. There were hushed, intense conversations happening in small clusters, but no loud chatter. It felt less like a corporate event and more like an elite, high-stakes ritual.

After picking up their badges, Willow and Leo walked into the main hall and found their seats.

"The production value here is insane," Leo whispered, taking in the grand space. He had rarely been granted access to rooms like this.

"Yeah," Willow agreed, feeling the weight of the room. "Because Mr. Smith is headlining, a lot of heavyweights from all over the globe flew in for this. The prestige level is off the charts."

"I'm so glad I came." Leo clutched his briefcase, treating the moment with reverence. "I've been drafting my questions for days, tweaking and adjusting the phrasing. I just need to find the right moment to approach him."

"We'll make it happen," Willow assured him. "Just wait for an opening."

At exactly nine o'clock, the summit commenced.

It followed the standard protocol: opening remarks, sponsor introductions, and welcoming speeches. Once the formalities were cleared, the real draw began—the guest presentations.

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While the lineup boasted a roster of heavy hitters, each delivering brilliant presentations, it was Mr. Smith, the symposium's closing keynote speaker, who drew the most thunderous applause and palpable anticipation.

Dressed in a sharp suit, he walked to the podium with a calm, measured pace. The sheer authority of his years in the field radiated from him, instantly anchoring the entire room. He was the undeniable focal point.

Leo Yardley was practically buzzing with excitement. This was a man he had only ever seen in journals and on news broadcasts. Now, standing right in front of him, Leo almost forgot to breathe.

Living up to his reputation as a global pioneer, every word Mr. Smith shared was pure gold. Over the course of an hour, he clinically dismantled complex technical principles, outlined clinical breakthroughs, and presented actionable data. Every hypothesis and every graph on the screen represented years of grueling, top-tier scientific struggle.

The entire audience sat in rapt attention. Not a single person dared to check their phone. All eyes were glued to the stage and the projected schematics. Some attendees scribbled

furiously in their notebooks, while others stared intently, brows furrowed in deep concentration. The room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, everyone completely immersed in the masterclass unfolding before them.

When the presentation concluded, Leo exhaled a long breath. "Incredible. He really is a world-class titan. His insight is on an entirely different plane than ours."

Willow completely agreed. She was familiar with many of the concepts Mr. Smith had touched upon, but realistically, the domestic infrastructure still lagged slightly behind the international forefront. No matter how brilliant she was, there were environmental limitations she couldn't outrun.

Next came the open Q&A and networking session, where attendees could freely approach the speakers. Unsurprisingly, Willow and Leo headed straight for Mr. Smith. Half the room had the exact same idea, creating a massive crowd around him.

While they waited in line, Leo frantically smoothed his tie and adjusted his jacket. He even asked Willow to check if he looked presentable, terrified of making a poor first impression through some minor faux pas.

Although Mr. Smith's expression remained characteristically stoic—lacking the warm, grandfatherly smile of some of his peers—he answered every question with intense focus. He guided people from theory to practical application, breaking down the steps with absolute precision.

Finally, it was Willow and Leo's turn. They stepped forward, introducing themselves by name and stating their company.

Mr. Smith, who had been listening with a relaxed, albeit tired, expression, suddenly froze. His eyes darkened the second he heard their names.

Everything Vivienne Sinclair had told him rushed back to the forefront of his mind. So, these were the two ruthless, backstabbing plagiarists.

His jaw tightened as he scrutinized them.

The man, Leo Yardley, stood tall and respectful. His eyes were bright, clear, and completely devoid of the shifting shadows of a deceitful corporate spy.

And the woman beside him, Willow Horgan, was even more striking. She stood quietly, exuding a calm, grounded elegance. She wasn't fawning over him like a desperate opportunist, nor did she have the frantic, aggressive energy of someone driven by pure greed. She didn't look like a treacherous thief at all.

In fact, Mr. Smith suddenly recognized her. She was the young woman he had seen at the airport. He vividly remembered her low-profile, unassuming demeanor as she waited in the arrivals terminal. It had left a surprisingly strong impression on him.

He found it incredibly difficult to reconcile the sophisticated, professional woman standing in front of him with the venomous descriptions Vivienne had provided.

But then again, appearances could be deceiving. Since Vivienne had sworn it was the truth, he assumed it had to be fact.

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"I know who you are," Mr. Smith said suddenly.

Willow Horgan and Leo Yardley both froze. Leo, in particular, felt a rush of shock and pure elation. His eyes lit up. The industry legend he had idolized for years actually knew his name? It felt like the ultimate honor.

Leo's voice trembled slightly. "You... you know our names?"

"You two are quite famous, aren't you?" Mr. Smith's tone was incredibly strange, and his words even stranger.

Up until this point, while he hadn't been overly warm, he had been professional and sincere in his answers, clearly just trying to be efficient. But this? This was entirely different.

There was no warmth in his eyes, only a cold, detached distance laced with barely concealed disgust. His expression screamed impatience as he looked down his nose at them, his face dark as thunder.

Willow and Leo stood paralyzed. It was obvious Mr. Smith was furious, but they had absolutely no idea why.

What made it worse was that they had been watching him interact with the crowd for twenty minutes. He hadn't treated a single other person this way. It was targeted specifically at them.

In an instant, the excitement drained from their veins, replaced by a cold, sinking panic. Neither of them knew how to react.

Willow was the first to recover. Assuming there had just been some bizarre miscommunication, she tried to smooth things over, politely attempting to ask the research questions they had spent days preparing.

But Mr. Smith didn't give her an inch. He completely ignored her, turning his head and immediately calling on the next person in line.

At that moment, the reality of the situation crashed down on them. Mr. Smith was intentionally humiliating them in public.

But it made zero sense. This was the first time they had ever spoken to him. They had never even crossed paths before today. How could they possibly have offended him?

Despite being brutally skipped over, Willow and Leo didn't leave. They stepped to the side, waiting. And what they saw over the next half hour only confirmed their worst fears.

Mr. Smith went right back to treating everyone else with the same focused, professional respect as before. He answered their questions thoroughly. The only people he treated like absolute garbage were Willow and Leo, leaving them completely iced out.

They waited until the very end of the session. Willow tried to approach him two more times, only to be blatantly ignored. Leo stood there gripping his notes so hard his knuckles turned white, his stomach tied in knots.

But Mr. Smith never gave them a chance.

As the symposium officially ended, the crowd began to filter out of the hall, the low hum of academic debate fading into the background. Willow and Leo had no choice but to follow the herd toward the exit.

All the bright-eyed enthusiasm they had walked in with had been thoroughly crushed, leaving only a heavy, suffocating blanket of confusion.

"This is so weird," Leo whispered, his brow furrowed in deep distress. "He literally said he knew who we were. I thought that meant we could establish a connection. Why did he suddenly treat us like we're radioactive?"

Willow was just as baffled.

"I don't understand it either," she said softly, a trace of defeat in her voice. "If he knew us, logically, he should have at least entertained our questions. But deliberately ignoring us, skipping over us like that... he was trying to publicly embarrass us."

Leo let out a heavy sigh. He had placed so much hope on this symposium, and the sudden, brutal rejection was a bitter pill to swallow.

He immediately started replaying the morning in his head, agonizing over every detail. "Did I do something by accident? Did I say something that pissed him off? Is that why he was so cold?"

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Willow shook her head. "Let it go. Don't overthink it. It might not be about us at all."

She hated seeing Leo doubt himself. As far as she was concerned, they had acted perfectly professional today. They hadn't crossed any lines.

Yes, getting face-time with a global industry titan was important, but not at the cost of their dignity. If this bizarre encounter ruined Leo's confidence and derailed his career, Willow knew the entire trip would be a devastating loss.

"I guess you're right." Leo was deeply disappointed, but he trusted Willow implicitly. He agreed that the issue likely didn't stem from anything they had done.

As the crowd completely dispersed, Vivienne Sinclair finally stepped out from the shadows of a heavy pillar near the exit. She had watched the entire scene play out, drinking in Willow and Leo's crushing confusion.

A faint, almost imperceptible smirk curved her lips. Her eyes glittered with a dark, twisted satisfaction.

Watching them go from the dizzying high of being recognized to the utter humiliation of being publicly snubbed, and finally seeing them walk away defeated and lost—it was intoxicating.

So this was what it felt like to play God with someone else's life, especially when that someone was Willow.

Vivienne still vividly remembered the threat Willow had made at the restaurant. Hadn't Willow claimed she was going to poach Mr. Smith? Well, look who was laughing now.

Vivienne was tempted to stride right up to Willow, throw those words back in her face, and gloat that she was the one who had poisoned Mr. Smith against them. What could Willow possibly do about it?

But after a moment, she held back. The timing wasn't right. It wasn't the moment for the final kill.

After all, she hadn't flown this foreigner all the way across the world just to teach Willow a minor lesson. She had much bigger plans in motion.

Until the trap was fully set, she couldn't afford to be careless.

—

Ever since returning from his business trip, Silas Thorne had resumed his nightly routine. Every evening, he cooked dinner and made sure Willow ate. The only difference was that before, he would invite her over to his place. Now, he carefully packed the meals into containers and brought them directly to her door.

He physically couldn't bring himself to leave her completely alone, but he also didn't want to suffocate her. This was his compromise.

That evening, he had made slow-braised beef short ribs, a side of creamy garlic shrimp, and roasted asparagus.

When he handed over the insulated bags, Willow felt a crushing wave of guilt. She had been eating his home-cooked meals for days without giving him any real justification or closure. She couldn't keep taking from him like this.

"I really can't keep doing this," she blurted out.

"Why not?" Silas frowned slightly.

"Because it's not appropriate."

"There's nothing inappropriate about it. This is my last chance." *The last chance I have to be near you.*

"What do you mean?" Willow didn't catch the implication.

"Nothing," Silas deflected smoothly. "Just eat. The food's going to get cold."

He had already gone to the trouble of cooking it, and she couldn't bring herself to throw it away. She took the bags. "If I keep eating your food, the least I can do is contribute something."

"You don't need to do anything. Just finish the food and put some weight back on. That's enough for me."

His answer gave her no room to argue, so Willow took matters into her own hands. "I made a Homemade Fruit Medley. If you don't mind, do you want to come in and have some?"

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"Can I?" Silas Thorne hadn't expected the offer. He hadn't even dared to hope for it.

"Of course." Willow found his reaction strange. It was just a fruit salad. "As long as you don't mind."

"I don't. I'd love to."

Once inside, Willow unpacked the hot dishes Silas had brought and arranged them on the dining table, then went to the fridge to grab the fruit medley she had prepared. She wasn't a master chef, so she usually stuck to simple, foolproof things. Thankfully, presentation mattered more than technique here.

Colorful chunks of fresh fruit were piled high in a glass bowl. The sweet, crisp scent filled the air, perfectly complemented by a drizzle of rich, tart yogurt. It looked vibrant, refreshing, and incredibly appetizing.

Willow scooped a generous portion into a small bowl and handed it to him. "If you don't like it, don't force yourself. You can leave it."

Silas didn't even entertain the thought of leaving a single bite. After fighting so hard just to be in the same room as her, his only fear was that she wouldn't let him have enough.

They sat across from each other in silence. She ate the dinner he had cooked; he ate the fruit she had prepared. Neither spoke.

Even though nothing overt was said, the atmosphere was a far cry from the effortless comfort they used to share. It felt as though an invisible glass wall had been erected right down the center of the table.

Eventually, Silas broke the silence, asking how her meeting with Mr. Smith went.

In reality, it had been a total disaster, but Willow wasn't ready to share that yet. For one, she still had no idea why Mr. Smith had treated them with such visceral hostility. For another, Silas was clearly exhausted. Ever since he got back from his trip, the dark circles

under his eyes had deepened, and he was working later and later. She absolutely refused to dump her professional drama on him right now.

"It was fine," Willow lied smoothly. But Silas's question sparked a sudden thought. Mr. Smith had said they were 'famous.'

Willow knew for a fact that she and Leo Yardley weren't famous in academic circles. Was it possible he recognized them because of Merit Biotech's reputation?

She tested the waters. "Do you happen to know Professor Smith?"

Silas shook his head. "No. Merit Biotech is relatively new to this specific sector. I've heard of him, but our paths have never crossed."

But Silas was dangerously perceptive. He knew she wouldn't ask something like that out of nowhere. "Why? Did something happen? Did you run into a problem?"

"No, just trying to figure out some industry dynamics. It's nothing major."

Since she didn't elaborate, Silas didn't push it. But he made sure his stance was crystal clear. "If you want me to know him, I can make it happen."

Even though Mr. Smith was a global academic heavyweight, Silas felt perfectly capable of dragging the man into his orbit if Willow asked for it.

"That's alright," Willow declined gently. She needed to investigate the situation herself first.

"Okay." Silas respected her boundary.

He quickly polished off his bowl and looked up at her. "This is incredible. Can I have another bowl?"

Willow froze. Her eyes went wide, staring at him in sheer disbelief.

Silas was a man raised on Michelin-starred cuisine. He was notoriously selective about his food, usually eating just enough to sustain himself. He was the furthest thing from an easy-to-please eater. And what she had served him wasn't even a cooked meal—it was just fruit and yogurt. And he thought it was incredible?

It took her several seconds to process his request. "Are you sure it's actually good? You really want seconds?"

"Yes. Can I?" Silas didn't hesitate for a fraction of a second.

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She could give him more, of course, but Willow found it absurd. She knew her own limits in the kitchen. "Are you just starving, or are your taste buds broken? Or are you forcing yourself to eat a second bowl just to protect my ego?"

