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Silas Thorne simply acknowledged her words. "Got it. When do you plan on coming back?"

Willow Horgan thought for a moment. "Soon. Within a week, I'd say."

Whether this trip yielded results or not, a week would be more than enough time.

Hearing this, the deep crease between Silas's brows finally smoothed out. He instantly began mentally rearranging his schedule, determined to wrap up his current projects as quickly as possible. Ideally, he wanted to be there to pick her up in person.

They chatted for a while longer. Eventually, exhausted from the day's events, Willow actually dozed off right in the middle of the call.

Through the screen, Silas studied her face. Her long lashes rested naturally, casting a soft shadow over her cheekbones. The delicate, elegant slope of her nose highlighted the clean lines of her profile. Stripped of her daytime resilience, she looked entirely peaceful and sweet.

He watched her quietly for a long time. If he could, he felt he could have happily done nothing but watch her sleep all night. But worried about disturbing her rest, Silas eventually ended the video call.

Before disconnecting, however, he leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead through the screen.

The next morning, when Willow woke up, it took her a moment to realize what had happened—she had actually fallen asleep with Silas still on the video call.

Embarrassed, she hurriedly sat up and grabbed her phone, intending to send him an apology text.

But before she could even open the messaging app, a knock sounded at her door. It was Mayor Henderson, asking if she was awake and mentioning he had some news.

Willow quickly freshened up and pulled open the door to greet him.

Seeing her, Mayor Henderson cut right to the chase. "That family asked me to tell you that they're willing to see you again. And their kid is back."

The news came so suddenly that Willow froze in surprise. Honestly, she hadn't expected things to progress this fast, especially given how incredibly resistant the parents had been just the day before.

Seeing her reaction, Mayor Henderson softened his tone. "Take your time. Get yourself ready, and we can head over whenever you're good to go."

Despite his reassurance, Willow finished getting ready in record time and immediately went to grab Leo Yardley. This was the opportunity they had been waiting for; she wasn't about to waste a single second.

Even before they reached the house, they could see the silhouette of a boy sitting quietly and obediently on the front porch.

It wasn't until they got closer that Willow and Leo realized just how severe his condition was.

His thin clothes did nothing to hide the scars covering his body. His exposed arms were littered with blisters of all sizes and ulcerated wounds. Some had just scabbed over, the delicate skin looking as though the slightest touch would tear it open and send it bleeding again. Other spots were inflamed and raw, the flesh a sickly crimson that made their chests tighten just looking at it.

He had a hunched posture, and his height and weight were noticeably stunted for a boy his age. His youthful cheeks were marred by patches of broken skin, and what should have been smooth, flawless skin was instead covered in wrinkles and thick scars, as if he had been ruthlessly crushed by time.

He just sat there quietly. He didn't run around, and he didn't cry or throw a tantrum. He was just a small boy with a profound stillness in his eyes that didn't match his age. Meeting Willow and Leo's gazes, he looked entirely peaceful, yet so incredibly lonely.

Even though they had mentally prepared themselves, seeing him like this still hit Willow and Leo like a punch to the gut, making them draw in sharp, collective breaths.

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Before coming here, they had definitely looked up some photos online, but without a doubt, the boy in front of them was the most severe case they had seen yet.

In that split second, both Willow and Leo finally understood the intense hostility the parents had shown them during their first encounter.

As parents, watching their own flesh and blood endure the agonizing pain of blistering, peeling skin day and night, living in a state of endless torture, was already a soul-crushing agony. But instead of showing kindness, the people around them constantly stared at the child's flaws, pointing fingers and using bizarre looks and cruel words to repeatedly tear open the family's wounds.

Day after day of cold stares, discrimination, and malice had eroded away all of this family's warmth, leaving nothing but sharp, defensive thorns. If it had been anyone else enduring this kind of torment year after year, they wouldn't have been able to let it go either.

The air on the porch was so quiet it felt suffocating, until a slightly hoarse, incredibly calm voice broke the silence. "Hello, I'm Ethan."

The boy was incredibly polite, taking the initiative to greet them first.

He sat bolt upright, trying his best to lift his chin and look just like any normal kid. He spoke very slowly, his voice lacking the crispness of other children. It was likely that any movement of his skin brought him stinging pain, so every word he uttered was spoken with soft, deliberate restraint.

Instantly, Leo's eyes reddened.

He was usually a cheerful, easygoing guy who wore his emotions on his sleeve, rarely showing this kind of soft vulnerability. But as a father himself with young kids at home, this was the exact kind of scene he couldn't stomach.

Looking at Ethan, who had suffered so much at such a young age, and then thinking of his own healthy, carefree children... They were all kids, all their parents' entire worlds. The mere comparison made his chest feel like it was being crushed by a boulder, aching so badly he could barely breathe.

Compared to Leo's emotional reaction, Willow maintained an aura of absolute calm and gentleness.

She understood the mindset of patients like this too well, especially a teenager like Ethan whose mind was rapidly maturing. He could already read everyone's emotions. Pity, sympathy, avoidance, or morbid curiosity—to him, they were all glaring reminders. Reminders of his flaws, and reminders of his abnormal affliction.

For him, the greatest kindness was simply respect and treating him as an equal.

Willow stepped forward slowly, her tone warm, and sat right down beside him. She didn't lean over him or deliberately avoid looking at his wounds. She spoke to him as if it were the most normal conversation in the world. "Hi, I'm Willow Horgan."

Beside her, Leo quickly chimed in. "I'm Leo Yardley."

Ethan nodded, turning his body slightly to look them in the eye. His tone was perfectly level, carrying a profound clarity that clearly didn't belong to someone his age. "My mom and dad said you guys are different from the other people who came here."

Willow's gaze paused for a moment before she asked, "What do you think?"

Ethan shook his head. "I don't know. I don't really know you guys yet."

"And based on our interaction right now?"

Ethan thought about it. "You seem okay. At least you don't stare at me as directly as they did."

"Did they stare at you very directly before?" Willow asked, keeping the conversation as casual as a chat between friends.

"Yeah. The people who came before either refused to look at me, or they stared at my skin for a really long time." Ethan spoke matter-of-factly, as if recounting a trivial event that had nothing to do with him—no grievance, no anger. "Some people talked to me very carefully, like I would shatter if they touched me. Others were very goal-oriented. I could tell they just saw me as a disease, not a person."

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Willow listened quietly without interrupting him, the gentleness in her eyes deepening into profound empathy.

Ethan looked up, meeting her gaze steadily, and continued in a soft voice, "But you didn't. You look at me with completely calm eyes. You didn't look away, and you aren't pitying me. You're just looking at me like I'm a normal person."

A warm, genuine smile curved Willow's lips. Her tone was firm and resolute. "You are a normal person."

That single sentence landed with quiet impact. It wasn't deliberately comforting or overly sentimental, yet it struck straight at the softest part of the teenager's heart.

"The illness is just something attached to you. It's your hardship, but it's not your entire identity," Willow said in a soothing, earnest voice, talking to him exactly as she would a peer. "You are Ethan. You are your own person. You have your own thoughts, your own hobbies, your own life. You shouldn't be defined by a medical condition, and you certainly don't need to be treated differently."

Hearing this, Ethan's thin shoulders relaxed just a fraction. The heavy gloom that had settled in his eyes for so long dissipated slightly, revealing a glimpse of the bright clarity a boy his age should have.

He fell silent for a couple of seconds before asking softly, "So, did you come here just to do research and record my symptoms too?"

"Before we got here, yes, but not entirely anymore," Willow said honestly. "The research is my job. I need real case data to study and conquer this disease, hoping it will save you guys from suffering so much in the future. But more than the data, right now, I want to hear your thoughts."

"My thoughts?" Ethan looked a little surprised.

"Yeah," Willow said, looking him dead in the eye. "All the treatments, all the scientific research—it's all ultimately for the patients themselves. No one knows the torment and experiences of these past years better than you do. I want to hear how you feel, not just read the words on a medical chart."

Ethan lowered his eyes, his fingertips lightly tapping the dirt beneath his feet. His tone grew even softer, carrying a rare sense of ease. "Honestly, I got used to it a long time ago. The pain is just normal now. I stopped being scared of it a long time ago. The only thing I'm scared of is my mom and dad being sad."

Willow completely froze. She had expected him to talk about how agonizing his life was, how much he suffered, or even curse the world for being so unfair. But he hadn't said any of that. All he cared about was his parents' pain.

In a split second, despite all the mental preparation she had done, Willow felt a lump form in her throat. He was only a teenager, and his entire life had been nothing but pain, yet his heart still broke for his parents.

"You're incredibly brave, but you don't have to force yourself to get used to the pain, and you don't have to force yourself to be strong. You're allowed to be scared, you're allowed to be exhausted, and you're allowed to be emotional. Those are all perfectly normal feelings."

Ethan looked up at her. After a long silence, the corners of his mouth tugged up into a very faint, genuine smile. "No one has ever said that to me before. Everyone just tells me to hold on, to be a good boy, and to cooperate with the treatment."

"That's because they're all just looking at your disease," Willow said slowly. "But I'm looking at you."

For a moment, the morning light seemed to brighten, filtering through the wooden windows and landing on the boy's thin shoulders.

The heavy burden Ethan had carried for years finally lifted just a little in that moment. He was no longer tense, nor did he try to maintain his calm facade. It was as if he had finally met someone who could truly understand and respect him.

"What do you want to know? I can tell you everything," he offered, his tone sincere and open. "Don't hold back, I'm fine."