"None of the above," Silas replied with total sincerity. "I genuinely think it's delicious."

Willow was speechless.

This time, she gave him a slightly smaller portion. And, just to ensure he didn't feel obligated to sit there and eat just to keep her company, she deliberately put her chopsticks down before he finished.

They hadn't spoken much all evening, and once the meal was over, the silence settled in again. Silas took the hint and stood up to leave. But before heading for the door, his eyes lingered on the remaining fruit salad in the serving bowl. "Can I pack the rest of this to go?"

Willow stared at him. "Are you serious?"

She was honestly starting to question reality. Was she secretly a culinary prodigy and just hadn't realized it until tonight?

She felt like she was in the twilight zone, but looking into Silas's earnest, expectant eyes, she couldn't find the heart to say no. She figured she was just overthinking it. Resigned, she grabbed a container and packed up the leftovers for him.

As she handed him the bag at the door, she gave him a strict warning. "If you can't finish it, throw it away. It won't keep until tomorrow."

"Don't worry," Silas promised. "I'll finish every bite."

As soon as he stepped into his own apartment, Silas carefully took out the container. But he didn't eat it right away. Instead, he pulled out his phone and opened his camera.

When Willow was around, he had to keep his intense obsession locked down. But alone in his empty apartment, he didn't have to pretend. He adjusted the container, played with the lighting, and snapped picture after picture until he captured the perfect aesthetic angle.

Satisfied, he opened his private social media feed. His fingers tapped the screen a few times, ensuring the privacy settings were locked to 'Only Me'.

Under the warm glow of his dining room lights, the screen illuminated the caption he had just typed:

[She made dinner for me for the first time.]

Once the post was live, Silas finally allowed himself to sit down and slowly savor the leftover fruit. He even walked over to his wine cellar and uncorked a hundred-thousand-dollar bottle of Romanée-Conti to pair with it. To him, the world's finest vintage was the only acceptable pairing for her handmade dessert.

—

Meanwhile, on the other side of the city, Vivienne Sinclair was hosting a lavish dinner for Mr. Smith. Outwardly, she claimed it was to celebrate the success of the symposium. But deep down, the real reason she was celebrating was the absolute humiliation Willow had suffered that afternoon.

Learning from her previous mistake of being too flashy at the airport, Vivienne had purposefully avoided New York's aggressively opulent hotspots. At least, that's how it appeared on the surface. The restaurant she chose had no glaring neon signs or velvet ropes. It was discreetly tucked away in a quiet, ivy-draped brownstone.

Mr. Smith had been reluctant to come. He loathed corporate networking and preferred to spend his evenings reading or resting. But Vivienne had been cunning. Instead of pressuring him directly, she had manipulated his research assistants and colleagues first, getting them on board so Mr. Smith would be forced to follow the group.

Her tactic worked. While Mr. Smith was cold, he wasn't completely heartless. He knew his team had crossed an ocean for this project, and he wasn't going to punish them by playing the tyrant.

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Walking into the restaurant, Mr. Smith didn't notice anything amiss. The decor was understated—plain walls, minimalist furnishings—a far cry from the ostentatious luxury he despised. For the moment, he felt at ease.

But anyone with an eye for true wealth would have noticed the details. The chairs looked simple, but they were hand-carved from century-old hardwood, cool and heavily weighted to the touch. The floors were laid with incredibly rare, matte-finished imported timber. The lighting fixtures, though unpretentious in design, were custom-forged from top-tier materials.

There was no gaudy gold leaf or crystal chandeliers to blind the eye, but insiders knew exactly what this place was.

Unfortunately, Mr. Smith and his team of academics were completely oblivious to this level of stealth-wealth. They just assumed it was a nice, quiet local bistro.

The dinner went smoothly. The atmosphere was far more relaxed and natural than any of their previous corporate dinners.

Once the plates were cleared, Vivienne smoothly suggested they stay and relax a bit before heading back to the hotel. Everyone was jet-lagged and exhausted from the conference, so they readily agreed.

Vivienne feigned a quick phone call, asking a server to guide the group further into the venue while she trailed slightly behind, her eyes sharp, monitoring the situation.

The server led them down a shadowy, inconspicuous hallway past the kitchens. The second they stepped through the double doors at the end, the atmosphere shifted violently.

Gone was the minimalist charm of the dining room. They had just entered The Serenity Wellness Wing—a sprawling, hyper-exclusive VIP retreat completely cut off from the outside world. The dimly lit corridors were lined with impossibly plush, rare carpets that absorbed all sound. Exotic, manicured greenery flanked the walls, and the air was thick with the heavy, sensual scent of expensive essential oils. Rows of private wellness suites lined the hall, offering absolute, soundproof privacy, dripping in dark, decadent luxury.

It boasted high-end massage suites, private saunas, and an exclusive zen lounge. Every square inch was meticulously engineered for indulgence, using materials that screamed exorbitant wealth.

Separated by a single wall, it was an entirely different universe. Outsiders were blinded by the modest restaurant front; only the true elite knew about the playground of sin and luxury hidden in the back.

And this was exactly why Vivienne had brought him here.

In all her interactions with Mr. Smith, he had played the part of the untouchable, righteous academic. He was strict, rejected any form of corporate schmoozing, and looked down on anyone trying to grease the wheels. He acted completely incorruptible.

But Vivienne didn't buy it for a second. She believed it was all a facade, a performance for the public eye. Men like him acted high and mighty when the cameras were on, bound by their professional titles, but behind closed doors? They were all exactly the same.

She wanted to strip away his armor. She had deliberately separated him from the main group, isolating him with his closest aides in a highly compromised, relaxed environment. She wanted to see if he could keep up the saint routine when plunged into pure temptation.

She had even used the server to guide them in, just in case he freaked out, giving her total plausible deniability.

As it turned out, her precautions were absolutely necessary.

Mr. Smith, who had been perfectly calm moments before, stopped dead in his tracks. His face darkened ominously as he took in the decadent surroundings.

He whipped around, his eyes locking onto Vivienne with terrifying intensity. His voice was low, hard, and laced with blistering contempt.

"Ms. Sinclair, what is the meaning of this? You said we were going to relax. What exactly is this place?"

He gestured sharply toward the dimly lit private suites, looking at them as though they were coated in filth. His gaze cut through her like a scalpel. "Using 'relaxation' as a cover to pull this kind of sleazy stunt? Trying to buy favor through cheap, decadent shortcuts? It's not just unprofessional, it is morally bankrupt. I suggest you explain yourself, immediately."

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Vivienne had come prepared, so she didn't feel a single ounce of panic. She expertly shifted all the blame onto the server who had led the way. "Professor Smith, I am so incredibly sorry. I was momentarily distracted and completely missed this. I only knew this bistro offered a quiet place to relax after a meal, but I had no idea the back room was... this kind of establishment. The server must have taken us down the wrong hall. My deepest apologies."

Standing to the side, the waitress caught the cue perfectly. Trembling, she immediately bowed her head and stammered out an apology, taking full responsibility and insisting the mistake had nothing to do with Ms. Sinclair.

Seeing the terrified girl, Professor Smith couldn't bring himself to press the issue. However, any mood for relaxation was completely ruined. Without another word, he gathered his team and walked out.

The moment the doors closed behind them, the heavy silence settled over the room. The meek, apologetic facade Vivienne had just worn shattered instantly. Her warm, graceful smile vanished, leaving nothing but dark impatience in her eyes.

The waitress, who had just played along with her scheme, stood carefully to the side, too afraid to breathe.

Vivienne shot her a glance, her tone icy but approving. "You did well just now. Quick on your feet and very smart."

She pulled a thick envelope of cash from her designer bag and tossed it into the girl's hands. "Go tell your manager to register this. Consider it a tip from me. There will be an extra bonus for you at the end of the month. Oh, and from now on, whenever I come here, you will be the one serving me."

Overjoyed and shocked, the waitress thanked her profusely and quickly backed out of the room.

Now entirely alone, Vivienne's tightly wound composure completely unraveled. She pushed open the door to a private tea room and stepped inside. Picking up a delicate cup of Dragon Well Tea, she took a slow sip. Despite the fragrant aroma, a sudden wave of rage hit her. Her fingers gripped the porcelain so hard her knuckles turned white.

"What a nightmare to deal with!" she hissed through gritted teeth, her eyes flashing with predatory frustration. "Pretending to be so righteous in public, yet totally impenetrable in private. I give him a way out, and he throws it in my face. He doesn't know what's good for him."

She let out a cold scoff, her expression twisting with relentless obsession. "I refuse to believe there is anyone in this world without a weakness. No matter how arrogant or strict he is, he's still flesh and blood. If this didn't work, I'll just grind his defenses down piece by piece. Sooner or later, he will work for me."

The reason she was so desperately trying to win Professor Smith over was simple: she knew her own capabilities better than anyone. If this relied purely on her scientific merits, she would never earn his respect, and her incompetence would eventually be exposed. Rather than waiting for the truth to come out, she needed to chain him to her

side before he caught on. That way, no matter what happened down the line, it would be too late for him to jump ship.

Vivienne didn't linger in the tea room for long. Just as she was gathering her things to leave, a knock echoed from the door. Assuming it was the waitress returning, she opened her mouth to snap that she wanted to be left alone.

But as the door swung open, the words died in her throat.

Standing in the hallway wasn't the waitress. It was Jayden Chase, one of the lead researchers who had just walked out with Professor Smith.

Vivienne stared at him in surprise. Assuming he had forgotten something, she asked if he needed to grab his belongings.

Jayden shook his head. He looked right at her and said he had come back specifically to find her.

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The moment the words left his mouth, Vivienne understood exactly why he had come back. A wave of relief washed over her. People driven by worldly desires were the easiest to control. And money was the one thing she possessed in abundance.

"Why should I trust you?" she asked, cutting straight to the core issue.

She wanted results, but she demanded absolute security. The fewer people who knew about this backroom deal, the safer she was.

"No need to rush. I understand your skepticism," Jayden replied smoothly, entirely unbothered. "Take your time. I will prove my worth."

Some things didn't need to be spelled out. The mutual understanding was already there.

Vivienne laid out her final condition. "Let me be clear. If this works, we both get what we want. If it goes south, you take the fall alone. You will not drag me down, and you will never mention my name."

"Deal."

With that single word, their covert alliance was forged.

In public, they would remain distant professional acquaintances, keeping strict boundaries. In private, they were co-conspirators tied to the same sinking ship, bound by mutual greed and shared risk.

With the terms settled, the suffocating tension in the room dissipated.

Vivienne smoothed out her designer dress, masking the sharp calculation in her eyes to return to her usual elegant composure. "I'm heading out. Are you coming? I can have my driver take you."

Jayden leaned back comfortably in his chair. "No thanks. Like I said, I actually like this place. You go ahead."

Vivienne caught his meaning instantly. She was slightly taken aback, having assumed his earlier comment was just a conversational icebreaker. Clearly, he genuinely enjoyed the establishment's hidden services.

But that worked perfectly for her. The more vices he had, the more leverage she held.

Vivienne offered a polite smile, pulled out her phone, and made a quick call. "Send two of your best girls to the private room. Take excellent care of Mr. Chase. Anticipate his every need and make sure he is thoroughly satisfied. I don't want a single complaint."

Hanging up, she looked at him. "Does that arrangement work for you?"

Jayden didn't say a word, merely offering a satisfied smirk. Vivienne knew she had him exactly where she wanted him.

Leaving the bistro, she headed straight for New York City's upper east side. Over the past few days, Julian's intense fury toward her had somewhat cooled. He occasionally spoke to her, though his attitude remained frustratingly distant. Unwilling to poke the bear, Vivienne had been walking on eggshells.

She had even gone out of her way to pick up takeout from a high-end restaurant, hoping to bring him a peace offering.

During the drive, she sent Julian two texts, telling him not to go to sleep yet because she was bringing him a late-night dinner. When no reply came, she dialed his number. The line was busy. Frustrated, she ended the call.

Irritation flared in her chest. It was late—who on earth was he talking to? She ordered her driver to speed up. She needed to get home and see exactly what was keeping him so occupied. Was it about Willow again? Was he still refusing to sign those divorce papers?

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The moment Vivienne stepped through the front door, she kicked off her restrictive heels, dumped the expensive takeout on the console table, and cornered the nanny. "Where's Julian?"

Having worked in the household long enough to understand Vivienne's volatile temper, the nanny was visibly intimidated. Seeing the frantic, irritated look on her face, the woman hurried forward to take the bags, her voice trembling slightly. "Mr. Sinclair is on the second floor. He went straight to his study when he got back."

Vivienne's expression darkened. Frowning deeply, she marched toward the stairs.

Of course, that was the exact moment little Toby ran over. Vivienne had been playing nice with him for the past few days, which had temporarily erased his memory of her previous cruelty. Seeing her home, he immediately clung to her legs, whining for her to play with him.

But Toby was just a child. He couldn't comprehend the twisted, transactional nature of the adults around him. Vivienne's recent kindness had nothing to do with maternal affection; it was a calculated performance to win Julian's favor.

Predictably, with Julian out of sight, her patience evaporated. Annoyed and completely exhausted by the boy's clinging, she shoved him hard. "Get off me. Go away."

Stumbling backward, Toby's face crumpled, and he was seconds away from a full-blown meltdown.