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Hearing Ethan's straightforward and genuine response, Willow and Leo were completely stunned.

They had trekked through mountains and rivers, enduring a grueling journey, all for the sake of getting him to open up.

But now that their wish had actually come true, looking at the frail, skinny teenager in front of them, neither of them felt an ounce of the excitement they had anticipated. Instead, their hearts were overflowing with a dense, agonizing wave of sorrow and pity.

Ethan was only a teenager, yet he had already tasted the bitterest of fates. He was stronger and more mature than kids his age, never crying or complaining, silently shouldering all the agony. But this maturity far beyond his years wasn't some natural gift—it had been brutally carved into him by countless bouts of excruciating pain.

All the questions and research points they had prepared were suddenly lodged in their throats, impossible to voice.

Willow decided to toss all of that aside for now and focus entirely on him as a person. Looking at the young boy, she said softly, "Let's not talk about the medical stuff today. We're not going to ask you any questions. We're just going to hang out with you."

At those words, the usually calm and composed Ethan snapped his head up, his dark eyes wide with utter disbelief. "Hang out with me?"

"Yeah, hang out with you."

Getting her confirmation again, a faint, pure smile finally blossomed on the boy's gaunt face, instantly lighting up the long-standing gloom in his eyes. He was a little excited, but also very nervous. "But I don't know what we're supposed to do. I've never had any friends growing up, so I don't know what friends do together."

"That's okay," Willow comforted him. "We can do whatever you want."

Willow reached out and gently ruffled the loose hair on his forehead. "By the way, did you get your bandages changed this morning?"

"Not yet," Ethan shook his head. "Mom was busy this morning, so she hasn't had the chance."

"Then I'll do it for you."

"Okay." Ethan agreed without a second thought. He had a natural liking for this woman. He didn't know why, but he just felt like she wouldn't hurt him and that she would do a good job.

Even though he agreed, Leo was a bit worried. Chatting was one thing, but he didn't support Willow changing Ethan's dressings. The wounds looked incredibly severe, and changing them was clearly a job for a medical professional. He was terrified that if she messed up even slightly, it would cause the boy even more agony.

He was about to talk Willow out of it, but she waved him off. "Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

Since she was so confident, Leo didn't push it. The three of them went inside the house. When Ethan told his mom that he wanted Willow to change his bandages, her immediate reaction was to refuse.

Her son had been battling this illness for years, and his skin was as fragile as a cicada's wings. Every bandage change was absolute torture. One wrong move could tear off the newly grown, tender skin or rip open a wound, causing terrifying bleeding. Even she had to be meticulously careful every single day just to feel somewhat okay doing it. She simply couldn't trust a stranger like Willow.

But Ethan insisted. "Mom, it's fine. I trust her. She can do it."

Persuaded by her son, she finally, reluctantly agreed, but demanded to stay right beside them the entire time.

Willow, of course, had no objections. In an instant, she slipped into her professional zone.

First, she thoroughly washed her hands, then dried them layer by layer with sterile medical wipes. Next, she systematically organized the various dressings they would need. Her movements were steady, precise, and incredibly methodical.

Before starting, she was still worried about hurting Ethan, so she reassured him softly, "You might feel a little pulling sensation. If it hurts, just tell me, and we'll slow down."

Ethan obediently nodded, his thin back tensing slightly, but his expression showed absolutely no sign of backing down.

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Most of his exposed skin was covered in open sores and heavily scabbed wounds. To tackle this, Willow first used sterile cotton pads to gently apply wet compresses along the edges of the wounds, softening them up. Once they were thoroughly soaked and the scabs had completely loosened, she began to peel away the old dressings—moving millimeter by millimeter.

She was incredibly patient throughout the entire process. Her technique was flawless, professional, and she judged the exact right amount of pressure perfectly.

After completely cleaning all the open sores, she wiped away the leftover medical solution from the surface of his skin. She meticulously inspected every tiny blister and tear, ensuring there were no hidden infected areas. Only then did she take out the specialized sterile healing dressings and apply them smoothly and securely over Ethan's damaged skin.

Laying them down, aligning them, and securing them—every step was up to standard. She applied the medical tape strictly to the healthy skin around the wounds, avoiding the sores entirely. The tension was perfect: tight enough to secure the dressing, but not so tight that it compressed the skin or cut off circulation.

The entire bandage-changing process flowed like water—detailed, standardized, and deeply professional. She didn't cause a single ounce of secondary trauma.

After finishing the first wound, she moved on to the second, then the third, then the fourth...

Once she finished his arms, she moved to his back, his chest, and then his thighs...

By the time she was completely done, two whole hours had passed.

Over those two hours, Ethan's mom's expression shifted drastically. She started out defensive and cold, utterly resistant to the whole thing. Then came shock and sheer amazement, until she finally clamped her mouth shut, not offering a single word of interruption. Her reaction was the highest form of approval Willow could get.

In fact, once it was all over, she couldn't help but ask, "Ms. Horgan, with those skills, I wouldn't believe it if you told me you didn't have someone in your family with this condition. Even for us families who live with it every day, it took over a decade of trial and error to get to that level. You are absolutely incredible."

Beside them, Leo was equally blown away. He had no idea Willow had this kind of skill set up her sleeve.

But to Willow, their praise didn't mean much. The truth was, she could only do so little. She just hoped that these small actions would alleviate a fraction of Ethan's pain and suffering.

Ethan really liked her and Leo. After his bandages were done, he spent the rest of the time chatting with them, asking where they were from and what the outside world was really like.

Willow and Leo gladly painted a picture of New York City and Seattle for him, describing the towering skyscrapers, the endless streams of traffic on the avenues, and the unique beauty of the cities as the seasons changed.

Ethan was completely engrossed, his eyes practically sparkling. Seeing this, Leo pulled a small gift from his backpack and handed it to him. It was a metal bookmark etched with a celestial pattern, polished until it gleamed. The edges were perfectly smoothed down so it wouldn't scratch his palms, and the front featured a tiny, engraved silhouette of the New York City skyline.

He had bought it while wandering the streets when he first moved to New York. He loved it so much that he carried it in his backpack everywhere he went. But today, he parted with his prized possession and handed it to Ethan. "This is what New York looks like. It's for you."

He bent down, looking the teenager right in the eye, his tone warm and unshakable. He encouraged him softly, "Focus on getting better. When your condition improves, one day, you'll be able to walk out of these mountains and see all the scenery we talked about with your own eyes."

Ethan clutched the precious bookmark, his fingertips tightening around it slightly. A trace of uncertainty hid in his eyes as he asked timidly, "Will I... really have the chance to see the outside world too?"

Willow stepped forward and gently ruffled his hair. "Of course you will. I promise."

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That day, Willow and Leo stayed at Ethan's house for a long time. They even stayed for dinner before heading back, so by the time they got home, the sun had already set.

As soon as they walked in, Mayor Henderson knocked on their door. Considering how late they had returned, he asked how things went today. Did Ethan agree to the interview? Or had the interview already started?

Willow nodded at first, then shook her head. "Ethan and his parents did agree to the interview, but we didn't start it today. We just hung out with him."

"Why?" Mayor Henderson was baffled. Wasn't this the opportunity they had been dreaming of? The chance was literally right in front of them, yet they didn't grab it. He was starting to not understand these two people at all.

Willow explained it to him. "For a kid like Ethan who suffers from a rare disease, what they need more than cold medical labels is companionship and care. They aren't just rare disease patients; they're living, breathing people who crave warmth. We can't do much else for him, so we just want to do what's in our power to make him feel a little warmth."

Hearing this, Mayor Henderson was completely stunned. At the same time, it confirmed his previous suspicion: this woman was truly different from the others. She seemed to genuinely care about Ethan and truly wanted to find a way out for him.

"Then we'll follow your schedule," Mayor Henderson said before leaving.

Meanwhile, Vivienne Sinclair also found out that Willow and Leo had spent the entire day at Ethan's house.

A wave of intense bitterness and sheer rage instantly consumed her.

She had waited so long and put in so much effort, yet she hadn't even spoken to the patient yet, let alone set foot inside their house. Why did Willow get to waltz right in without doing a damn thing?

Why?

Vivienne thought it was completely unfair!

She balled her hands into fists, her knuckles turning white. Jealousy, resentment, and sheer frustration boiled in her chest, turning her face into an ugly, thunderous scowl. But before she could even try to shove down the viciousness in her heart, the door to her room was suddenly shoved open.

Mr. Smith walked in, his face set in stone, a freezing sharpness in his grayish-blue eyes. "What exactly is going on?"

He didn't bother with pleasantries or greetings, cutting straight to the interrogation. "We're all here to do research, and they even arrived later than us. So why are they allowed to spend so much time at the patient's house? Why can they have in-depth contact with the patient, while we haven't even seen the patient's face yet?"

"You're in charge of local coordination and managing the team's research schedule. Is this the result you're giving me?"

"Didn't you say everything was foolproof and that we just needed to wait? How do you explain this situation now?"

The barrage of questions piled up, his sharp words striking Vivienne like daggers, instantly backing her into a corner.

A chill ran down Vivienne's spine, and her chest tightened in panic as the immense pressure suffocated her. She couldn't explain it, and she didn't dare to.

She couldn't admit that she lacked the capability to earn the family's trust, and she absolutely refused to admit that Willow was simply better than her and had seized the upper hand.

Faced with this situation, her mind defaulted to its own twisted logic: that bitch Willow must have used some underhanded, dirty trick to steal this opportunity. Otherwise, how could a nobody like her ever compete with Vivienne?