Seeing his tears welling up, Vivienne immediately raised her hand, the threat of physical violence clear in her sharp glare. Terrified, Toby clamped both hands over his mouth, swallowing his sobs and not daring to make a single sound.

The nanny, highly attuned to the shifting dynamics, dropped what she was doing and rushed over to scoop the boy into her arms. "Come on, Toby. Let's go to the kitchen and get you a treat."

Her quick exit wasn't just to protect Toby; she was saving herself. She had witnessed Vivienne's explosive rages far too many times. Unable to unleash her wrath on Julian, Vivienne always used the staff as her punching bags.

With them out of the way, Vivienne didn't waste a second. She hurried up the staircase.

Approaching the study, she raised her hand to knock but paused. The heavy oak door hadn't been fully shut, leaving a narrow crack. Standing perfectly still in the hallway, Vivienne could hear Julian's voice crystal clear.

His tone was terrifyingly cold, laced with an authoritative fury that made her stomach drop.

"I made my bottom line perfectly clear. No matter how many times they appeal, the first-instance verdict must be upheld."

"I am not getting a divorce. Not in this lifetime."

"What do you mean you can't guarantee it? I never want to hear those words out of your mouth again. I pay your firm millions of dollars. If you can't handle this simple task, then you have no business calling yourself a lawyer. You might as well pack up your briefcase and leave the industry."

The line went dead. The study fell into a suffocating silence.

Outside the door, Vivienne was frozen solid. The blood in her veins turned to ice, rushing straight to her head in a dizzying wave.

He was actually talking to the lawyers about it!

He truly had no intention of divorcing Willow!

Maintain the verdict. Never divorce.

Those words detonated in her mind on an endless loop, instantly shattering the delicate, self-deluding fantasy she had built.

She stood paralyzed, her back pressed against the freezing corridor wall. Her fingertips trembled uncontrollably, and a suffocating wave of despair washed over her.

She was consumed by blinding rage, yet simultaneously terrified. She desperately needed to figure out her next move.

She stood there for a few more moments until the study door suddenly swung open. Julian stepped into the doorway, and their eyes met in a jarring, unexpected collision.

For a split second, a flicker of awkwardness crossed Julian's face, but he masked it instantly. He gave her a blank look, said nothing, and moved to walk past her toward the stairs.

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"Julian," Vivienne called out, her voice trembling as she stared at his back. "Was what you just said true?"

Knowing she had eavesdropped on the entire conversation, Julian didn't bother lying. "You heard it yourself."

"Why?" she choked out, her heart twisting in agony.

"There is no 'why.' The timing just isn't right."

"Is the timing not right, or will it never be right?" she demanded.

Julian's brow furrowed, his handsome features tightening with visible annoyance. "You're overthinking this. Instead of dwelling on nonsense, you should be figuring out how to push the project forward."

"So, that's what this is about?" Vivienne refused to let it go.

"What?" Julian snapped, entirely out of patience.

Vivienne spelled out her worst fear, syllable by bitter syllable. "Is it because Willow's career is taking off? Because she's shining and successful again? Has that made you fall back in love with her?"

Her emotions were spiraling completely out of control. Despite her toxic ambition, her feelings for Julian had always been genuine. They had been together for years, and he had once pampered her like she was the center of his universe.

All the grievances she had swallowed recently erupted at once. Her eyes stung with unshed tears. "If that's what you want, I can do it too. I am not worse than her. I can achieve everything she has, and I can do it better! You saw what happened today. I managed to bring Professor Smith on board. I will outperform her in every single way."

She had laid her heart bare, offering him absolute devotion, but Julian's expression remained maddeningly indifferent. In fact, her accusations only seemed to irritate him further.

"Who told you I fell back in love with her?" he demanded, his voice dropping into a dangerously low register. Deep down, he acknowledged that Willow had changed, but it was nowhere near enough to reignite his love. What he felt was raw, suffocating possessiveness. He refused to be the one discarded.

The control of this marriage belonged to him. If anyone was going to walk away, it would be him tossing her aside. Who gave her the right to make that decision?

Facing the hysterical Vivienne, he felt nothing but exhaustion. Yet, he held his tongue from saying anything too vicious. After all, she had been working tirelessly lately, and orchestrating the meeting with Professor Smith was entirely her doing.

He let out a heavy sigh, his tone softening a fraction. "Your only priority right now should be making this project a success. Stop filling your head with baseless assumptions."

Changing the subject, he asked, "How did the dinner go tonight?"

Julian had been invited to the dinner with Smith's team, but he had zero interest in attending, dumping the entire social obligation onto Vivienne.

Hearing the shift in his tone, Vivienne recognized the olive branch. She was still fuming, her chest tight with resentment and jealousy, but she had no choice but to swallow her pride. This was the bed she had made.

She couldn't afford to go to war with Julian. She had no leverage. As long as he held all the power, her only option was submissive obedience—unless she produced undeniable results.

"It went well," Vivienne lied, discreetly wiping the corner of her eye and forcing down the bitter lump in her throat.

"Good." Julian didn't press further and continued down the stairs. "Go get some rest if you're done."

Vivienne stood in the dimly lit hallway, staring at his retreating back for a very, very long time.

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Chapter 426

With every step he took, her heart sank deeper into an endless abyss.

She could clearly feel it—that exclusive indulgence and blinding favoritism he used to shower her with was slowly dissipating into nothing.

A profound sense of loss washed over her, but the sheer, stubborn refusal to accept defeat anchored her in place. She vehemently rejected this chilling reality.

No!

She would never let things end like this.

Julian belonged to her. He always would.

Fueled by this toxic, obsessive drive, Vivienne arrived at the Sinclair Group headquarters at the crack of dawn the next day. She threw herself into the project, operating on pure, frantic adrenaline.

To her credit, she was incredibly lucky. Thanks to Professor Smith's hands-on guidance, their previously disastrous gene-editing project was finally undergoing a massive overhaul. The chaotic data sets, misaligned genetic targets, and glaring loopholes were systematically eradicated. The research, which had been paralyzed for months, was rapidly streamlining and getting back on track.

Seeing the tangible progress, Vivienne grew desperate to embed herself even deeper. She needed to prove her worth to Julian. More importantly, she needed to crush Willow. Leeching off Professor Smith's genius was the fastest, most effective shortcut to victory.

During a briefing, she boldly requested to join the core experimental team. Although the Sinclair Group was technically partnering with Smith's team, all the heavy lifting and critical data analysis had been strictly handled by Smith's people. The Sinclair Group was merely a name on the contract. Vivienne wanted total access.

"Professor, would it be possible for me to participate in the upcoming core experiments?" she asked, flashing her most professional smile.

Professor Smith evaluated her for a long moment. He didn't reject her outright. "It's possible. But I need to ask you a few questions first. As you know, my standards for my lab staff are exceptionally high."

Vivienne's stomach dropped. She only wanted to be in the lab to take credit; she had absolutely no grasp of the complex, highly technical mechanics at play.

Reaping the rewards without doing the work was her ultimate life philosophy.

Forcing an aura of calm, she replied, "Please, ask away."

Professor Smith didn't pull any punches. "In our current targeted gene editing, we are addressing the mismatch issue at the pathogenic gene's exon splicing site. Tell me, how would you optimize the CRISPR off-target rate, and how specifically would you use sgRNA base modification to reduce the probability of fragment deviation?"

The moment the words hit the air, Vivienne's mind flatlined. She barely understood basic gene-editing theories, let alone the intricate, project-specific, high-level operational mechanics he was demanding. She hadn't bothered to read a single technical briefing in depth.

A suffocating silence engulfed the room. The embarrassment was agonizing, but driven by her sheer greed for power, she brazenly tried to deflect. "I might not be fully up to speed on the absolute specifics since I wasn't part of the initial phase. Professor, could you perhaps ask something a bit more foundational?"

Smith frowned. Likely taking her administrative role into account, he reluctantly pivoted. "Very well. After repairing the gene fragment, the cell's transient transfection efficiency is currently too low. What is your diagnosis for the primary cause, and how would you specifically adjust the electroporation parameters to correct it?"

Compared to the first, this was a much more standard, straightforward question that any competent researcher could answer.

Yet, Vivienne stood frozen. Her brain was a desolate wasteland.

She wanted to scream. What the hell kind of questions were these? Was this old fossil purposely trying to humiliate her?

Just as she was preparing to invent a pathetic excuse to dodge the question and try again another day, Jayden Chase smoothly stepped into the fray.

"Professor," Jayden interjected, his tone perfectly measured. "Regarding the first question, the current sgRNA terminus has two redundant complementary bases, which is the primary driver of the off-target deviation. Applying a 2'-O-methylation modification will effectively suppress the mismatch rate. As for the cell transfection efficiency, the previous electroporation voltage threshold was set too high, damaging a subset of the active cells. Dropping the voltage by 50V and extending the pulse duration by 10ms will significantly boost the successful transfection rate."

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After flawlessly answering the technical questions, Jayden seamlessly pivoted to cover for Vivienne. "Ms. Sinclair is actually quite familiar with these protocols. We had an in-depth discussion about these very metrics a few days ago, and her insights were incredibly constructive. I imagine she's just a bit caught off guard by the on-the-spot quiz."

While his excuse did little to mask her actual incompetence, it effectively diffused the suffocating tension in the room and saved her from total public humiliation.

Professor Smith's stern expression softened marginally. He looked back at Vivienne. "You must consistently operate at this level of proficiency if you want a spot in my lab."

"Understood, Professor. I will redouble my efforts," she promised smoothly.

As soon as Smith and his team walked away, Vivienne ground her teeth together, mentally cursing the man. You arrogant old fossil. You intentionally tried to embarrass me. I'll let you play god for a few more days because you're still useful. But the second this project is secured, we'll see if I ever give you the time of day again.

By the time the lab sessions concluded, it was already noon. Under the guise of wanting to learn more, Vivienne invited Jayden out for lunch. However, the moment they were seated in the upscale restaurant, she remained dead silent, not offering a single word of conversation.

Seeing her icy demeanor, Jayden raised an eyebrow and took the initiative. "I thought you brought me here to ask for guidance. Why so quiet?"

Vivienne let out a faint, cynical scoff. She met his gaze, her eyes devoid of any warmth. "Did you really think I gave a damn about those technical questions?"

"Ah. My mistake, then," Jayden chuckled. The smile was strange, entirely detached, and didn't reach his eyes—a look that made people instinctively uncomfortable.

Vivienne had zero interest in playing games. She cut straight to the chase. "Thanks for bailing me out this morning. Name your price. We might be allies now, but business is business. Besides, I despise owing anyone a favor."

"No payment necessary," Jayden replied, casually taking a bite of his steak. His dark eyes remained fixed on her. "Consider that my pledge of loyalty. We are operating on your turf, and I know you still harbor doubts about me. Today was just the first proof of my value. There will be plenty more."

"Oh?" Vivienne's gaze turned chillingly sharp. The deep-seated suspicion in her eyes didn't waver. She wasn't foolish enough to drop her guard over one simple favor.

Sensing her lingering distrust, Jayden didn't panic. A confident, calculated smirk touched his lips. "I've already identified the perfect opportunity. If you play your cards right, you can entirely rewrite the Professor's opinion of you and shatter his academic bias."

"What kind of opportunity?"

Leaning in, Jayden lowered his voice and outlined his strategy.

"Are you certain this will work?" she asked, her interest undeniably piqued.

"We won't know until we try," Jayden said, radiating a relaxed confidence. "Unlike securing a spot in the core lab, this objective doesn't require top-tier security clearance or elite technical expertise. Plus, you're a New York native with a silver tongue and an extensive social network. If you pull this off, the Professor will look at you in a completely different light."

Vivienne was thoroughly sold. "And how do you guarantee he'll assign this task to me?"

"Leave the logistics to me. You don't need to worry about a thing."

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Chapter 428

In the realm of genetic research, theoretical knowledge was utterly useless without raw, clinical data. And recently, Professor Smith had stumbled upon a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Late that evening, the harsh, sterile glow of the lab's surgical lights illuminated stacks of international journals and genomic sequencing reports. The faint, clinical scent of disinfectant mixed with the crisp smell of printed paper hung heavy in the air.

Professor Smith stared at a freshly updated global rare disease database report, his eyes clouded with a torturous mix of awe and frustration.

Having dedicated his life to gene editing, his holy grail wasn't just textbook theory—it was real-world clinical anomalies and live tissue samples. Any opportunity to study an extreme mutation in the field held unimaginable, paradigm-shifting value.

Unfortunately, this specific case was a logistical nightmare.

The patient was suffering from a staggeringly rare, complex genetic mutation causing severe skin degeneration. It was an ultra-rare subtype of Epidermolysis Bullosa. There were only three documented cases left on the planet, and this particular patient presented the most stable survival rate and the most comprehensive progression of the disease. The scientific value was astronomical.

Unlike standard single-gene disorders, this patient's mutation points were impossibly hidden, triggering a dual collapse of both epidermal and interstitial repair genes. It was an anomaly that standard lab simulations and mouse models could never accurately replicate.

To any geneticist, this was a divine gift. It was the key to a monumental breakthrough that would cement their legacy. Smith should have been ecstatic, but instead, he was overwhelmed with anxiety. This golden opportunity came with a seemingly insurmountable barrier.

The patient was young Maya. Her family kept her fiercely protected in the Appalachian Highlands. The region was a geographical fortress—no direct flights, no nearby train stations. The final stretch required navigating dozens of miles of treacherous, unpaved mountain ridges, making it nearly impossible for a standard research team to transport highly sensitive medical equipment. Moreover, the local community was intensely insular and conservative, fiercely rejecting outsiders, especially medical professionals. Two separate domestic research teams had already attempted the journey, only to be chased out before they even caught a glimpse of the family, let alone gathered any viable data.