A woman who used to be built like a heavyweight—even if she successfully lost the weight, she could never scrub off that nauseating aura of trash. Let alone her background and education; how could she possibly compare in any aspect?

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From the very beginning, she had never respected Willow, nor did she ever think Willow was worthy of competing with her.

Trapped in her own echo chamber, Vivienne quickly drew a conclusion. "Mr. Smith, there's definitely something shady going on here. Willow must have used some dirty tricks to get this opportunity."

She paused and then pressed on. "Merit Biotech must be paving the way for her. They're using their corporate privileges to let her cut the line right in front of us!"

This wasn't the first time Mr. Smith had heard this excuse. The first time, it actually sounded somewhat plausible, especially since he was new here and didn't know the full context. But after observing the situation for a while, he had started to pick up on some details.

For instance, didn't Vivienne have the full backing of the Sinclair Group behind her?

"Don't you have the Sinclair Group behind you?" he asked bluntly.

That single sentence crashed down on her without warning, freezing Vivienne exactly where she stood.

She had completely underestimated that Mr. Smith would call her out so directly. The elegant composure on her face instantly shattered, and a wave of unsuppressible resentment surged in her chest. But for the life of her, she couldn't find the words to fire back.

Vivienne's lips pressed into a tight, thin line, her fingertips pale as a ghost, her face flushing red and then draining of color.

It took her a good long moment to force down the fury in her heart and plaster on a barely passable smile. "Don't worry, Mr. Smith. I'll handle this properly. I will make sure everything is arranged so our team can smoothly participate in the interviews and research. There won't be any more mistakes."

But as her words hung in the air, Mr. Smith just stared at her quietly. There was no emotion in his deep eyes—he neither nodded in agreement nor voiced any further doubts.

This time, he wasn't just going to take her word for it. He was going to see for himself.

After Mr. Smith left, Vivienne didn't waste a single second. She went straight to find Mayor Henderson.

She didn't dare go to the family's house. The memories of her last two visits were still fresh in her mind—the liquid manure, that vicious mutt Buster. She was genuinely terrified.

Along the way, the damp, earthy evening breeze off the mountains whipped at her face, messing up her hair. Vivienne haphazardly brushed it away, the anxiety, grievance, and rage building inside her finally hitting a boiling point she could no longer suppress.

Seeing her storm over, Mayor Henderson didn't try to hide, as if he had expected her. He even invited her inside.

Vivienne shoved his arm away, her tone hurried and vicious, burning with undisguised fury. "What the hell is going on today? Why did Willow get to spend so much time at that family's house?"

"You promised you would cooperate with our team's research and help us get access to the patient. How could you just turn around and go back on your word? You even helped them! Is this how much your reputation is worth?"

"Or did she slip you some cash under the table? Why else would you risk crossing me to help her?"

This was exactly how Vivienne operated—firing off wild accusations without giving a damn about what anyone else thought.

Fortunately, Mayor Henderson didn't seem fazed by her outbursts, even though most of her claims were pure fiction. From start to finish, he didn't offer any lengthy explanations. He just said one thing: "I really don't have the final say in this."

Like hell Vivienne was going to believe that. "Are you playing me?"

Mayor Henderson replied politely, "I wouldn't dare."

Realizing she wasn't going to get any answers out of him, Vivienne violently kicked a nearby stool. "If you won't talk, then I'll go find Willow. I want to see exactly what kind of game you're all playing."

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Bang! Bang! Bang!

Willow was in her room organizing files when a rapid, violent knocking suddenly erupted at her door.

The force was heavy, carrying unconcealed, misdirected fury. The door frame practically vibrated, the dull thuds sounding exceptionally jarring in the quiet night.

At the same time, it was accompanied by several demands to "Open the door!"

It was Vivienne.

She was coming to stir up trouble at this hour, and it was mostly likely related to them visiting Ethan's house earlier today. Willow found it incredibly annoying and didn't want to engage, but the pounding on the door only grew heavier. Worried it would disturb her colleagues, Willow stood up and yanked the door open.

The moment the door cracked open, Vivienne's rage-filled face lunged forward. Jealousy and anxiety raged in her eyes. Without waiting for Willow to speak, her tone came out sharp and frantic, dripping with interrogation. "What exactly did you do at that patient's house today?"

Willow stood in the doorway, her expression as smooth as glass. Her eyes were clear and cold, utterly devoid of fear or panic. She casually looked up at the unhinged Vivienne. "Does that have anything to do with you?"

"Who do you think you are? Do I need to report my work to you?"

Two simple sentences, neither arrogant nor submissive, instantly choked the words right out of Vivienne's throat.

Vivienne was already overflowing with anxiety, terrified that Willow had hijacked this hard-won opportunity. Being coldly rebuffed only dumped gasoline on the fire.

She glared viciously at Willow, a dark, calculating glint flashing in her eyes. "Why are you acting so high and mighty with me? I saw it all. You and the mayor have been sneaking around constantly. You definitely made some shady deal with him to get this opportunity, didn't you? Aren't you afraid I'll expose this whole thing and let everyone see your true colors?"

Willow's expression remained perfectly stoic, her gaze clear and honorable. She had zero reason to feel guilty. She carried herself with dignity and treated Vivienne's threats as nothing more than a rabid dog barking at the moon.

Seeing her complete lack of reaction only made Vivienne see red. She completely lost what little composure she had left. "I was the one who discovered this patient first! This rare disease research project and the scientific accolades belong to my team! Don't you dare think you can just swoop in and steal it!"

Willow hadn't wanted to waste her breath, but since Vivienne brought it up, out of pure respect for Ethan, she finally spoke. "Vivienne, do you have any idea what Epidermolysis Bullosa means for Ethan?"

"Do you have any idea how much agony he endures every single day?"

"He is not just a set of data for your resume. He's not material for you to win awards or secure promotions. He is a living, breathing person who is suffering through endless torment."

Willow had genuinely wanted her to realize what she was actually doing. But to her surprise, Vivienne didn't care in the slightest. In fact, she scoffed. "Save your self-righteous lectures. Are you seriously going to stand there and tell me you didn't come here for the research and the fame? Besides, the only reason you can get your hands on these resources and one-up me is because Silas Thorne is babying you and backing you up."

Normally, Willow would have ignored a comment like that. But right now, staring into Vivienne's repulsive eyes, she suddenly spoke up. "That's right. I am relying on him."

The blunt, unapologetic admission instantly caught Vivienne off guard.

Before she could even react, a faint, icy smirk curled the corner of Willow's lips. She continued, unyielding, "If you're so capable, why don't you go rely on Julian Sinclair?"

That single, short sentence was like a razor-sharp needle, viciously popping every last bubble of Vivienne's facade and pride.

She froze in place, her face draining of color before flushing a humiliated, blotchy red. Her deepest obsession and most profound embarrassment had just been ripped open in public, leaving the pathetic reality hidden beneath her glamorous exterior with nowhere to hide.

Everyone knew she was obsessed with marrying Julian, plotting and scheming to win his affection. But Julian had remained ice-cold, adamantly refusing to divorce Willow. It was her absolute biggest sore spot, the one taboo she never let anyone touch.

And yet, Willow had just laid it out there with the most effortless grace. If that wasn't a brutal mockery and a direct challenge, what was?

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Vivienne completely snapped. The arrogance vanished from her eyes, replaced only by panic, sheer humiliation, and a towering inferno of rage. Her breathing hitched, and she could no longer maintain her elegant facade. "Are you feeling incredibly pleased with yourself right now?"

She glared furiously at Willow's impossibly calm face, grinding her teeth, every word dripping with twisted resentment. "Just because Julian is dragging his feet on the divorce, do you seriously think you've got him wrapped around your finger? You think you've already won?"

Faced with her hysterical interrogation, Willow's expression didn't change a single fraction. No anger, no panic—just an overwhelming, crystal-clear apathy. She didn't even want to waste a single syllable explaining herself. "You really are incapable of seeing anything beyond your own narrow little world."

That sentence was the final straw that broke the camel's back, utterly destroying whatever shred of sanity Vivienne had left.

The viciousness in her eyes exploded. Her brain short-circuited, and she raised her hand, swinging it violently toward Willow's face. The movement was fast and ruthless, fueled by a desperate need for revenge.

But before her hand even made it halfway, Willow grabbed her wrist with a flawless, dead-calm precision.

Willow's grip wasn't overly tight, but it was solid as a rock. Before Vivienne could even struggle, Willow flicked her wrist and swung her own hand in a sharp arc—

Smack!

A crisp, resounding slap echoed through the quiet room like a gunshot.

Vivienne's entire brain shorted out.

A burning, stinging pain instantly flared across half her face, the numbness spreading quickly. She froze, her body stiffening in sheer disbelief. She couldn't fathom that Willow—the usually gentle, indifferent woman who always backed down—actually had the nerve to slap her in public.

She clutched her burning, reddening cheek, her eyes instantly welling with humiliated fury and absolute shock. But before she could even lash out, Willow had already raised her hands, giving her a clean, forceful shove out the door.

Vivienne stumbled back several steps, landing pathetically in the hallway.

Then, Willow stared at her with ice in her veins. "Don't ever think about coming to my door to start trouble again. You won't get away with anything here."

She slammed the door shut. The first thing Willow did was go wash her hands. Just touching Vivienne had made her feel gross.

Having failed to get the upper hand over and over again, Vivienne was left with no choice but to turn around and find Jayden Chase. He was the only one who could help her now.

Jayden was polite enough, but when Vivienne laid out her frustrations and demands, he just put on a difficult expression and waved her off. "You're going to have to figure this out yourself. At most, I can drop a subtle hint or put in a good word for you in front of Professor Smith. I can't make it too obvious. If anyone catches on, not only will it not help you, but it'll also blow back on me."

His words were completely airtight, meaning he had offered absolutely zero practical help.

A wave of bitter disappointment washed over Vivienne. She realized the man was completely useless. Her face instantly iced over, and having no desire to stick around, she turned on her heel to leave.

But just as she took a step, he grabbed her wrist in a vice grip.

Jayden had intentionally pulled her back, his gaze locked dead onto the faint red handprint still lingering on her cheek. His eyes were loaded with flirtatious intent and unfiltered calculation. "What happened to your face?"

Vivienne instinctively turned her head, not wanting him to look at it, and gave a dismissive reply. "It's nothing. Just a minor thing."

She had hoped to brush it off, but Jayden didn't care about her distance in the slightest. His fingertips actually reached out, aiming straight for her cheek.

The second his skin was about to make contact, a wave of disgust shuddered through Vivienne. Alarm bells shrieked in her head, and she violently swatted his hand away with a hard, frantic strike.

She stepped back, her eyes freezing over completely, her tone carrying a crystal-clear warning. "Watch yourself! You and I are nothing but business partners, from start to finish. That's it."

Being called out like that in public didn't embarrass Jayden at all. Instead, he lazily pulled his hand back, a careless smirk plastered on his face. "I was just joking around with you. No need to overreact. Why so serious?"

Vivienne ripped her gaze away and let out a cold scoff. "It better be a joke."

With that, she stormed off.

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The next morning, Willow and Leo arrived bright and early at Ethan's house.

This time, they weren't just chatting with him; they were also teaching him a few things.

Ethan was incredibly smart. Even though he had been trapped by his illness for years with very little formal schooling, his comprehension skills were off the charts. Whether it was basic knowledge or the simplified biology concepts Willow threw in, he only had to hear it once. After thinking it over for a moment, he understood it completely. He even occasionally chimed in with logical questions, overflowing with curiosity and a thirst for knowledge about the world.

It was just a tragedy that this disease had never shown him an ounce of mercy.

After sitting up straight and focusing on his studies for just an hour, his thin back started to tremble slightly. The healthy flush on his face faded, replaced by a pale, sickly weakness. The micro-tears on the surface of his skin throbbed with a dull ache, pulling at his nerves until he could no longer maintain his upright posture.

"Willow, Leo, I want to rest for a bit. Is that okay?" he asked.

"Of course," Willow immediately agreed, then helped him up to slowly walk around the yard.

But even walking was something he couldn't sustain for long. Soon enough, he had to sit back down in his chair. Still, his color was much better than it had been a moment ago.

The mountain breeze was cool and crisp, making everyone feel refreshed.

Ethan spoke up on his own. "Willow, Leo, I know you guys are here to research my disease. You can ask whatever you want. I'll tell you everything."

Looking at the resilient, clear-headed teenager in front of her, Willow knew it was time. The sooner they conducted the research and began studying the data, the sooner they could help him.

She and Leo exchanged a look, instantly dropping their casual demeanor and switching into a rigorously professional research mode. Her tone was gentle yet solemn. "Alright, Ethan. We're going to ask you some professional questions now for the medical research. Just answer based on how you truly feel. Don't force yourself."

"And of course, if you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer something, you can stop us at any time."

Ethan gave a firm nod, straightening his thin spine.

Willow took charge of the interview, while Leo handled the camera and note-taking. In a split second, they were locked in.

"How old were you when you first started experiencing the skin tearing and blistering? Do you remember exactly what it looked like back then?" Willow asked softly.

"I don't remember the exact time, but my mom says I was probably a little over a year old," Ethan's voice was calm and light, as if he were telling a story about someone else. "At first, it was just tiny blisters on my hands. My parents thought it was a normal rash and didn't think much of it. But then the blisters kept multiplying. If you touched them even lightly, they'd pop, ooze, and scab over. Soon, my whole body was covered in open sores that wouldn't heal no matter what they did. Since then, my skin has never been whole again."

Beside them, Leo quietly recorded the data, his pen scratching lightly against the paper, careful not to interrupt their conversation.

Willow gave a small nod and continued with another precise question. "As you grew older, from being a toddler to a teenager now, have you noticed any significant changes in how often it flares up or how severe the wounds are? For example, does it get worse when the seasons change, when you catch a cold, or when you're exhausted?"

"Yeah, there are huge changes," Ethan answered methodically, thinking it through carefully. "When I was little, the flare-ups were way more frequent. I'd get new blisters and torn skin almost every single day. As I got older, it stabilized a bit. But now, if the weather gets hot, if I sweat, or if I sit or walk for too long, as soon as my body gets tired, it flares up that very night. My skin burns and gets insanely itchy, and then whole patches

of blisters break out. The old scars rip open and bleed, too. It's the absolute worst in the fall and winter when the air is dry. My whole body gets tight and chapped. Even small movements like lifting my arm or bending over will tear the scabs right open. It hurts so much I can't sleep the entire night."

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"When you have a flare-up, aside from the skin tearing and the pain, do you experience any other symptoms? Like fever, fatigue, or mucosal damage?"

"I get exhausted a lot. Like when I was reading just now—my brain wanted to keep studying, but my body just gave out," Ethan said frankly. "The inside of my mouth and throat tear up too. It hurts to eat or drink anything, and sometimes I run a low-grade fever when it's really bad. The local doctor said it's from the wounds getting infected. Whenever my skin tears severely, my whole body burns like I've been scalded by boiling water."

Hearing this, Willow's heart sank slightly. She pressed on with a core question for their clinical research, "Over the years, have you noticed any patterns to the flare-ups? Like, under what conditions is your condition relatively stable? Are there any specific triggers you can clearly identify?"

"I have," Ethan replied, his eyes incredibly serious. "If I don't stay up late, avoid intense exercise, don't sweat too much, and keep my emotions steady, the flare-ups happen a lot less. The moment I get anxious, sad, or move around a bit too much, my body reacts immediately. I can't run, I can't jump, I can't even laugh too hard. Any sudden movements will tear my skin. With this disease, it's like I'm not allowed to have emotions or energy."

The words were spoken lightly, but they masked over a decade of silent torment. A teenage boy should have been running wild, laughing and roughhousing with his friends. Instead, from the moment he could remember, he had lived in cautious confinement, forced to coexist with fragile skin and endless pain for the rest of his life.

Willow swallowed the lump in her throat, maintaining her professional rhythm as she asked the final core question. "With the constant cycle of tearing and scabbing, aside from the physical pain, does it affect your daily life and mental health? For example, do you get scared to interact with people, or feel self-conscious or anxious because of the illness?"

Ethan stayed silent for a few seconds. A fleeting hint of loneliness flashed in his clear eyes, quickly replaced by resilience. "When I was little, yeah. I didn't understand it back

then. I'd envy the other kids running and playing, and I was terrified of people seeing my wounds, so I never talked to strangers. As I got older, I figured it out. It's not my fault; I'm just sick. I definitely feel self-conscious sometimes, but mostly I'm just used to it. Now, I don't mind people looking, and I'm not afraid to talk about it. If my answers can help your research and spare other kids like me from going through all this pain in the future, then it's worth it."

As he finished speaking, sunlight filtered through the cracks in the roof and landed on his frail shoulders. Despite being covered in painful wounds and scars, his eyes were clear and brave, shining with a wisdom and kindness far beyond his years.

Even with Willow and Leo maintaining their utmost professionalism, they couldn't help but be deeply moved.

Willow paused her questioning and said softly, "Thank you, Ethan. I appreciate you being so earnest and honest with us for this research."

Beside her, Leo stopped his note-taking as well. Looking at the resilient boy in front of him, his eyes welled up with tears again. He had never realized he was such a crier. Or maybe it was just a side effect of getting older.

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They were so engrossed in their work that neither noticed the tall figure standing in the doorway. With blonde hair and blue eyes, it was Professor Smith.

Surprisingly, Ethan was the first to spot him.

He had never seen a real foreigner in person before, so when his gaze suddenly met those deep blue eyes, a wave of timidity washed over him. He instinctively shrank back toward Willow, nervously clutching the hem of her shirt, too shy to lift his head again.

"Don't be scared, Ethan," Willow said, turning her head just in time to follow his line of sight and spot Smith standing at the entrance.

Leo also registered who it was, but the resentment from being misunderstood at the summit still lingered in his chest. Because of that, he made no move to greet the man.

Back then, they had approached him with genuine sincerity and a desire to learn, only to be met with prejudice and coldness. Respect was a two-way street; since the man had made his disdain obvious, they saw no reason to bend over backward for him now.

So, even though it was clear Smith had come over on his own accord, Leo simply withdrew his gaze coldly. He looked down and began packing up his recording equipment, completely ignoring the older man.

Willow, being a bit more composed, gave a slight nod in Smith's direction. It was purely out of politeness, layered with clear boundaries and detachment. The admiration and enthusiasm she once held for him had long dissipated, leaving behind nothing more than the courteous formalities afforded to a stranger.

Both of them had braced themselves for his cold shoulder, or perhaps even a public reprimand. To their surprise, Smith didn't turn away indifferently as he had before. Instead, he stepped forward and slowly walked into the small yard.

He had been standing outside listening quietly to the entire interview, and his perspective had undergone a monumental shift.