After agonizing over the file, Smith removed his glasses and rubbed his temples, letting out a defeated sigh. "This case is an absolute miracle. If we miss it, we might be waiting a decade for another. But the sheer logistical nightmare of a field study is entirely beyond our team's operational capacity."

A heavy silence fell over the lab. Everyone knew he was stating an undeniable fact.

Just as the morale plummeted to rock bottom, Jayden spoke up. "Professor, I have a proposal. I'm not sure if it's my place to say."

Smith turned to him. "Let's hear it."

"Why don't we let Vivienne handle it?" Jayden suggested smoothly.

Smith looked instantly skeptical.

Jayden pressed his advantage. "Our primary roadblocks are funding the logistics and navigating the hostile local environment."

"On the first point, Vivienne represents the Sinclair Group. She has unlimited access to capital, off-road fleets, and logistical support. This expedition requires portable

sequencing rigs, sterile sampling units, a dedicated security detail, and a convoy of heavy-duty SUVs to handle those mountain roads. She can personally finance and coordinate the entire operation. It wouldn't cost our grant a single dime, and you wouldn't have to lift a finger to organize it."

"As for the local resistance, Vivienne is a New York socialite. She thrives on networking, maneuvering through complex social webs, and bribing the right people to open locked doors. Where a team of straightforward academics would fail, she might actually have the ruthless charm required to buy our way in."

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"You should at least give her a shot," Jayden reasoned, his tone perfectly persuasive. "Besides, she’s been begging to join the core team. This is the perfect test. If she succeeds, you can decide how to utilize her. If she fails, it shuts her up for good. Either way, we hold all the cards."

While Smith found the manipulation slightly distasteful, the overwhelming temptation of the clinical data was impossible to resist. This was likely his only shot at this breakthrough.

When it came to research, the man possessed an almost terrifying obsession.

To him, a lost sample was a lifelong regret. Incomplete data was a stain on his soul. An unconquered technical barrier was a demon that kept him awake at night.

He simply couldn't watch this opportunity slip through his fingers.

Knowing exactly how to play him, Jayden had pitched the idea with absolute confidence.

"And how do you plan to guarantee her participation?" Smith finally yielded.

"Leave that to me," Jayden said, a predatory smirk breaking across his face. "I promise you, she will eagerly accept, and she will get the job done."

Later that night, Jayden shot Vivienne a cryptic text: It's done.

Both of them were lethal, calculated players who smiled while hiding daggers behind their backs. They never left a paper trail for anything illicit, preferring to conduct their real

business verbally. A text like this was intentionally vague, impossible to trace back to any specific conspiracy.

Understanding the game perfectly, Vivienne simply replied: Received.

Across the city, Willow had also caught wind of the Appalachian case. Thrilled by the prospect, she immediately marched into Silas Thorne’s office to request the field assignment. To her absolute shock, he shot her down instantly. "No."

Willow froze. Silas had always championed her ambitions; he usually approved her requests without a second thought.

"Why?" she demanded, refusing to back down.

Silas looked up, his dark, predatory gaze locking onto hers. His eyes were like a fathomless abyss, swirling with intense, unspoken resistance. Yet, when he spoke, his tone was maddeningly rational. "The environment out there is highly volatile. It's incredibly remote, and there are far too many unpredictable risks. There is absolutely no reason for you to go personally. I will deploy the Aegis Private Tactical Rescue fleet to secure the perimeter and send a specialized medical squad in your place. They will hand-deliver every single piece of raw data straight to your desk. It won't hinder your research in the slightest."

"But it's not the same," Willow argued, her frustration mounting. "I don't want secondhand information. This case is different. The only way to truly understand the variables is to be on the ground, witnessing the physical mutations firsthand. Nuance gets lost in translation. I cannot let this opportunity pass me by."

Her stubbornness only darkened the possessive, protective storm brewing in Silas's eyes.

He had no desire to cage her brilliance or stand in the way of her passion. But on this specific issue, there was zero room for negotiation. In his world, her safety superseded absolutely everything else.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, turning away so he wouldn't have to look at the disappointment in her eyes. "Your travel request is denied."

Willow was left speechless. This was the very first time since they had met that Silas had flat-out denied her, the first time he had pulled rank with such cold authority. She felt a crushing mix of helplessness and sting of betrayal.

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Chapter 430

Compared to Willow's fierce battle for approval, Vivienne's request was a walk in the park.

Having spent her days pretending to play scientist at the lab, she hadn't had the time to hound Julian during office hours. Her only window to see him was late at night.

After dinner, Julian was locked in his study dealing with corporate matters when Vivienne knocked and walked in.

Annoyed by the sudden intrusion, Julian snapped his laptop shut. "What are you doing in here? Do you need something?"

Sensing his foul mood, Vivienne immediately softened her tone. "Next week, Professor Smith is embarking on a field study for an ultra-rare case. I'd like your permission to accompany the team."

Julian stared at her, his handsome face an unreadable, emotionless mask. "Will this field study actually accelerate the project?"

"Yes. It's a phenomenally rare genetic mutation, the kind we might not see again for decades. If we secure the firsthand clinical data, it will drastically propel our R&D forward and give Sinclair Group a massive edge in the market."

Getting the business justification he needed, Julian gave a curt nod. "Then go."

Just two words. No hesitation, no concern, and absolutely zero reluctance to see her leave.

He didn't bother asking how treacherous the remote mountains were, or if the journey would be dangerous. He didn't offer to connect her with local authorities, nor did he show the slightest inclination to ensure her safety. He was too stingy to offer even a single word of comfort.

Staring at his cold, detached demeanor, a sharp ache pierced Vivienne's chest.

Refusing to give up, she tried to bait a reaction out of him. "The environment out there is notoriously hostile. It's filled with unpredictable dangers."

Julian merely raised an eyebrow, his tone agonizingly dismissive, as if she were discussing a minor inconvenience. "Then make sure you take care of your health."

Pausing for a second, he added coldly, "If you need more funding for security, just submit a request to finance."

Every single word was painfully professional and deeply hollow. There wasn't a shred of genuine human concern.

Vivienne's heart flatlined. She stood entirely paralyzed.

After a few seconds of her blank staring, Julian's patience snapped. "What? Is there something else?"

"No... nothing."

"Then go get your logistics in order. And close the door on your way out."

Vivienne stepped out into the hallway, her stomach churning with toxic resentment and humiliation. The moment she was alone, she pulled out her phone and began rallying her contacts, swearing a silent, vicious oath that she would flawlessly execute this mission.

In her twisted logic, Julian's sudden coldness was entirely Willow's fault. If she could just outperform Willow, if she could publicly humiliate and destroy her, Julian's eyes would finally return to her.

Ironically, her toxic delusion mirrored Julian's exact mindset. He was equally convinced that Willow’s demand for a divorce was just an emotional tantrum, a temporary rebellion. He fully believed that once she hit a wall, she would come crawling back, begging for his forgiveness.

Deep down, they were cut from the exact same cloth—narcissistic, arrogant, and utterly blind to the autonomy and dignity of anyone but themselves. They genuinely believed the universe revolved around their desires, and that whatever they demanded would eventually be theirs.

—

Over the next few days, Willow cornered Silas twice more to argue for the Appalachian expedition. No matter how passionately she explained the revolutionary impact the data would have on their company, Silas's answer remained an impenetrable wall of ice: "I don't give a damn about the data. The answer is no."

With the expedition's departure date looming closer and her request still completely blocked, the sheer stress and frustration finally broke Willow's immune system. She collapsed with a severe fever.

Silas didn't find out until he arrived at the office the next morning. Willow hadn't told him she was sick. He was in the middle of a high-stakes cross-border executive meeting when his assistant broke the news. Without a second thought, Silas stood up, abandoned the boardroom, and ordered his driver to race straight to her apartment.

Arriving at her door, he didn't hesitate for a single second before knocking.

Through the wood, Willow's voice was weak and painfully hoarse. "Who is it?"

"Me."

It was a single syllable, deep, rich, and intensely commanding. Even without a name, Willow knew exactly who was standing on the other side.

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For some reason, her throat tightened the moment she heard his voice.

Willow pushed her weak body off the bed and shuffled over to open the door. As it swung open, she was met with Silas's deep, worry-filled gaze.

Silas immediately took in her pale, haggard face and the faint dark circles under her eyes. She looked so fragile that a strong gust of wind could knock her over. It felt as if a hand had reached into his chest and squeezed his heart, leaving him breathless with a suffocating ache.

The two had been caught in a standoff lately, making the sudden reunion feel slightly tense.

"What's wrong?" Silas broke the silence.

"I have a slight fever," Willow replied.

"Did you take any medicine?"

"Yes."

"Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"No."

"Are you in a lot of pain?"

"I'm okay."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

After the rapid-fire questions, Silas told her to get back into bed while he headed straight for the kitchen with practiced familiarity.

Before long, the comforting aroma of warm chicken soup drifted through the apartment.

Silas patiently let the soup simmer until it was rich and hearty, carefully cooling it to the perfect temperature before bringing a bowl to her bedside.

He pulled up a chair, clearly intending to feed her.

Willow felt a wave of embarrassment and leaned back. "You don't have to do that. I can feed myself."

Silas ignored her protest, stubbornly holding the spoon. "Open up."

The room fell quiet, filled only with the soft sounds of her eating.

Once the bowl was empty, Silas set it aside and pressed his fingers gently against her forehead. Relief washed over him when he confirmed she wasn't burning up.

A long silence stretched between them before he finally lost the battle against his own affection.

His deep voice broke the quiet of the room, laced with a helpless surrender. "Do you really want to go that badly?"

"Yes. Opportunities like this are rare. I have to go," Willow insisted.

Seeing the unyielding spark in her eyes, Silas let out a heavy sigh. All his previous stubbornness, worry, and reservations crumbled completely at the sight of her unwavering determination despite her illness. "Fine. I agree. You can go."

A bright gleam of surprise lit up Willow's eyes. "Really? You're letting me go? You aren't just saying that, are you?"

Silas sighed again. How could he possibly stop her when she was pushing herself this hard?

"I'm not lying. You can go."

Hearing his final concession, the heavy gloom that had weighed on Willow for days vanished instantly, replaced by a surging tide of joy. Forgetting everything else, she threw

her arms around Silas. "Thank you! Thank you so much! You are absolutely the world's best boss!"

Caught off guard, Silas stiffened as her warm, soft body crashed into his chest, carrying a faint scent of medicine and a gentle warmth.

He hadn't expected her to initiate a hug. It took him a long moment to relax. His long fingers hesitated in the air before finally resting gently against her back, wrapping around her with a careful tenderness, as if he were holding something incredibly precious and fragile.

Unfortunately, the embrace lasted only a fleeting second before she pulled away.

Silas desperately wanted to hold on, but he had serious matters to address. "Don't celebrate just yet. I agreed, but I have a few conditions."

"No problem. Name them," Willow said, still riding the high of her excitement.

"First, I'm sending an escort team with you. They won't interfere with your work, but they are there to guarantee your safety."

"Second, you will report your whereabouts and physical condition to me every morning, noon, and night. You must text me that you are safe every single evening."

"Third, absolutely no wandering into remote or dangerous areas alone. Any last-minute itinerary changes must be cleared with the security team I provide."

"Fourth, the moment the study concludes, you return immediately. No lingering around."

It was a long list of demands, but knowing he was actually letting her go, Willow didn't mind in the slightest. She immediately promised, "Don't worry, I can do all of that."

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Silas felt a wave of helpless amusement, though his gaze was entirely indulgent. "Is that so?"

"Yes, you have to believe me!" Willow nodded frantically, terrified he might go back on his word.

The fever had left a rosy flush on her cheeks, giving her a luminous complexion. Her eyes were bright and sincere, brimming with an unfiltered determination. Yet, her slender frame looked so soft and small, exuding an endearing innocence that made his heart ache.

In that instant, all the frustration and anxiety Silas had harbored over the past few days were completely shattered by her clear, earnest gaze.

He reached out and gently brushed her cheek. "Alright, I believe you."

"Are you tired? Do you want to sleep for a bit?" Silas asked softly.

Willow shook her head. "Is there any soup left? I think I'd like another bowl."

"Wait here," Silas said, ruffling her hair.

He returned moments later with a fresh bowl, carefully blowing on it to cool it down before feeding it to her bite by bite.

After finishing her meal, a wave of exhaustion washed over Willow, and she soon drifted into a deep sleep.

Silas sat quietly by her side. Once her breathing steadied into a peaceful rhythm, he meticulously tucked the covers around her and quietly slipped out of the room.

Stepping into the hallway, he pulled out his phone. Moving with crisp, decisive efficiency, he dialed Arthur Vance.

Without the warm glow of the bedroom lamps, the harsh overhead lights cast a chilling, authoritative edge over his towering frame. The softness in his eyes from moments ago had completely vanished, replaced by an intensely cold and commanding aura. The shift in his demeanor was so drastic it was as if he were an entirely different man.

"Willow is going on a field study next week. I need you to arrange a few things immediately."

Arthur was a seasoned professional. Without missing a beat, he responded, "Go ahead, Mr. Thorne."

"First, personnel. Assemble a specialized field team right now. Handpick three of our most experienced, elite operatives to escort her."