He had seen countless researchers who only cared about project data and academic accolades, but he rarely encountered anyone like Willow. Her questions were thoughtful and gentle, every word attuned to the suffering of the patient and their family. Her eyes held genuine compassion and kindness. Beyond her sheer professionalism, it was the profound empathy she displayed during the interview that truly moved him.

Smith couldn't help but recall Vivienne's description of her—selfish, opportunistic, driven only by profit. Yet, looking at the deeply compassionate and empathetic young woman in front of him, he couldn't reconcile the two images at all.

As Smith entered the yard, Willow and Leo didn't actively drive him away as they had with Vivienne, but they didn't try to win his favor either. They simply went about their business.

Having just finished the interview, a few new blisters had already surfaced on Ethan's skin. Willow skillfully took out her medical supplies and leaned in to carefully treat his wounds.

Seeing this, Smith was stunned once again. In all his years of research and interviews, neither he nor anyone on his team had ever personally tended to a patient's wounds like this.

Smith watched quietly for a moment. Only when Willow had finished dressing the wounds and began packing her supplies did he finally speak. "Regarding gene therapy for Epidermolysis Bullosa, what do you consider to be the greatest obstacle in current research?"

The question was straightforward—one of the most fundamental yet critical pain points in their field.

Willow didn't stop what she was doing. She didn't understand why he was suddenly asking this, but out of politeness, she answered, "The biggest challenge right now is the lack of stability post-gene editing, which often leads to off-target effects. Additionally, the engraftment rate of the corrected skin cells is extremely low, making it difficult to achieve long-term, effective healing, which results in recurrent blistering."

Smith gave a slight nod, a flicker of surprise crossing his eyes. He quickly followed up with a second question, zeroing in on a crucial aspect of patient care. "And for this type of condition, what do you believe is the optimal age for intervention?"

It was a highly practical clinical question, a basic prerequisite for any researcher studying rare diseases.

Willow gently patted the top of Ethan's head, a tender sorrow flashing in her eyes as she gave the honest answer. "The golden window for treatment is under the age of three. Young children have high cell viability, which yields the best results for repair and intervention, with the fewest side effects."

She looked down at Ethan, who had already passed that critical age, but her tone remained steady, filled with undeniable confidence as she added, "Although Ethan has missed the optimal window, that doesn't mean there are no options left. The golden period is just the ideal scenario. We can use a staggered restorative care regimen paired with targeted adjunct therapy to steadily manage his condition, improve his skin integrity, and minimize his pain as much as possible."

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The brief exchange of questions and answers was crystal clear, precise, and highly professional, without a trace of confusing jargon or fluff.

Smith was thoroughly stunned, his deep blue eyes widening in sheer disbelief.

He had only intended to test her with a couple of fundamental questions, but he never expected that someone as young as Willow would possess such an exhaustive understanding of clinical treatments, age adaptability, and the primary obstacles in combating Epidermolysis Bullosa.

Both her clinical reasoning and diagnostic logic were incredibly precise.

What was even more astonishing was that her answers and cognitive approach instantly reminded Smith of the exact person he had been searching for. Their styles were uncannily similar.

Finding that individual was, in fact, his primary objective for this trip to China.

But on second thought, he looked at the serene, youthful face before him. Could someone this young truly be the mysterious researcher who had introduced groundbreaking, disruptive concepts to the global field of gene editing?

After pondering it for a moment, Smith concluded the answer was obvious: it was impossible.

What kind of pedigree did that require? It was a pinnacle of academia that countless top-tier geneticists and rare disease experts worldwide couldn't reach, even after dedicating their entire lives and decades of tireless research to the subject.

If it really were her, the entire history of this medical field would have to be rewritten.

Leo was visibly irritated by the older man's sudden appearance and unprompted interrogation. Mindful of Smith's status, he kept his temper in check but couldn't resist dropping a passive-aggressive hint. "If you're done with your questions, we have a tight schedule to keep."

The implication was obvious—they had work to do, he was intruding, and it was time for him to leave.

Smith didn't take offense, merely nodding in acknowledgment.

Based on his silent observation, his opinion of Leo had also drastically improved. The young man had been focused, efficient, and exceptionally professional while taking notes—clearly an expert deeply entrenched in their field.

Appreciating raw talent, Smith felt his initial prejudice melting away. He replied amicably, "I'll be out of your hair in a moment."

Seeing that he was much more approachable than before, Leo offered a pointed reminder. "As you can see, we're the ones currently working with Ethan. If your team intends to participate in this study, we can compete fairly on our own merits. There's no need for any underhanded tactics behind our backs."

Underhanded tactics?

Smith frowned slightly, genuinely confused by the underlying accusation.

Noticing his confusion, Leo casually brushed it off. "If you want the details, go ask Vivienne."

Smith didn't press the issue, but just before he left, he dropped a bombshell. "You can rest easy. My team will no longer be pursuing this project. Starting today, you have free rein to proceed with your research without interference."

Willow and Leo both froze, caught completely off guard.

Leo was the first to find his voice. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely," Smith promised solemnly. "I'll instruct my team to pack up the moment I return."

Having witnessed the scene earlier, he knew better than anyone that his team no longer stood a chance with this project.

Field research relied entirely on establishing a solid foundation of trust with the patients. Without that bond, even the most meticulous data was practically useless. And it was glaringly obvious that Willow and Leo had already built that trust with Ethan.

Smith certainly cared about the project's potential and wanted to produce meaningful results, but he also had strict professional boundaries and a strong sense of ethics. He knew what was permissible, what was right, and what was truly worthwhile.

On top of that, the situation on their end was a mess. There was no telling when Vivienne would actually sort things out, and he simply didn't have the luxury of wasting any more time here.

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Professor Smith was a man of his word.

Upon returning to their temporary base at Mayor Henderson's residence, he didn't waste a single second, immediately issuing the order for his team to pack up and leave.

The announcement sent a wave of confusion through the ranks. They hadn't even begun their research since arriving in the mountains; sample collections and environmental data gathering hadn't even started. Pulling out now meant completely abandoning the project.

As disappointing as it was, his team had followed him for years and knew his temperament well. They figured that if he was calling it off so abruptly, he must have hit a major roadblock and had his own specific reasons for the decision.

So, nobody questioned it. They silently and methodically began packing away their equipment and organizing their research files, prepping for the sudden departure.

But when Vivienne heard the news, she was completely blindsided.

She couldn't understand how everything had unraveled literally overnight.

This rare disease research was an opportunity she had fought tooth and nail for. It was her leverage to secure a spot in the primary research group, prove herself to Julian, and finally crush Willow. If the project was suddenly axed, how was she supposed to pull any of that off?

Vivienne absolutely refused to let that happen. Pacing frantically, she racked her brain for a solution to salvage the situation.

Suddenly, she remembered that Smith had left the house earlier that morning.

In this godforsaken backwoods, there was nowhere else for him to go except that specific family's home. It was glaringly obvious he had gone there. And conveniently, Willow had been there all morning as well.

The pieces fell into place—it had to be Willow! She must have used Vivienne's absence to spread rumors and smear her name to Smith, manipulating the usually resolute professor, who had been so eager for this research, into making a rash decision to pull out.

Vivienne realized she had severely underestimated Willow.

She had assumed the toxic lies she'd fed Smith earlier would have been enough to nail Willow to the cross. She hadn't expected the tables to turn so quickly; the bitch had clearly been busy pulling strings behind her back.

But her top priority right now was to stabilize Smith. She would settle the score with Willow later.

Her face tight with anxiety, Vivienne practically sprinted to Smith's door. "Professor Smith, are you in? We need to talk."

Inside, Smith was currently reviewing the evacuation checklist, his finger tracing over lines of dense data, his expression stoic and calm. Hearing the frantic voice outside, he didn't even bat an eye, though a wave of annoyance washed over him. That was fast, he thought.

It was just as well; he had been planning to speak with her anyway.

The door opened, and Vivienne barged in. She expertly hid the viciousness in her eyes, slapping on a mask of panic and pure grievance. Her eyes were already brimming with tears, making her look like the ultimate victim. "Professor, I heard you're pulling the entire team out? Why the sudden change of heart? Our research isn't even finished. If we leave now, all our prep work will have been for nothing."

Smith stared at her, his expression entirely unreadable, offering zero emotional response.

He had never really noticed it before, but looking closely at her now, he realized his student's emotions were often far too theatrical and forced.

Being subjected to his intense scrutiny made Vivienne acutely nervous. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Smith wasn't one to beat around the bush. "Regarding this research project, have you been pulling underhanded tricks behind our backs?"

Vivienne's heart skipped a beat, but she forced herself to maintain her composure. "Professor, why would you ask that? Did someone say something to you? You know I've been completely focused on the research this entire time; I haven't had a second to do anything else. Please don't let someone's malicious lies damage our relationship."

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Although she didn't name any names, every single word was a direct accusation against Willow.

Smith caught the implication loud and clear. However, unlike before, he didn't immediately take her side. Nor did he reprimand Willow. He simply said coolly, "Noted."

Seeing his reaction, Vivienne knew he didn't entirely believe her. But there was no time to dwell on that now; she just needed him to change his mind and delay the evacuation.

So she pivoted back to her primary concern. "Professor, can you just give me one more week? I promise you, in a week's time, I'll deliver the results you want."

Smith was already displeased, and her relentless badgering only spiked his irritation. His voice dropped to a frigid tone. "This is my team, and I make the decisions. Based on our

overall risk assessment and project overhead, pulling out now is our only viable option. This is not up for debate."

"But—"

Vivienne tried to argue further, but a sudden knock interrupted her before the door swung open. It was Jayden.