"Second, logistics. Ensure all equipment is fully stocked, prepped, and tested in advance. Provide a complete set of office supplies, emergency outdoor survival gear, and off-road vehicles for transportation."

"Third, security must be airtight from start to finish. Scout the entire route ahead of time. Eliminate every potential hazard and map out the safest possible paths for her site visits."

He summarized his orders with a single, absolute command: "In short, I don't want a single scratch on her."

He would indulge her dreams and surrender to her stubbornness, but he would also personally eradicate every storm, danger, and hidden threat lurking in the shadows before it could ever touch her.

Arthur was entirely accustomed to his boss's ruthless efficiency. He quickly processed the list of demands and set things in motion. "Understood, Mr. Thorne. I'll get it sorted immediately."

Departure day arrived in the blink of an eye.

Unable to shake his lingering anxiety, Silas repeatedly went over the mountain terrain, safety protocols, and daily routines with Willow, spelling out every detail until he was absolutely certain she had memorized them all. Only then did he reluctantly let her go.

The journey was relentlessly grueling and exhausting.

The group took a commercial flight, transferred to a long-distance train, and finally boarded a rugged bus that navigated the winding backwoods roads. After an entire day of travel, they finally arrived at the remote town in the Appalachian Highlands just as evening fell.

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Unfortunately, the weather was not on their side. The moment they stepped off the bus, a torrential downpour unleashed over the mountains, blanketing the forest in a thick, gray mist.

With the treacherous mud and the sun quickly setting, the field team carefully approached Willow, suggesting they hold off on heading into the mountains. They proposed resting in town for the night and beginning the study once the rain stopped.

These operatives had been personally handpicked by Arthur Vance and strictly briefed to prioritize Willow's safety above all else. Anyone who warranted that level of microscopic attention from the executive assistant had to be someone of immense importance—and

likely someone with a massive ego. They walked on eggshells, adopting a highly deferential tone.

To their surprise, Willow was incredibly agreeable. She nodded immediately. "I'll listen to you. You guys are the professionals."

The team exchanged shocked glances, completely unprepared for her easygoing nature. Exhausted from the grueling journey, no one wanted to argue. They quickly booked rooms at a nearby inn.

After dropping off her luggage, Willow got ready to video call Silas. He had made it abundantly clear that the very first thing she needed to do upon settling in was check in. She hadn't forgotten.

Silas picked up the moment the call connected.

On the screen, Willow offered a bright, happy smile, clearly in high spirits.

Silas had already received a briefing from Arthur. Knowing she had followed the team's advice and hadn't done anything reckless, the heavy stone in his chest lifted, and his tense expression softened.

But as the camera inadvertently panned across her room, revealing the peeling walls and faded, rustic furniture, a fresh wave of heartache gripped him tightly.

"Why are you staying in a place like that?" Silas frowned.

"This is actually the best inn in town. It's perfectly fine," Willow explained. "The locals are incredibly sweet, the lady running the place is taking great care of me, and the food is great. You don't need to worry. Plus, Leo is right next door. I'm completely safe."

Hearing her reassurance, Silas didn't press the issue, not wanting to ruin her mood.

He smoothly changed the subject. "You've been traveling all day. How are you feeling? Are you exhausted?"

"I'm doing alright. Not too tired," she replied.

The two continued chatting through the screen, with Willow happily recounting minor details from her trip.

A while later, just as Willow was about to say goodnight and head to the shower, a clear, respectful voice drifted from Silas's end of the call, addressing him as "Mr. Thorne."

For a second, Willow's brain short-circuited.

Wait, he wasn't at home? There were other people around him?

She took a closer look at him on the screen. He was dressed in an impeccably tailored dark suit, his shirt buttoned flawlessly to the collar. His usual relaxed, at-home demeanor was gone, replaced by an icy, untouchable elegance that screamed high-stakes formal event.

It finally dawned on her—he was in the middle of a business engagement.

The realization sent a furious blush to her cheeks, and her fingers curled in sheer embarrassment.

She had assumed he was alone in his office or relaxing at home, which was why she had been chattering away so casually. Had she known he was out in public surrounded by colleagues, she never would have dared interrupt him.

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Silas noticed her sudden shift in demeanor. Assuming she was feeling unwell, he quickly asked, "What's wrong? Do you feel sick?"

Willow shook her head, her face still flushed as she awkwardly muttered, "Why didn't you tell me you were out?"

Silas paused. It had never occurred to him that Willow would care about his whereabouts, so he hadn't bothered mentioning it. He was currently in Seattle attending a critical government summit as the keynote guest. The networking event was still in full swing.

Misinterpreting her embarrassment, he assumed she was checking up on him. Thrilled by the idea, he enthusiastically launched into a detailed breakdown of his entire itinerary. He even promised to update her on his exact location moving forward.

Willow found the explanation entirely baffling. She had zero intention of tracking his movements. She was just mortified that she had forced him to listen to her ramble about a rustic inn in front of a room full of important people.

"If I knew you were busy, I wouldn't have talked your ear off," she groaned in frustration.

"Why does it matter?" Silas looked genuinely confused. "What's the difference if I'm at home or out?"

Either way, he was always going to answer her call on the first ring.

"There's a huge difference!" Willow wanted to explain further, but knowing he was at an event, she immediately bit her tongue.

"Never mind," she finally decided. "Go back to work. I'm hanging up."

Assuming she was just tired from the trip, Silas didn't push. He reminded her to get some sleep and ended the call.

The moment the screen went black, Silas slipped the phone back into his suit jacket. The rare, tender softness that had just graced his eyes vanished in an instant, receding like the tide to leave behind his usual distant, commanding, and untouchable aura.

Just as he looked up, a low, good-natured chuckle sounded beside him.

Governor Harrison, a heavyweight in Seattle's political sphere, strolled over. He carried the natural authority of a man at the top, though his expression was warm. The two were well-acquainted and shared a close rapport.

Governor Harrison looked at him with a knowing glint in his eye. "Was that your girlfriend on the phone?"

He gave Silas an appreciative once-over and laughed. "I've known you for years, and I have never seen you look that relaxed or speak that softly."

Silas pressed his lips into a thin line and offered a faint shake of his head. "Not yet."

Three simple words. No elaborate explanation, but no denial either.

The Governor instantly understood. A knowing smile crinkled the corners of his eyes as he clapped Silas on the shoulder.

"'Not yet,'" he repeated, thoroughly amused by the implication. "Which means she will be."

Silas's dark eyes deepened, but he didn't argue. He simply gestured toward the hall. "Come on. Let's get back to business."

Governor Harrison chuckled. "Alright, alright. Business first."

The rain poured relentlessly through the night.

By the next morning, the downpour hadn't let up. For safety reasons, Willow's team decided to bunker down at the inn for another day. However, miles away and unbeknownst to them, Vivienne Sinclair and Mr. Smith had already arrived in the area.

The sky above the mountains remained black with churning clouds, showing no signs of clearing.

The dirt paths had transformed into treacherous mudslides. Freezing wind howled through the trees, whipping the branches into a violent frenzy.

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Vivienne's group stood at the base of the mountain.

Taking one look at the catastrophic weather, a staff member frowned heavily and stepped forward to warn her. "Ms. Sinclair, the rain is too heavy. The trail is completely compromised, and there's a high risk of mudslides. It's extremely dangerous to head up now. We should wait in town until the storm passes."

But Vivienne was entirely consumed by her desperation to prove her brilliance and leadership to Mr. Smith. Desperate to claim the glory, reason flew right out the window.

She gazed up at the fog-drenched peaks with arrogant defiance, tossing her head as she feigned unbothered grace. "It's just a little rain. If we can't overcome a minor inconvenience, how are we supposed to handle the rest of the research?"

Despite her team's repeated pleading, Vivienne refused to yield, doubling down on her demands.

Left with no choice and bound by her authority, the staff collectively sighed and reluctantly followed her into the storm.

It didn't take long for reality to set in.

The torrential downpour had turned the dirt path into a thick, sticky swamp. Every step plunged their boots deep into the muck, requiring immense effort just to pull their feet free. Their pants were soaked through with freezing, muddy water, weighing them down and making progress excruciatingly slow.

A sudden, violent gust of wind nearly knocked the entire group off their feet. At that point, the team refused to take another step.

Even Mr. Smith spoke up, advising that there was no need to rush into the mountains under such horrific conditions. He firmly suggested they return to town and wait it out.

But Vivienne was blinded by her own ego. In her mind, conquering the harshest elements would only highlight her superior capabilities. So, she made an executive decision: the rest of the group could head back, but she would take a small, elite crew and press forward.

Without waiting for an argument, she turned and marched into the storm.

Jayden Chase watched her in absolute disbelief. He thought she was losing her mind. There was no way he would ever endure this kind of torture. However, seeing an opportunity, he quickly buttered her up to Mr. Smith, praising her unwavering dedication and fearless spirit.

The deeper they ventured into the woods, the more brutal the weather became.

When Mr. Smith was still present, Vivienne had played the part of the resilient, independent leader, insisting she would climb the mountain on her own two feet.

Now that Mr. Smith was gone, the performance immediately stopped. The meticulously crafted mask shattered.

She exploded in a fit of rage. "What kind of godforsaken hellhole is this? Do you expect humans to walk on this garbage?"

"I can't take another step! One of you, come carry me up this mountain."

The remaining crew members' faces instantly darkened, a surge of resentment bubbling in their chests.

The path was lethal, the weather was horrific, and they were already pushed to their absolute physical limits. They barely had the strength to keep themselves upright. How could she expect them to haul a grown, overly privileged woman up a muddy cliff?

Besides, hadn't she been the one who insisted on this suicide march in the first place? Everyone had begged her to stop, yet she stubbornly forced them into this nightmare. And now she was too tired? She should have thought of that earlier!

Pushed to the brink of survival, no one gave a damn about kissing up to the boss anymore.

Seeing them ignore her, Vivienne unleashed a volley of venomous insults. "You useless pieces of trash! I told you to come carry me! Are you deaf? If you aren't going to make yourselves useful, what's the point of even having you around? Bringing you along was the biggest mistake of my life!"

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Despite her venomous insults and relentless screaming, no one stepped forward to carry her.

Everyone knew exactly how dangerous this trail was. The rain was blinding, and one wrong step in the slick mud could send them plummeting off the cliff to their deaths.

In a survival situation, it was every man for himself. They knew the paycheck was good, but it meant nothing if they were dead. No one was going to risk their neck to indulge her princess complex. They focused solely on keeping themselves alive.

Furious and completely out of options, Vivienne had to bite her tongue. Swallowing her explosive rage, she dragged her exhausted body behind the group, stumbling forward one miserable step at a time.

After what felt like an eternity of agonizing torment, the group finally stumbled into the rural village where the patient lived.

By the time they arrived, Vivienne's flawless, glamorous image was utterly destroyed. She looked like an absolute wreck.

Her expensive clothes were smeared with thick mud, torn at the edges from jagged thorns, and hung off her frame in a soggy, pathetic mess. Her perfectly styled hair was plastered against her skull by the freezing rain and sweat, making her look disheveled and completely lifeless.

Ignoring her ruined appearance, she immediately demanded someone track down the local leader to guide them to the patient's house.

Having been thoroughly bribed beforehand, Mayor Henderson treated her like royalty. He practically bent over backward, offering her hot tea and asking if she needed to rest.

But Vivienne had zero patience. "Save the pleasantries. Just take us to the house right now."

Mayor Henderson looked uncomfortable. "Ms. Sinclair, perhaps we should wait. That family is incredibly difficult to communicate with. I haven't fully smoothed things over with them yet, and barging in now might cause an ugly scene. Besides, you've all been

trekking through the rain, and you're soaked to the bone. Why not rest here for the night and go tomorrow? I've already prepared rooms for you."

That suggestion was the spark that ignited Vivienne's boiling fury.

She had just endured absolute hell, dragging herself through a mudslide to get here. Her goal was finally within reach. There was no way she was backing down now.

Stepping forward, her eyes hardened into a vicious glare. "I don't have time to wait. Make it happen."

"But..."

Mayor Henderson tried to reason with her, but Vivienne brutally cut him off. "I was trying to be polite, but clearly, you need this spelled out. You took my money, so you do your job. If they aren't on board, that's your failure, not mine. I am not wasting my time here, and I am certainly not paying the price for someone else's stubbornness."

The Mayor flinched, instinctively taking a step back as panic flashed in his eyes. He had assumed the city girl would be soft and easy to manage. He never expected this level of explosive hostility. Her overbearing arrogance left him entirely suffocated.

Seeing his hesitation, Vivienne's tone turned ice-cold as she issued an absolute command. "Take me to them. Right. Now. I don't care if they want us there or not. I am conducting that interview today."

Terrified, Mayor Henderson swallowed his objections. Nodding quickly, he led the furious, unyielding Vivienne and her miserable crew deeper into the village.

Although the family technically lived in the same community, their house was entirely isolated. It sat at the farthest, most desolate edge of a ravine, far away from the other villagers. Surrounded by overgrown weeds, there wasn't even a proper path leading up to it.

Trudging up the steep, rocky slope, Vivienne's already foul mood plummeted to a dangerous new low.

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When they finally arrived, they were greeted by the sight of a crumbling, dilapidated shack. The mud walls were cracked and peeling, the roof was missing half its shingles, and thick moss coated the foundation. The yard was consumed by wildly overgrown weeds, littered with dead branches and rotting junk.

The stench of suffocating poverty hung heavy in the air.

Vivienne took one look at the miserable scene and her face contorted in disgust. In all her life, she had never imagined people could live in such squalor. A wave of uncontrollable revulsion twisted her stomach.

The boy's parents stepped out of the house. Startled by the sudden crowd, their eyes instantly hardened with defense and hostility. Mayor Henderson quickly stepped forward, using the local dialect to smooth things over, barely preventing them from kicking the group off the property.

Just as the tension started to ease and the Mayor felt he could reason with them, Vivienne abruptly pushed her way to the front. Being in this filthy environment for even a second made her skin crawl. She just wanted to grab the data and get out.

Lifting her chin, she spoke with a cold, abrasive arrogance, completely devoid of empathy or respect. "Bring out your sick child."

The moment the words left her mouth, the air in the yard froze.

The parents' faces turned dangerously dark. Their eyes flared with deep-seated fury, though they forced themselves to hold it back.

Suddenly, the door creaked open.

A teenage boy slowly stepped out of the shadows.

Ethan kept his head down, his posture hunched, radiating a heartbreaking sense of insecurity and fear. He didn't dare look at the strangers. Because of his severe condition, his skin was as fragile as tissue paper. His face was covered in a horrifying patchwork of blistered, crusted sores. His hands had fused entirely, leaving him with no visible fingers—just two scarred lumps of flesh. The sight was startling and utterly tragic.

Vivienne was entirely unprepared for the gruesome reality of the disease. It was absolutely revolting!

All the blood drained from her face, and her pupils shrank in terror. The next second, she slapped a hand over her mouth, doubled over, and violently vomited right in front of them.

Seeing this, Sarah's face went completely rigid. A storm of maternal heartbreak and fiery rage exploded in her eyes as she immediately pulled Ethan behind her, shielding him from the monster in front of them.

Mayor Henderson stood frozen in absolute horror, staring at the retching Vivienne. He was completely at a loss for what to do.

Garrett remained entirely silent. He simply turned on his heel and marched into the dark shack.

Before anyone could figure out what he was doing, he emerged carrying a heavy, sloshing wooden bucket. The liquid inside was murky, radiating a foul, indescribable stench.

In one swift, powerful motion, he swung his arms back and hurled the entire contents of the bucket violently at Vivienne and her crew!

At first, the group only felt a freezing, slimy substance splatter across their bodies. They stood in shock, completely confused.

Then, an overpowering, eye-watering, suffocating odor filled the air, violently invading their lungs. Everyone's face twisted in pure horror.

It was liquid manure!

The vile sludge dripped down their hair and soaked deep into their clothes. The sickening stench instantly engulfed the entire yard.

Vivienne, standing front and center, took the brunt of the hit. Her designer clothes, already caked in mud, were now drenched in pure filth. The suffocating odor wrapped around her like a physical blow.

She lost her mind, screeching like a banshee. "You... How dare you!"

"How dare I? If you ever set foot on my property again, I'll do a hell of a lot worse! Get the hell out of here!" Garrett's jaw was locked tight, his muscles coiled with the sheer, explosive protectiveness of a desperate father defending his own.

Terrified of another bucket, the crew grabbed the hysterical Vivienne and scrambled down the mountain.

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The heavy rain battered the leaves in the yard. It wasn't until Vivienne and her crew completely disappeared down the mountain trail that the isolated property finally returned to a heavy silence.

Sarah gently took Ethan's cold wrist. With eyes brimming with unbearable heartache, she led him back inside the house. She softly rubbed his shoulders, murmuring endless words of comfort. Only when the sheer terror in the boy's eyes began to fade did she quietly step back out into the yard.

She looked at her husband, whose face was still a mask of fury, his chest heaving heavily. Sarah let out a long, exhausted sigh, her voice laced with helplessness. "You were too reckless just now. That woman is clearly rich and powerful. We can't afford to make enemies like that."

Garrett snapped his head away, his expression entirely unrepentant and fiercely stubborn. His fists were clenched tight at his sides. The moment he recalled the sheer revulsion in that woman's eyes when she looked at his son, his rage reignited. "Reckless or not, I will never regret it! Did you see the way she looked at him? She looked at Ethan like he was some kind of monster! Does my son deserve to be treated like garbage just because he was born?"

Sarah stared out at the dark, stormy sky, a deep bitterness swallowing her gaze. "It's been so many years. Aren't you used to it by now? We left the village and moved out here in the middle of nowhere just to escape those disgusted stares. We just want him to grow up in peace."

"Ethan is sick. That is a fact we can't change. You can't keep fighting the whole world. Your health is more important."

Remembering the cruelty of the strangers, her heart bled just as much as his. But they had no power. Since they couldn't change reality, they could only endure it. After so many years, she had numbly accepted their fate.

Hearing her words, Garrett's rigid posture slumped slightly, but his eyes remained fiercely determined. "I don't care what they think. My boy hasn't done anything wrong. He is a good kid, not the freak they see him as."

His voice rang with absolute certainty, making a solemn vow to protect his son with every ounce of his being. "I will never let those people near him, and I will absolutely never agree to their so-called research. These people are just like the rest—greedy vultures looking to use Ethan as a freakshow exhibit to line their own pockets."

Sarah didn't argue. She let out a heavy sigh, turned around, and walked back into the dark house.

Meanwhile, Vivienne and her crew were still dragging themselves through the freezing drizzle, heading back toward the Mayor's house.

The trail hadn't felt this long on the way up, but now it felt like a never-ending nightmare.

Every gust of wind carried the stomach-churning stench of the liquid manure plastered to their bodies. Vivienne was in the worst state of all. Taking the direct hit, the vile filth had seeped deep into her clothes and skin. No matter what she did, she couldn't escape the smell.

Exhaustion set in, and the foul odor was pushing them over the edge. Finally, one of the crew members couldn't take it anymore. He stopped dead in his tracks, clutched his stomach, and violently hurled his guts out onto the muddy path.

That sound shattered the very last of Vivienne's sanity.

Smothered in absolute humiliation and filth, she felt her dignity completely disintegrate. A tidal wave of shame and explosive fury ripped through her.

Her face contorted into a mask of pure malice. Glaring at her trembling team, she spat out a vicious warning: "Listen to me, and listen well. Not a single word of what happened today leaves this mountain. If any of you breathes a syllable of this to anyone, I will personally ruin your lives!"

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The crew went dead silent out of sheer terror. No one dared to utter a single sound, forced to endure the vile stench as they kept their heads down and trudged the rest of the way in misery.

When they finally dragged themselves back to the Mayor's house, Vivienne couldn't wait another second. She bolted straight for the bathroom. She stood under the scalding shower, scrubbing her skin raw, but the suffocating stench of manure felt permanently etched into her pores, impossible to wash away.

She rubbed frantically, turning her skin burning red, nearly scrubbing off a layer of flesh before finally stopping. The smell still lingered. She was trembling uncontrollably with absolute rage.

She had braved a torrential storm and climbed a treacherous mountain, only to be subjected to this? She would never, ever let this go.

Just then, her phone rang loudly. It was Jayden.

Vivienne took a few deep breaths, forcing the violent hysteria down her throat. Suppressing the raging fire in her chest, she answered, "Hello."

Jayden was simply calling for a status update, firing off a barrage of questions that only made her want to scream.

Gritting her teeth, she forced a calm tone. "Tell Mr. Smith that everything is progressing perfectly. We met with the family today, and the communication went incredibly smoothly. I will visit them again tomorrow. Just wait for my signal to bring the team up."

Even though her lie was seamless, Jayden felt something was off. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Vivienne nearly snapped her phone in half. Okay? How could she possibly be okay?

She had endured more suffering today than in her entire life combined. She had been drenched in literal manure! Did she sound okay?!

But she refused to show weakness. Her voice turned instantly frosty. "You don't need to know anything else. Just remember our arrangement and do exactly as I say."

She hung up, her blood boiling the more she thought about it. Refusing to suffer in silence, she immediately video-called Julian, desperate for a sliver of sympathy—or at the very least, wanting him to see the sacrifices she was making.

"Julian, I hiked up the mountain today. We got caught in a terrible storm, and I was completely drenched. The mudslides were so dangerous, it was terrifying," she blurted out the second he answered.

Naturally, she omitted the horrifying reality of getting a bucket of manure thrown in her face. It was far too humiliating to ever admit out loud, especially to him.

To her absolute dismay, Julian barely reacted. His eyes remained fixed on the documents in his hand as he replied flatly, "Why would you go into the mountains in bad weather? Be careful next time. Don't be so reckless."

He didn't even look up at her once.

Vivienne desperately tried to keep the conversation going, but his responses remained painfully cold. The only voice echoing in the empty room was hers.

Frustration flared hot in her chest. She wanted to scream at him, demanding to know what was so important that he couldn't even look at her. It was late at night—did he really need to ignore her?

But she knew she didn't have the leverage to make those demands right now.

She had to endure it.

She would endure until this project was a massive success, until she thoroughly crushed Willow, and until Julian was finally forced to look at her again.

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The next day, the sun finally broke through the clouds.

The very first thing Vivienne did upon waking was order Mayor Henderson to arrange another visit to the isolated house.

Before even speaking to him, she had already confidently messaged Mr. Smith, giving him the green light to head up the mountain. She was absolutely certain she would break the family today. By the time the research team arrived, she would have everything neatly wrapped up on a silver platter.

Vivienne couldn't help but smirk, already envisioning the look of pure shock and admiration on Mr. Smith's face when he saw her flawlessly execute the impossible.

Lying awake the night before, she had completely rationalized the family's violent hostility.

In the end, it was all about money.

She had thrown some cash around when she first arrived, but who knew how much of it actually trickled down from the Mayor to that family? If they did get a cut, it obviously wasn't enough.

Based on the absolute squalor she witnessed yesterday, they were utterly destitute. Throw in a kid with a chronic disease, and money was undoubtedly their god. They just didn't want to look desperate by begging her directly, so they put on a dramatic show of aggression to drive up the price.

At the end of the day, they were just pathetic, narrow-minded peasants trying to act proud.

Fully dressed and reeking of expensive perfume, she gathered her team and ordered Mayor Henderson to lead the way.

The Mayor hesitated, taking a cautious step back. "Ms. Sinclair, maybe we should wait one more day? The sun just came out, but the trails are still incredibly slick. And after their reaction yesterday... they are deeply stubborn people. I'm worried things will escalate if we go back now."

He didn't explicitly spell out the danger, but everyone knew exactly what he meant.

At his words, the crew immediately tensed, instinctively stepping backward.

The ghost of that nauseating stench still lingered in their noses. Several of them subconsciously lifted their collars, desperately sniffing their clothes to check for the smell.

Vivienne, however, was entirely unfazed. Her face darkened as a cruel, contemptuous sneer touched her lips. "What do you know?"

She patted her heavy designer bag, stuffed with stacks of cash she had prepared beforehand. She hadn't expected to use it this quickly, but clearly, it was time.

"They are dirt poor, and their kid is a medical disaster. They are barely surviving. Putting up a fight is just a desperate negotiation tactic. They're waiting for me to raise the price."

She tilted her head back, practically radiating arrogant superiority. "I brought enough cash today to equal several years of their pathetic income. No one turns down real money when it's shoved in their face. Yesterday was just a prideful little act. Today, when I throw this cash at them, they'll be begging to comply. You'll see."

Watching her overbearing arrogance, Mayor Henderson could only sigh internally. He had lived in this village his entire life; he knew exactly what kind of people Garrett and Sarah were. They had lived in poverty forever, but their pride and integrity were unbreakable. They despised handouts, and their son was their entire world. If money were the answer, the countless researchers before Vivienne wouldn't have failed.

He desperately wanted to warn her, but he didn't dare. This wealthy city girl was not someone he could afford to cross. Swallowing his heavy dread, the Mayor reluctantly turned and led them back toward the house.

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When they arrived, the couple was helping their child with physical therapy.

Because of his illness, the boy's small frame was hunched over, unable to stand up straight. Every step was agonizingly slow and difficult. His limbs trembled slightly, revealing his suppressed pain. Even the simple act of standing and walking was pure torture for him.

Yet, the couple showed no signs of impatience. Garrett bent down to protect his son's side, while his wife crouched in front of him, gently guiding his steps with eyes full of tender heartache.

As he turned, Ethan suddenly caught sight of Vivienne and her entourage at the door. His face drained of color. Trembling violently, he instinctively shrank back, pressing himself into his father's chest.

The couple immediately looked toward the door. Spotting Vivienne's group, they didn't say a word. Garrett shielded Ethan, turned back into the house, and slammed the door shut, locking Vivienne and her people out.

The group outside shifted uncomfortably. The atmosphere instantly froze.

Only Vivienne remained perfectly still, showing not a trace of embarrassment or guilt. Instead, a cold, arrogant smirk tugged at the corners of her lips. She looked at the closed door with an insufferable sense of superiority.

She had already figured this family out. In her narrow, selfish worldview, all resistance and coldness simply boiled down to greed. She was absolutely certain that their fierce rejection yesterday and their shut door today wasn't about being disturbed. They were just playing hard to get to drive up the price.

The colder and more distant they acted, the more money they wanted. They were just waiting for her to wave cash in their faces.

She rubbed the thick stack of bills in her designer bag, completely self-assured. If they wanted to play games, she had all the time in the world. She'd see who caved first.

Sure enough, just as she predicted, the door opened a crack a few moments later. Ethan's mother stepped out.