He played dumb, acting as if he had no idea Vivienne was inside, pretending he was just there to grab some paperwork. "Ms. Sinclair, you're here too?"

Vivienne was livid and couldn't be bothered to entertain him. However, Smith seized the opportunity to dismiss them both, telling her to leave with Jayden.

Vivienne obviously didn't want to go; she wasn't finished. But the choice was ripped from her hands as Jayden practically dragged her out of the room by force.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped at Jayden the moment they were in the hallway.

Jayden pulled her to the side, his gaze dark as he hissed a warning. "Cool it. Stop harassing him. The Professor despises it when people throw tantrums in public. The more you push, the more he'll dig his heels in, and you'll burn any bridge you have left."

"So I'm just supposed to give up?" Vivienne seethed, consumed by indignation.

"Take the loss on this research, or permanently piss off the Professor and nuke your chances of ever joining his team. Your call," Jayden said, leaving the choice squarely on her shoulders.

At the end of the day, their partnership was purely transactional. He liked working with smart people. But if she was determined to act like an idiot and dig her own grave, he had no problem cutting her loose.

In the end, Vivienne forced herself to swallow her fury.

But without a shadow of a doubt, she added this grievance to Willow's ever-growing tab.

Smith's team moved with military precision, packing up and shipping out in a matter of hours. The once-bustling camp lost half its population in a flash, leaving the area feeling hollow, desolate, and eerily quiet.

Completely oblivious to the drama, one of her subordinates wandered over to ask if they should start packing as well. The innocent question was the match that lit Vivienne's powder keg. She exploded in a vicious tirade, screaming at everyone to get the hell out of her sight and stay away.

Terrified by her psychotic outburst, the staff members scattered like roaches, not daring to utter another word.

Soon, the sprawling space was occupied only by Vivienne and her few closest sycophants.

From start to finish, her stance was unshakeable: she wasn't leaving.

She was nursing a lethal grudge, and there was absolutely no way she was letting this slide.

Why the hell did Willow get to completely torpedo her plans and leave her in the dirt, only to walk away unscathed and reap all the glory and benefits?

There was no way in hell she was going to let her get away with that.

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Vivienne immediately announced she was heading down the mountain.

Sensing the toxic aura radiating off her and the murder in her eyes, her entourage was nervous enough to offer an escort. But Vivienne shot them down with an icy wave of her hand, insisting on going alone with absolute finality.

Knowing full well how unhinged she could be, no one dared to argue and wisely backed off.

Soon after, she shouldered her backpack and marched out.

Vivienne stayed down in the valley for hours, from the peak of afternoon until the sun sank below the horizon. It wasn't until the twilight faded and the thick, suffocating blackness of night swallowed the mountains that she trudged back, carrying the chill of the evening wind with her.

The moment she returned, someone rushed over to ask how she was feeling and if she had eaten dinner. Vivienne treated them like ghosts, clutching her heavy black backpack tightly to her chest as she stormed into her room and bolted the door shut, locking out everyone and everything.

Inside the stifling, dimly lit room, she sat at the desk and went straight to work on the contents of her bag. Sorting through massive stacks of freshly printed smear posters, her eyes gleamed with a psychotic, venomous obsession.

She stayed holed up in her room late into the night. Once she was absolutely certain the camp was dead silent, she cracked her door open and slipped out under the cover of darkness.

The moonlight was sickly and faint, leaving visibility practically at zero. Melting into the shadows, she moved with swift, calculated precision. Armed with a thick wad of smear posters and a bottle of glue, she glided silently through every corner of the village.

Going door to door, she meticulously plastered the sheets dead center on everyone's front doors, ensuring they were impossible to miss. She didn't stop there. Tree trunks, the community bulletin board, hallway walls, and even the exterior stone walls...

She blanketed every high-traffic, hyper-visible public area without missing a single spot.

Page after page of venomous lies lay dormant in the night, waiting like landmines for the dawn to trigger a catastrophic explosion.

In the pitch-black shadows, Vivienne couldn't stop a cruel smirk from curling her lips. The bitch actually thought she could play games with her? She was about to give Willow a front-row seat to the consequences of crossing Vivienne Sinclair.

At the crack of dawn, the pale morning light trickled in. As the early-rising locals opened their doors, they were immediately slapped in the face with the glaring black-and-white text.

The flyers plastered over every conceivable surface weren't job listings or community notices. They were unhinged, brutal assassinations of Willow's character, every single word designed to gut her reputation.

The gossip spread like wildfire. In a matter of minutes, the entire village was in an absolute uproar.

Exposing the Truth Behind Researcher Willow Horgan: A Talentless, Immoral Academic Impostor.

Willow Horgan projects an image of a dedicated, ethical professional, but in reality, she is a morally bankrupt degenerate with a sickeningly chaotic personal life.

*She is still legally married to her husband, aggressively clinging to the status of his wife while refusing to let him go. Yet she has zero shame, carrying on illicit affairs and hooking up with other men behind his back. Her slutty behavior and blatant infidelity

prove she is nothing but a homewrecker who puts her own sick desires above all basic decency.*

Her moral depravity is only matched by her academic fraud. Her supposed expertise is a total fabrication; she is nothing but a scam artist. With only a basic bachelor's degree to her name, she has zero advanced medical training. Yet she continuously lies to the public, inflating her status and conning her entire team into believing she is a senior research expert.

This woman is a talentless fraud who leeches off the hard work of others to fake her way through the industry. She is a manipulative, two-faced liar who has absolutely no right to work in research, let alone demand anyone's trust or respect!

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The stark black-and-white flyers were weaponized pages of character assassination, meticulously listing every fabricated sin to destroy Willow.

The explosive slander blanketed the village like a suffocating black net.

Everyone who read the flyers was struck dumb, their eyes wide with shock. The pristine image of the gentle, composed, and hardworking woman they thought they knew shattered into a million pieces.

Nobody bothered to fact-check the claims, nor did anyone care to look for the obvious holes in the story. That was the tragic reality of isolated communities—people were simple and straightforward, making them incredibly gullible and prone to mob mentality.

The locals had no concept of PR spin or malicious framing. Their straightforward nature made them dangerously susceptible to mass manipulation. A single vicious rumor on a cheap piece of paper was all it took to permanently overwrite reality.

When Ethan's parents saw the flyers, their stomachs dropped, paralyzed by a sickening wave of panic. They were deeply protective of their boy, simple yet cautious by nature. Even if they had their doubts about the accusations, it was a risk they absolutely refused to take.

To them, it was better to be safe than sorry. If even a fraction of the flyer was true, Ethan spending every day with her would inevitably corrupt him. As parents, their worst

nightmare was their child falling in with the wrong crowd and picking up toxic behavior from a degenerate.

So, that very morning, they strictly forbade Ethan from speaking with her again.

Ethan didn't understand and tried to press them for reasons, but they blew him off, telling him he was too young to understand and didn't need to know the details.

But Ethan had his own mind. He knew Willow was a good person, and he genuinely liked her. Because of that, he completely ignored his parents' warning.

Across the village, Willow, the star of this smear campaign, caught wind of the situation almost immediately.

The second Leo saw the flyer, he absolutely lost his mind, screaming at the top of his lungs. "This is absolute fucking bullshit! What kind of gutter rat is pulling this garbage? Only a cowardly piece of trash would pull a stunt like this from the shadows! If they've got a problem, they should say it to our faces instead of acting like a spineless bitch!"

"Fabricating lies out of thin air just to destroy someone's life—it's psychotic! Their mind is so warped and filthy, it makes me sick! How the hell do you sleep at night after pulling something this evil? I hope they rot in hell!"

His voice boomed with raw fury, his eyes practically glowing with violent rage as he tore into the sickening cowardice of the smear campaign.

After unleashing his tirade, Leo's chest heaved violently. Forcing his anger down, he snapped his gaze to Willow. "Who the hell plastered these everywhere? Who's psychotic enough to target you like this?"

Willow stood quietly, staring at the wall completely wallpapered with toxic lies. Her eyes were devoid of panic, holding only an icy, detached clarity, as if she already knew exactly who was pulling the strings.

"Who else?"

"There's no one else but Vivienne who would pull a stunt like this."

At her words, the realization hit Leo like a bucket of ice water. She was right. The only person who knew these twisted half-truths and was venomous enough to weaponize them was Vivienne.

Connecting the dots to Smith's sudden evacuation yesterday, it was painfully obvious that Vivienne had orchestrated this psychotic revenge out of pure spite.

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Leo ripped one of the posters off the wall, violently shredding it into confetti in seconds.

The harsh sound of tearing paper slashed through the quiet yard.

It echoed loudly, sharp and abrupt.

Then came the second, the third. He tore into the flyers with savage desperation, venting his murderous rage, desperate to scrub this filth from the backwoods forever. What he really wanted was to be ripping Vivienne to pieces instead.

Willow watched his frantic efforts, her chest tightening with sympathy. "Stop tearing them down. You'll never get them all."

Leo froze, his chest still heaving, his face contorted in furious disbelief. "What do you mean I can't get them all? You shouldn't have to deal with this psychotic garbage being dumped on you!"

Refusing to accept that this tiny village could be entirely consumed by these vicious lies, he stormed out of the yard, determined to see just how many more flyers were out there.

But the second he stepped through the gates, his fury and fragile hope were instantly snuffed out, replaced by a chilling wave of despair.

The sight before him made his blood run cold, and then boil over completely.