She looked utterly exhausted, her eyes bloodshot. Caring for her sick son day in and day out had drained every ounce of her energy. Facing the strangers at her door, she had no room for anger, only bone-deep weariness. "Please leave. Our family isn't taking part in any research. Don't come back."

But this genuine, desperate plea meant nothing to Vivienne.

She just saw it as a pathetic stalling tactic from a poor woman holding out for a bigger payday. "You're putting on quite the show, but isn't it all just for money? Spit it out. How much do you want?"

Ethan's mother froze, confused by the callous words. For a moment, she didn't even know how to react.

Taking her silence as a negotiation tactic, Vivienne lifted her chin, her tone dripping with crushing condescension. "Here's ten thousand dollars. That's more than you backwoods people make in years. Just go bring your son out right now, cooperate with our data collection, and this cash is yours."

If the mother hadn't understood before, she definitely did now. These people didn't see them as human beings. They saw them as livestock.

And they had absolutely zero respect for her son. To them, he was just a freak to be studied.

She didn't take the money. She didn't even look at it. Her voice was terrifyingly calm. "Alright. Wait right here."

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No argument. No rebuttal. She was almost too compliant.

Vivienne immediately flashed a triumphant smile. So much for backbone and boundaries. In the face of cold, hard cash, everyone folded.

She casually weighed the stacks of bills in her hand, relaxing her posture. Radiating an overwhelming sense of superiority, she was already calculating her next steps.

Once they brought the kid out, she would wrap up the data collection and hand it straight to Mr. Smith. That way, she would solidify her spot as the key contributor to the project. When that happened, not only would Mr. Smith be impressed, but even Julian...

While Vivienne was lost in her fantasies, the front door suddenly swung open. She thought she'd won. But instead of the boy, a feral mutt, Buster, exploded out of the house, charging at them like an absolute maniac!

No one anticipated this. The group standing outside descended into instant chaos.

The dog was filthy and vicious. Like a heat-seeking missile, it lunged straight for Vivienne!

Terrified out of her mind, she yanked the person next to her to use as a human shield. At the same time, the cash slipped from her grip. Hundreds of dollar bills scattered into the air, caught by the mountain wind, and fluttered uselessly to the dirt.

The yard turned into a circus of screams and scrambling bodies.

Finally, amidst Mayor Henderson's frantic shouts, Garrett stepped out of the house, moving at a leisurely pace, and called the dog back.

But the damage was done. Vivienne and several of her team members had their clothes shredded. Some even had shallow bites and scratches. They looked utterly pathetic.

Yesterday it was liquid manure. Today it was an attack dog. This was too much!

Vivienne had reached her breaking point. Her fury peaked, leaving her trembling with rage. "I will make you pay for this!"

Seeing this, Mayor Henderson rushed over to play peacemaker. "Don't do anything rash. The most important thing right now is to get to the town clinic for rabies shots. These country mutts run wild. They're dirty and carry God knows what diseases. If something serious happens, it'll be too late for regrets."

The mayor's warning snapped Vivienne back to reality. Clenching her jaw, she forced herself to turn around, deciding to heed his advice and treat her wounds first.

But as she turned, Garrett's cold voice cut through the air. "Take your filthy money. We don't want it!"

"You...!"

Vivienne wanted to pivot back and scream, but the rest of her team practically dragged her away. Even if she wasn't scared, they were! Who knew what kind of diseases that mutt was carrying? They were terrified.

Wasting no time, they practically sprinted down the mountain.

In their rush, they completely missed Mr. Smith and his team heading up the trail. By the time Mr. Smith reached the village entrance, there was no sign of Vivienne.

Jayden Chase was anxious and immediately shot Vivienne a text.

Down in the town clinic, Vivienne was biting back a scream as the doctor swabbed her cuts with rubbing alcohol. Still, she forced herself to endure the stinging and called Mr. Smith.

She had no choice. She was the one who insisted on sending them up the mountain so early. This whole mess was entirely her fault.

Over the phone, she only told him that they had a run-in with a village dog, conveniently omitting the disastrous failure of her research attempt. To sell the lie, she even warned his team to be careful. Then, she instructed them to settle in at Mayor Henderson's place, promising to head back as soon as she was bandaged up.

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She then called Mayor Henderson, demanding he host Mr. Smith's team perfectly. She also threatened him to keep his mouth shut about the disasters of the past two days, or there would be hell to pay.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the ridge, Willow and her team arrived at the village entrance.

They had been resting at the base of the mountain for the past few days due to the rain, only venturing up when the skies finally cleared today. Because they strictly followed wilderness safety protocols, moving cautiously and taking zero risks, they hadn't arrived until now. But the delay was worth it. At the very least, no one on their team had suffered a single scratch.

Arthur Vance had arranged for them to stay at Mayor Henderson's house as well. In a remote place like this, he was the only viable contact.

Mayor Henderson didn't mind. He was a practical man; as long as he got paid, he was happy. Previous reporters and researchers had always boarded at his place, too. It was just a weird coincidence that two different factions had shown up at the exact same time.

The mayor greeted Willow's team and led them inside. Unexpectedly, the moment they stepped into the yard, they bumped straight into Mr. Smith's group.

The second she saw Mr. Smith, Willow knew Sinclair Group was here too. It made sense. With such a rare case study on the line, no one in the industry would pass up the opportunity.

Mr. Smith spotted her as well. Thanks to Vivienne's poison in his ear, he had formed a negative opinion of Willow, pegging her as a mercenary opportunist. Naturally, he assumed she was only here to exploit the situation for profit.

He gave her a dismissive glance before averting his eyes. Willow, however, politely nodded in his direction.

As the two groups passed each other, Leo whispered, "What are they doing here?"

"Probably the same thing we are," Willow replied softly.

"They beat us to the punch," Leo grumbled, clearly annoyed.

Willow reassured him, "It's fine. May the best team win."

The group headed inside, and Mayor Henderson assigned them their rooms. Given his experience over the past two days, he fully expected this new batch to complain about the accommodations. After all, they looked just as wealthy as the first group.

But surprisingly, no one complained. Instead, they all thanked him sincerely.

For a moment, the mayor was too stunned to speak.

Then, he asked when they planned to head up to the house. He was already bracing himself for their answer. If they were as stubborn as the Sinclair team and demanded to go today, he'd take them. He'd just get yelled at, and maybe attacked by a dog again. Once they went through the whole humiliating ordeal, they'd finally give up.

Instead of making demands, Willow politely asked for his advice. "When do you think would be best? You know this area, and you know the family. We'll follow your lead."

Hearing this, Mayor Henderson realized this team was entirely different from the first. Not only did they respect local customs, but their manners put that Sinclair woman to shame.

Since they were being reasonable, he gave it to them straight. "Today isn't a good idea, and tomorrow probably won't work either. It's best to wait a couple of days. Another group just went up there, and the family ran them off pretty hard."

Leo's ears perked up. He instantly guessed the mayor was talking about the Sinclair Group. He quickly described Vivienne's appearance, asking if she was part of that group. When the mayor confirmed she was, Leo practically lit up with glee.

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When Vivienne returned from getting her rabies shot and realized Willow was staying there too, her face darkened into an ugly scowl.

She gritted her teeth, cursing inwardly. What a desperate bitch. No matter the situation or the stakes, Willow always showed up to fight her for it. As if a nobody like her even deserved to be in the same arena.

Spiteful, Vivienne immediately pivoted to Mr. Smith, tearing into Willow with a fresh barrage of insults. But Mr. Smith's entire focus was on the case study; he had absolutely zero patience for her petty drama.

Instead, he cut her off. "When can we actually start the interviews and data collection?"

Recalling the disasters of the past two days, Vivienne played it smart this time. Instead of boasting that it would happen "immediately," she hesitated. "I need to discuss the timeline with the mayor."

Mr. Smith frowned, clearly displeased. "Didn't you tell me this morning that everything was arranged? You said we could start the interviews the second we got into the mountains."

Yes, she had said exactly that. But back then, she had no idea the family would be so stubbornly ungrateful, rejecting her cash and unleashing a rabid dog on them.

The mere memory made her blood boil, but she couldn't let Mr. Smith see that. So, she lied smoothly. "Yes, I did say that, but on our way up, we were suddenly ambushed by stray dogs. Look, my wounds are still throbbing."

She pointedly showed him her bandaged arm, hoping to scare him off for a bit. "This isn't New York. The locals are uneducated, and the environment is volatile. To ensure your team's safety, I strongly recommend we wait. Once the mayor gives the green light, we'll go in. It won't be too late."

Seeing this, Mr. Smith hesitated. It wasn't that he was afraid, but he had to consider his team. These professionals had flown across the world with him. Many were middle-aged with families to support. He couldn't afford to be reckless.

"How many days?" he asked, backing down.

"Two days," Vivienne replied. She had already confirmed this with Mayor Henderson before meeting with Mr. Smith. "Rest assured, everything will be perfect in two days."

Two days passed in a flash.

At the crack of dawn, Vivienne aggressively rallied her team and barked at Mayor Henderson to lead them back to the house.

Right as they were leaving, they bumped into Willow's group. The moment their eyes met, Vivienne narrowed her gaze and rolled her eyes so hard it was impossible to miss.

Her silent message was loud and clear: You're out of your league. Pack up and go home before you embarrass yourselves.

Furious, Leo stepped forward to confront her, but Willow simply shook her head and held him back.

After Vivienne's group marched off, Leo couldn't hold it in. "Seriously, what is she so smug about? I wanted to slap that look right off her face!"

"And why do they get to go first? Aren't they going to snatch the interview out from under us?"

"It doesn't matter," Willow explained, her tone perfectly calm. "Look at how frantic they were. It means nothing is locked down yet. Besides, if being first actually mattered, she would've closed this deal days ago. So, there's no rush. We stick to our own pace."

As for that pace, Willow had a concrete plan. Before she even arrived—and over the past few days—she had been researching Ethan's specific case extensively online.

And it wasn't just the physical symptoms. She studied the psychological toll the disease took on patients and their families. She sympathized with them, understood them, and respected them. She knew that to truly conduct a meaningful interview, earning their trust had to come first.

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Hearing this, it instantly clicked for Leo. "You're right. If getting here early was all it took, they'd be on a flight back to New York by now."

Thinking back to the mayor's story about their humiliating retreat, Leo chuckled. "Well, good luck to them, then."

Truth be told, Vivienne's arrival this time was vastly different from her previous attempts.

Unlike the aggressively locked doors of the past two days, Garrett and his wife were noticeably more yielding. After a moment of hesitation, they stepped aside and allowed the team into their home.

Vivienne's face immediately lit up with triumph. She assumed they had finally accepted reality. Her voice grew noticeably louder, and as she introduced Mr. Smith, she practically radiated the smug joy of a guaranteed victory.

Mr. Smith, oblivious to the backstage drama, thought this was all due to her hard work. Pleased, he offered her a few words of praise, causing Vivienne's ego to inflate even further.

What they didn't know was that the family's softened stance had nothing to do with Vivienne. It was entirely the result of Mayor Henderson's tireless mediation over the past two days.

He had visited the couple multiple times, patiently reasoning with them. He warned them that stubbornly fighting off these outsiders would only hurt their son in the long run. These corporate researchers were relentless, wealthy, and wouldn't leave until they got what they wanted.

He also told them the truth: there were two separate groups here now. If they were worried, they could take their time, compare the offers, and then make a final decision.

By finalizing a deal, they could ensure no one would bother them ever again, and their son might finally get proper medical treatment. It was the only way to break free from this nightmare.

Vivienne was oblivious to all of this. She firmly believed this was her own doing. Impatient, she immediately barked orders at her team to prep for the interview.

But after waiting for quite some time without a glimpse of the boy, she lost her temper. "Where is your kid? We're all waiting. Hurry up and bring him out."

Because Mr. Smith was present, she had forced herself to rein in her usual vitriol.

Garrett was clearly still furious with her. Glaring with undisguised hostility, he snapped, "Ethan isn't here. He's at a relative's house."

Hearing this, Vivienne exploded. "What is that supposed to mean? We're already here, and you're telling me the kid is gone? Are you playing us? Do you have any idea how much our time is worth? Can you afford to waste it?!"

Garrett's rage instantly eclipsed hers. "If you don't want to wait, get out! No one asked you to be here! And for the record, we never agreed to your damn interview!"

Seeing a screaming match brewing, Mayor Henderson quickly intervened. "Garrett is right. Ethan isn't home today. And they haven't actually agreed to your research yet." He didn't sugarcoat it. "As you know, there's another group in town. They want to weigh their options."

"Are we buying groceries here? Weighing options?" Vivienne scoffed. She knew exactly who the 'other group' was, which only fueled her anger. "Tell him I can offer the highest price."

Mayor Henderson looked uncomfortable. "But as you've seen, they don't really care about the money."

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"What are you implying?" Vivienne snapped, turning her hostility on him.

"It's just the reality of the situation," Mayor Henderson sighed. Truthfully, he was exhausted. He had been dragged through the mud with her over the past few days and was sick of it. Plus, after meeting Willow's team, his patience for Vivienne's arrogant entourage had worn razor-thin. He just wanted to resolve this and get them out of his hair.

He laid out his bottom line. "This is the best I can do. If you're not satisfied, you're welcome to negotiate with them yourself."

"You think I won't?" Vivienne shot back, but a jolt of fear spiked through her as she recalled her last two visits. Her dog bites were still throbbing.

Watching their back-and-forth without a patient in sight, Mr. Smith grew impatient. But as a foreigner, he couldn't keep up with Vivienne's rapid-fire speech and the heavy Appalachian accent. He had no idea what was being said.

"So, what's going on? Are we seeing the boy today?" he asked Vivienne.

Cornered, Vivienne couldn't hide the delay anymore, though she still spun the truth. "Not today, I'm afraid. He's not home. We'll have to wait a little longer."

But Mr. Smith wasn't stupid. Remembering Willow's presence yesterday, he pressed, "Are they refusing our interview because they want to go with Willow's team?"

This was a common hazard in field research—competing teams fighting over the same subject, leaving the final decision entirely up to the interviewee.

Vivienne hadn't expected him to connect the dots so quickly. She quickly backpedaled. "They do want to compare their options, but don't worry. It's just a formality. Our odds are practically guaranteed."

Although Mr. Smith wasn't thrilled, there was nothing he could do. It was out of their hands.

Forced to concede, the team lugged their heavy equipment all the way back down the mountain, humiliated once again.

The moment they returned, Vivienne spotted Willow and Leo adjusting their gear in the courtyard. She rolled her eyes, cursing them out in her head.

But then she smirked. Honestly, it was better if they went up there. Let them experience the exact same abuse and humiliation she had endured. It would crush their pathetic little hopes. Did they really think they stood a chance?

She had fought tooth and nail just to get her foot in the door. They were fools if they thought a first visit would yield any results.

Vivienne had already painted a picture in her mind. She was certain Willow and Leo would face something far worse than liquid manure and feral dogs.

The thought instantly cleared her foul mood. A malicious, gloating smile touched her lips. She was practically vibrating with anticipation to laugh in their faces.

But Willow and Leo ignored her petty display, calmly continuing their work. Once she was gone, Leo spoke up. "You called it. Looks like they came back empty-handed."

"Yeah," Willow nodded. "If they had succeeded, they wouldn't have been back so soon."

As they spoke, Mayor Henderson appeared at the gate. Approaching them, he asked, "Do you two have time right now? I can take you to the house."

"Of course," Willow and Leo said, stopping their work immediately.

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"Alright, grab your things and follow me," the mayor said carefully, trying to outline the situation without offending them. "Before we go, I need to make a few things clear. The boy isn't home today. The parents just want to evaluate their options before making a decision. And given what's happened over the last few days, they probably won't be very welcoming. You need to prepare yourselves."

"No problem," Willow replied instantly. "We completely understand. Just lead the way."

"Alright, let's go."

With that, Willow and Leo grabbed their bags, ready to move.

The mayor looked at them, a little surprised. "Just the two of you?"

After all, Ms. Sinclair never went anywhere without a posse of at least five or six people.

Willow nodded. "Two is plenty. Like you said, they haven't agreed to the interview yet. Bringing a mob of people would be intrusive."

"You're not bringing anything else?" the mayor pressed.

"No, this is all we need," Willow assured him.

Mayor Henderson recalled how Vivienne's team always hauled a mountain of bulky equipment up the trail, acting like they were shooting a Hollywood documentary. These two were a breath of fresh air.

"But I do need to bring this," Willow added, tapping the large backpack she wore.

The mayor nodded and led them up the mountain path.

Along the way, Leo offered to carry the bag for her, but she declined.

Leo was deeply curious. Since they set out, he had noticed how fiercely she guarded that bag, treating it like a precious treasure and refusing to let anyone else touch it.

"Chief, what kind of treasure do you have stashed in there?" he asked.

"You'll see soon enough," Willow smiled.

The mayor guided them along the winding, rugged dirt trails until they approached the property.

The closer they got, the more dilapidated and desolate the surroundings became.

When the cramped, crumbling mud-brick house finally came into view, a heavy wave of sorrow hit both Willow and Leo.

It was hard to believe that in this day and age, when most people enjoyed comfortable, modern lives, there were still families huddled in such impoverished ruins.

Knowing that they were raising a child with a severe rare disease in these conditions made their hearts ache even more.

As soon as they entered the yard, Garrett and his wife were waiting at the door. Their faces were dark, their eyes filled with deep-seated resistance. It was obvious they were not welcome.

Even though Mayor Henderson tried to break the ice with a few words, it didn't change the atmosphere. The couple continued to stare at them with wary impatience.

Thankfully, Willow and Leo didn't take offense. Caring for a severely ill child was agonizing enough. Constantly being harassed and treated like circus freaks would break anyone. They understood completely.

Instead of prying about where Ethan was, Willow started by validating their struggle. She told them that what they were doing—fighting to care for their child and protect his mental and physical well-being—was nothing short of heroic.

Then, she unzipped her backpack and began pulling out the items she had brought for them.

It was then that Leo finally saw what she had been guarding so fiercely the entire trip.

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The bag was packed to the brim. Inside were neatly stacked medical dressings, sterile gauze, specialized bandages, soothing ointments, and a complete set of medical care supplies specifically designed for Butterfly Children with Epidermolysis Bullosa.

Leo and the mayor had never seen these specialized items before and didn't fully understand what they were.

But the parents knew exactly what they were. The moment they laid eyes on the supplies, they froze. Countless people had shown up at their door with all sorts of excuses, but Willow was the first one to actually show up with the critical dressings their son desperately needed.

Willow gently pulled out each item, handing them over with a soft explanation. "These are specialized dressings for wound care and daily protection. I hope they can help your son in some way and ease a little bit of your burden."

There was no aggressive probing, no condescending interrogation. Just genuine empathy and quiet kindness.

Instantly, the couple's demeanor shifted. Their cold, guarded hostility melted into stiff, overwhelmed hesitation. They didn't move, but the harshness in their eyes was undeniably gone.

After a long, heavy silence, the mother finally spoke. "How did you know? How do you know exactly what kind of dressings we need every day?"

Willow met her gaze, speaking in a calm, completely equal tone. "To be honest, I did my homework before coming here. I researched Epidermolysis Bullosa extensively. I know what kind of medical supplies are needed for daily care, and I know the risks you have to navigate every single day to keep him safe."

Pausing for a moment, she continued, "And because I read up on it, I know just how agonizing it is to raise a Butterfly Child. But this is a genetic condition. No one could have known before he was born. It is not your fault."

"So, please don't carry that guilt. Right now, there are specialized drugs entering clinical trials overseas. Medicine is always advancing. There is hope for a cure."

Her words were like a sudden ray of sunlight, piercing through the suffocating darkness that had trapped this family for years.

Just as Willow had said, caring for a Butterfly Child was grueling, but the crushing judgment from the outside world was far worse.

Some blamed the parents. Others were disgusted by their child, calling him a monster. And then there were those who only saw him as a lab rat. Over the years, Garrett and his wife had endured an unbearable amount of cruelty.

Today, they finally met someone who understood. The years of pent-up grievance, exhaustion, and despair violently collided with a sudden surge of gratitude. The mother's shoulders trembled, and her eyes instantly grew red.

Garrett remained outwardly stoic, but the defensive hostility that radiated from him was entirely gone.

Willow didn't push. She simply explained how to use the specific dressings and then took her leave.

Walking out of the yard, Leo looked at Willow. He had known her for years, but she still managed to amaze him every time.

Her competence was undeniable, but what truly mattered was the sincerity beneath it all. She was meticulously thoughtful, inherently pure-hearted in a cutthroat world, unshakably calm in crisis, and always carried herself with a quiet, humble grace.

"Chief, how do you know so much about this?" he asked. "You knew the exact dressing protocols and the overseas drug trials."

Willow walked at a steady pace, her expression serene. "I just did a lot of reading beforehand. Of course, it would be great if we can conduct the research, but I genuinely sympathize with what they're going through. I just wanted to help in whatever small way I could."

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Mayor Henderson, walking silently beside them, heard every word. Looking at this seemingly fragile young woman, he realized with absolute certainty that she was entirely different from anyone else who had come here.

Upon returning to the mayor's house, Willow and Leo immediately spotted Vivienne waiting by the front door.

She wasn't there out of the goodness of her heart. She was waiting to relish the sight of their humiliating defeat and tear them to shreds with her mockery.

But as their figures grew closer, the smirk on Vivienne's face slowly froze.

The pathetic scene she had pictured didn't exist. Forget liquid manure and dog bites—Willow and Leo were immaculate. Their clothes were perfectly clean, without a speck of dust, looking exactly as they had when they left that morning.

Vivienne's absolute confidence shattered. Her face darkened as all traces of smugness were violently replaced by shock and furious resentment. "Why are you perfectly fine?"

Leo caught on instantly. Remembering the struggles the mayor had mentioned, a mocking smirk touched his lips. "What, did you think everyone was going to get chased off like a stray dog like you did?"

He paused, deliberately dragging out his words, his smile deepening. "Why don't you tell us exactly what happened to you? Come on, entertain us."

Vivienne's face drained of color. Speechless, humiliated, and seething with anger, she demanded, "How do you know about that?"

In truth, Leo had no idea what had actually happened. But he loved watching her squirm in impotent rage, so he baited her. "I know a lot more than you think. Do you want me to list it all out for you?"

"You...!"

"Move it, you're blocking the door!" Leo shoved past her without a shred of mercy, leading Willow inside.

After Leo's brutal humiliation, the fury inside Vivienne exploded, turning her cheeks a blotchy, furious red.

Suffocating her rage, she whipped around, marching over to Mayor Henderson to interrogate him. "Did you tell them what happened to me these past two days?"

The mayor waved his hands defensively, his expression entirely honest. "No, I haven't breathed a word of it to anyone."

Vivienne's eyes darkened with suspicion. "You better not have, or you'll regret it."

Though seething, she didn't have time to dwell on it. She abruptly shifted the topic to the day's events. "What exactly is that family thinking? What are they trying to pull? I don't have time to play their little games. Tomorrow is my absolute deadline. I have to finish the interview and data collection."

"I... I can't decide that for them," the mayor said, looking cornered. "You know my role is just to introduce you. The final choice is entirely up to them."

"Are you screwing with me?" Vivienne glared at him murderously.

"I wouldn't dare," the mayor quickly apologized. "But I told you this from the very beginning."

Vivienne knew she was in the wrong. He had told her it wasn't a guarantee when she first contacted him. But to show off for Mr. Smith, she had promised that it was a done deal.

With her back against the wall, she had no choice but to double down on her threats. "I don't care about the details. I just need this done. If you fail me, I'll ruin you."

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Mayor Henderson didn't particularly care about her threats. He had lived most of his life out here in the backwoods. There really wasn't much left in the world that scared him.

That was just human nature. The older a man got, the closer he got to the end, the more he just wanted to follow his conscience and speak the truth.

That evening, after freshening up, Willow initiated her usual video call with Silas.

The room was dimly lit by a single, warm yellow desk lamp. Her long hair was tied back casually, and she wore a simple, loose cotton loungewear set as she answered the call.

This had been their unbreakable routine for the past few days. No matter how chaotic their days were, they always carved out an hour at this exact time to talk.

During these calls, Willow usually did most of the talking, sharing every little detail, every person she met, and all the trivial things that happened that day.

On the other side of the screen, Seattle's neon skyline cast a brilliant glow, contrasting sharply with the cold, understated luxury of Silas's living room.

Silas lounged back in his leather chair, his dark, intense gaze fixed on Willow through the screen, never wavering for a second.

He wasn't happy. An inescapable ache swirled in his eyes as he watched her sitting in that Spartan, run-down room. He could never be at peace knowing she was living like that.

Yet, he also knew this was what she wanted to do. If he truly loved her, he had to support her.

Still, Silas couldn't help himself. "Do you remember what I told you? Don't push yourself too hard out there. If you feel sick or if anyone gives you a hard time, you tell me immediately."

Willow's eyes curved into a sweet smile. "I'm perfectly fine. The mountain air is great, the food is good, and no one's giving me a hard time."

"Good," Silas nodded, letting the subject drop.

Of course, the only reason he accepted her answer so easily was that Arthur Vance was giving him daily briefings. Silas was absolutely certain that Willow hadn't run into any real trouble, which allowed him to relax.

But now, it was Willow's turn to be dissatisfied. She frowned slightly, her eyes carefully studying Silas's face through the screen.

They hadn't seen each other in just a few days, yet he had visibly lost weight. His sharp jawline looked even more hollow, and a faint shadow of stubble lined his chin. He had lost his usual immaculate polish, replaced by an unmistakable shadow of exhaustion and fatigue clinging to his brow.

Maybe it was the distance, or maybe it was just how much she missed him, but Willow lost control of her tone, blurting out, "I'm the one roughing it in the backwoods. So why am I the one eating well while you're the one losing weight?"

"Yeah. I haven't been sleeping well lately," Silas admitted, showing a rare glimpse of vulnerability.

As for why he wasn't sleeping, ninety-nine percent of it was because of her.

Since she left, Silas felt like a massive void had been ripped open in his chest. Everything felt hollow, and he couldn't summon the interest to care about anything.

On top of that, Seattle was hosting several critical government summits. A mountain of work had forced him to pull all-nighters, leaving him physically and mentally drained from chronic insomnia.

Tortured by his longing for her and crushed by his corporate duties, the weight loss was inevitable.

"Why aren't you sleeping well? Is work too stressful?" Willow asked anxiously. When she got anxious, she tended to nag. "No matter how important work is, you can't neglect your

health. Go to bed early. Stop staying up until three in the morning. And make sure you eat your meals on time! Don't just grab a coffee and call it lunch."

As the words left her mouth, she suddenly realized how much she sounded like a scolding wife. Realizing she had crossed a line, she instantly snapped her mouth shut.