Every mud wall, wooden door, utility pole, and the massive trunk of the old locust tree at the village entrance was plastered in them. Every single front gate in his line of sight was smothered in the exact same smear posters.

The glaring black-and-white print was an inescapable, suffocating plague that infected every inch of the village.

As the wind blew, the loose corners of the flyers fluttered aggressively, sounding like countless vicious mouths whispering their toxic lies, condemning Willow without mercy.

Leo stood rooted to the spot, adrenaline spiking as the sheer magnitude of the sabotage sent his rage into overdrive.

Suddenly, Willow's words made sickening sense.

He couldn't imagine how many times she had been framed like this to know that despicable woman's tactics so perfectly.

Blinded by anger, Leo marched straight to Vivienne's door. He pounded on the wood, screaming demands and logic at the top of his lungs, but the room remained dead silent.

Vivienne had barricaded herself inside, playing dead like the coward she was.

The futile standoff was agonizing.

Just then, Mayor Henderson walked by. Leo latched onto him like a lifeline, immediately pleading, "Mayor, you have to help us clear this up. Willow isn't like that. She would never do any of this."

Henderson nodded, clearly believing Leo, but he looked deeply conflicted. "I believe you, but the problem is whether everyone else will. And more importantly, whether Ethan's parents will."

That single sentence targeted the most fatal flaw in their situation.

Their rare disease field research was in its final, most critical phase. If everything fell apart now, all their efforts would go straight down the drain.

Willow and Leo fully understood the stakes. Refusing to waste another second on Vivienne, they headed straight for Ethan's house.

According to the original plan, they had a full day of interviews scheduled with the boy. But when they arrived, the gates that were normally wide open were bolted shut, radiating a hostile, dead energy that acted as an icy barrier locking them out.

Impatient, Leo practically jogged up to knock on the door. After a long wait, the heavy wood finally creaked open, revealing Garrett. His face was grim, his eyes heavily guarded.

Leo took the initiative, asking if Ethan was home and explaining they were there to continue the research.

Garrett remained silent for a long moment before answering, "Ethan isn't here. And don't ever come looking for him again."

"He won't be participating in your project anymore. We're done here."

His tone was exhausted but completely immovable. In just a few words, he had single-handedly sealed the fate of their research.

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Hearing this, Willow and Leo felt a suffocating wave of despair and helplessness, but there was absolutely nothing they could do.

They knew perfectly well that Garrett was only acting this way out of pure, desperate love for his son.

Having spent his entire life caring for a child with a rare, devastating illness, his only driving force was keeping his boy safe. He couldn't afford a single risk, utterly terrified of exposing his already fragile son to anything toxic.

The sheer weight of that clumsy but overwhelming fatherly love left them without the right—or the heart—to argue.

Leo stepped forward and gave a polite nod, his voice steady and restrained as he made one last attempt. "We completely understand your concerns, but it would be such a shame to throw away this opportunity..."

Before he could finish, a group of men swaggered down the alley and surrounded them. They were the local thugs—young, arrogant punks notorious for loafing around and causing trouble.

Crossing their arms, they glared at Willow and Leo with overt hostility and disgust, their faces twisted with aggression. "Get the hell out! We don't want you in our town!"

"Yeah! Walking around pulling this shady bullshit with your twisted agendas! Have you got no shame dragging a sick kid into this?"

"Don't you dare infect our kids with your filth! Get the hell out of here!"

The vile, degrading insults rained down on them, punctuated by sneers of contempt that poisoned the air.

Furious, Leo stepped forward to fight them, but Willow grabbed his arm, yanking him back. They were completely out of their element in hostile territory; provoking a brawl was a suicide mission. Plus, the guys were clearly looking for blood, and if things got physical, Willow and Leo would be the ones leaving in body bags.

Leo gritted his teeth, forced to choke down his rage.

Just as they hit a dead end and were about to retreat, the slow shuffle of footsteps echoed from inside the house.

"Dad." It was Ethan.

His small, frail body stood dead center in the doorway. He was as sickeningly pale as ever, but his clear eyes burned with an astonishing brilliance.

Ignoring the aggressive thugs and the toxic flyers plastered everywhere, he squared his tiny shoulders and declared with absolute certainty, "I believe Willow. I want to keep doing the research with them."

It was just a few soft words, but they struck with the force of a bomb.

While the adults obsessively calculated the risks and blindly swallowed rumors, choosing self-preservation at the first sign of trouble, this sheltered, naive child refused to buy into the lies. Operating on pure instinct and genuine trust, he stood stubbornly in Willow's corner.

Willow's breath hitched, a rush of overwhelming emotion and warmth flooding her chest, leaving a lump in her throat.

Beside her, Leo was completely choked up, his eyes already rimmed with red.

Seeing his son acting out, Ethan's father, Garrett immediately rushed over to block him, hissing, "You're just a kid, you don't know what you're talking about! Get back inside!"

Ethan flinched, clearly terrified by his father's anger, but he dug his heels in. He didn't budge an inch, sending a crystal-clear message that he was siding with Willow.

Enraged by the defiance, Garrett yelled again, "Are you deaf? I said get inside!"

As Garrett reached out to grab him, Willow immediately lunged forward to stop him. "We're done for the day. We're leaving right now, just don't hurt him."

In truth, even if Garrett hadn't intervened, Willow wouldn't have let Ethan stay out here. The volatile crowd and aggressive thugs were far too dangerous a situation for him to be exposed to.

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Willow walked over, her voice soft and soothing as she told Ethan, "It's okay. We won't do the interview today. We'll come back when there's more time."

Ethan was incredibly obedient. Without asking a single question, he simply nodded. "Okay. I'll wait for you."

Willow offered him a faint smile, gently but firmly reminding him, "Don't forget the English words we taught you yesterday. Use your free time today to memorize them. We'll quiz you the next time we come by."

"I will! I promise I'll memorize them!" Ethan nodded vigorously, his face dead serious.

After comforting the boy, Willow and Leo decided to head back. Given the explosive situation, they had zero better options.

However, on the walk back, they noticed something incredibly unsettling.

Scattered under the shade of trees, along the edges of the fields, and even leaning against abandoned stone pillars, were groups of young men. They were all uniformly dressed in tight black clothes, with cheap, botched dye jobs in their hair. Slouching aggressively with their hands jammed in their pockets, they projected an aura of erratic, violent energy.

Their faces wore a lawless, thuggish swagger, and their glassy, restless eyes held none of the simple honesty typical of the locals. Instead, they radiated a predatory, street-level malice, practically mirroring the exact same vibe as the goons they had just faced outside Ethan's house.

What was worse was that every single one of them was tracking their movements. It wasn't casual curiosity; it was a brazen, hyper-fixated predatory gaze that felt suffocatingly heavy, sending a sickening chill straight down their spines.

Leo instinctively stepped closer to Willow, shielding her as best he could while muttering, "Where the hell did these guys come from? We haven't seen them once since we got here."

Willow shook her head, equally unnerved. "I have no idea. Let's just get back to base."

To their horror, when they returned to Mayor Henderson's residence, a few more men with the exact same look and psychotic energy were lingering in the courtyard. They weren't working, they weren't talking—they were just standing completely still, their unblinking stares locking onto Willow and Leo the second they walked through the gate. It was blatantly creepy.

Unable to ignore the massive red flag, Willow pulled Mayor Henderson aside and whispered, "Mayor, I have to ask. All those young guys in the yard and around town—are they locals? Why are there suddenly so many of them? We haven't seen them before."

Henderson was equally bewildered; it was the first time he'd ever seen them massing like this. "A few are from our town, but a lot of them are punks from the neighboring villages. These kids are notorious deadbeats. They sleep all day and prowl at night, refusing to do an honest day's work. They'd sleep straight through a heatwave. Seeing them actually crawl out of bed and gang up like this? You usually can't even find one of them on a good day."

He paused, frowning. "It's damn strange, them all swarming the village first thing in the morning like this. If you two don't have anywhere else to be, I strongly advise you stay indoors for the rest of the day."

Willow and Leo read the danger loud and clear. Nodding in agreement, they immediately locked down their plans and decided not to set foot outside again today.

Since they couldn't do any fieldwork, they didn't really need to leave anyway. Willow simply rounded up their team. Taking advantage of the downtime, they focused entirely on cross-referencing and organizing their existing data to ensure nothing was missing.

The rest of the team arrived quickly, and they dove into organizing their files. The intense focus made the hours fly by.

After a long stretch of work, they finally took a breather. Massaging her aching temples, Willow grabbed her phone. Her very first instinct was to text Silas and tell him about all the insane, creepy things that had happened today.

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But remembering he'd mentioned a packed schedule of important meetings today and might not check his phone right away, Willow hesitated.

First, she didn't want to disrupt his work. Second, she worried she was just overthinking things and would only stress him out over nothing. Besides, with so many people around, what could possibly happen?

With that in mind, Willow finally set her phone down.

What she didn't know was that at that exact moment, Silas Thorne was already on a flight to see her.

The second his conference in Seattle wrapped up, he hadn't paused for a breath. He canceled his next two mandatory meetings and rushed straight to the tarmac to board his private jet.

His executives assumed he had some massive corporate crisis to handle. Only Silas knew that this desperate, impatient rush was entirely for one person.

He had kept his arrival a secret, hoping to give her the ultimate surprise.

The jet cruised smoothly above the clouds, a rolling sea of white outside the window. Yet Silas didn't spare a single glance at the view; his mind and heart were entirely consumed by the woman waiting for him. He wondered what she was doing right now. Had she eaten lunch yet?

It had been far too long since he last held her. Even though Arthur Vance sent him regular updates and he saw her during their video calls, Silas still worried. Was she losing weight? Getting too much sun? Was she dealing with hardships he didn't know about?

More importantly, he desperately wanted to know if she had missed him during this time apart.

Whenever he thought of Willow, a sudden thrill fluttered in his chest. A gentle, intoxicating warmth spread through his veins, softening his usually predatory features into a rare expression of pure tenderness.

He turned his head, his deep voice laced with a subtle warmth as he asked Arthur, who sat beside him, "How has she been these past few days?"

He was asking about her, not the Merit Biotech project.

Arthur understood perfectly, though his latest update was from the previous night. He replied truthfully, "Director Horgan is doing well. No issues on her end. The project is proceeding smoothly, too. Based on the current progress, they should be able to wrap everything up in a few days."

Hearing this, Silas nodded.

Up until today, a knot of anxiety had been tight in his chest. He had constantly hoped Willow would return to New York City sooner so they could finally be reunited.

But now that he was flying straight to her, that burning impatience slowly settled. He wasn't in a rush anymore. If anything, he could just stay out there with her for a few extra days. They rarely got to spend time away together, so this was the perfect opportunity to just be by her side.

Later that afternoon, the rain started.

The downpour came fast and fierce, as if the heavens had been violently ripped open. Dense sheets of rain smashed down, instantly blurring the Appalachian Highlands into a gray wash.

In an instant, the world was engulfed in a thick, white mist. Howling winds sent raindrops crashing in every direction, and the air turned bone-chillingly heavy, carrying the ominous bite of a severe storm.

Amidst the torrential downpour, the few young local thugs they had seen that morning darted back and forth under the cover of the storm. Their footsteps were hurried and secretive. They whispered with heads bowed, glancing around cautiously. Their silhouettes flickered in the heavy rain, their movements sketchy and urgent, as if plotting something sinister.

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The rain only fell harder.

Thick black clouds pressed down on the mountains. Gale-force winds whipped dense sheets of rain, slamming against the roof tiles, windows, and surrounding woods of Mayor Henderson's residence with a deafening rumble.

The wind howled through the valley, the storm raging as the world turned dark and suffocating. The muddy mountain roads were completely soaked, and the entire forest was deathly empty, leaving only the massive roar of the storm.

Inside, although somewhat shielded from the weather, the room felt stiflingly hot and unusually oppressive, the stagnant air making it hard to breathe.

At this moment, Willow lay quietly on the bed, covered by a blanket. Her posture was peaceful, yet she was clearly not in a normal state of sleep.

Her eyes were tightly shut, dark lashes resting on her pale, exhausted face. Her lips were colorless, and the rise and fall of her chest was frighteningly shallow.

It wasn't a deep slumber; she had slipped into a coma-like unconsciousness due to the chemical incapacitation.

In truth, it wasn't just Willow. Leo Yardley and the other Merit Biotech colleagues were all in the exact same state.

Across the beds, everyone lay in eerie silence, not a single one awake. Some were turned on their sides, others flat on their backs, but all breathed shallowly, their bodies unnaturally still and rigid. Against the chaotic roar of the storm outside, the silence in the room was terrifyingly obvious.

Soon after, the door was pushed open from the outside.

A few figures slipped into the room, using the dark, rainy night as cover. They ducked their heads, moving with practiced stealth. It was the same group of idle thugs they had encountered during the day.

Dripping with the damp, earthy scent of the storm, their footsteps were incredibly light. Their eyes scanned the room with high alert as they moved cautiously, deliberately suppressing any noise.

A tall, lanky young man immediately locked his eyes on Willow's face. He stared openly, lowering his voice to a whisper. "This chick is way too gorgeous. Classy, too. What a damn shame."

The man closest to him instantly nudged him, shooting a wary glance toward the door. "Shut your mouth and keep your hands to yourself," he snapped, cutting him off. "Just do your job."

"Yeah, don't forget why we're here," another chimed in, his expression dead serious, focused entirely on the payout. "We're just the hired muscle. Our job is to deliver them to the drop point in one piece. Don't touch anything else, and don't ask questions."

The tall thug begrudgingly pulled his gaze away, scoffing. "I was just making an observation. It's not like I was gonna do anything."

"Keep your observations to yourself! The client was very clear about the rules. We do the drop, we get paid. It's a massive payday—once we have the cash, you can buy whatever kind of woman you want. Don't screw this up and ruin our payday over nothing."

Hearing this, the men instantly dropped any distracting thoughts and got straight to work with ruthless efficiency.

The thunderous storm outside completely masked any noise from within the house. The pitch-black night and torrential rain became their perfect cover.

Working in practiced coordination, they carefully hoisted the unconscious Willow and Leo onto their backs. Using the storm to hide their movements, they swiftly carried them out of Mayor Henderson's residence.

An inconspicuous cargo van idled on the side of the road. The doors slid open, swallowed their targets, and slammed shut. Within seconds, it vanished into the stormy night.

The journey was a convoluted maze. Following Vivienne Sinclair's strict instructions, they changed contact teams three separate times along the route, entirely avoiding main roads and populated towns, sticking strictly to desolate, unpaved mountain trails.

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Furthermore, every handover was silent and lightning-fast. No one spoke; they just moved with tense, oppressive purpose.

After all the twists and turns, the van finally braked to a halt in front of Shadow Creek Grotto in the middle of nowhere. It was completely off the grid, far removed from any village or hiking path—a natural, deeply concealed abyss.

Following the plan, the men dumped Willow and Leo inside and immediately retreated, not daring to linger for a single second.

Once outside, a younger thug stared at the pitch-black mouth of the cave, a chill creeping up his spine. "Honestly, who did these people piss off? Getting dumped in a devil's den like this..."

Another kicked a pebble at his feet, his tone dripping with apathy. "We're deep in the Appalachian Highlands. This cave is treacherous and totally isolated. Even if they're lucky enough to wake up, they won't last long without food or water. And if they don't starve, the wild animals roaming these mountains at night will pick their bones clean."

"Did you forget the scariest part?" Someone else leaned in, lowering his voice as unease flashed across his face. "This cave has a nasty reputation around here. Rumor has it that back in the day, anyone who committed a murder or needed a body to disappear would toss the corpse right down here."

He covered his nose and mouth. "That's why it always reeks of rot. The smell is unbearable."

A heavy silence fell over the group. The night wind howled past, carrying a damp chill that made their skin crawl.

The leader frowned sharply, cutting off the morbid chatter. "Enough. Quit spooking yourselves over ghost stories."

He shot a hard glare at the men, enunciating every word. "We're getting paid to do a job. We do exactly what the client ordered. Who these people are or who they pissed off is none of our business. I'm going to split the cash right now. Remember, once you take your cut, we split up and leave exactly as planned. As for what happened tonight, you'd better develop amnesia."

Hearing that, the men didn't dare hesitate. Shoving their dark thoughts aside, they turned and vanished into the depths of the forest under the cover of the relentless rain. They left behind nothing but Shadow Creek Grotto, completely abandoning the unconscious victims in this inescapable trap.

Inside, the cave fell into total darkness and silence.

After what felt like an eternity floating in an endless, heavy haze, Willow's consciousness slowly began to return. She struggled to open her eyes, only to find she couldn't see a thing. It took her a long moment to realize that wherever she was, there was absolutely zero light.

Soon, a foul, musty stench hit her nose. It was thick, metallic, and nauseating, slipping into her lungs with every breath and making her head spin with fresh waves of dizziness.

Willow pinched her thigh hard, forcing a sliver of clarity through the fog. Instinctively, she reached out her hand, trying to feel her way around and prop herself up to assess her surroundings. But the moment her fingertips left the freezing ground and stretched forward, they brushed against something warm and solid—a human body.

That sudden, unexpected touch in the pitch-black darkness instantly shattered her fragile composure. Her entire body stiffened, and her heart slammed against her ribs. "Who's there?"

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At the exact same time, Leo, who she had accidentally touched, was also groggily coming to.

His mental state mirrored Willow's—dizzy, disoriented, and utterly clueless as to why he was waking up in this bizarre place. Hearing Willow's voice finally anchored him a little.

He steadied himself, swallowing past the dry rasp in his throat. "It's me, Leo."

Recognizing his voice, the panic threatening to choke Willow receded slightly, though she didn't dare drop her guard. They were completely blind in an unknown environment, and fear still gripped them both.

The sealed space was terrifyingly quiet, but it was also the perfect environment for thinking.

Drawing comfort from each other's presence, they slowly reined in their racing emotions and forced themselves to logically assess the situation. Both their memories cut off abruptly right around the time they had dinner. Everything after that was a complete blank. Clearly, something had happened during that meal.

Most likely, they had been the victims of chemical incapacitation. That explained the instant blackout and the lingering vertigo.

As for who did it, they both had a silent understanding, but even if they wanted payback, they had to survive this first. The absolute priority was figuring out where they were and how to escape.

Their first instinct was to check for their phones, but their pockets were empty. Not just their phones—every single personal item had been stripped from them. It was glaringly obvious that Vivienne Sinclair hadn't left them a single lifeline. She was dead set on leaving them to rot in this desolate wasteland.

A heavy wave of despair crushed down on them both.

Before they could fully process the bleak reality, the storm outside violently intensified. The wind shrieked, driving the torrential rain, and mixed within the chaos were the eerie, bone-chilling cries of wild animals. The sounds echoed unpredictably, making the surrounding darkness feel even more sinister and terrifying.

But amidst those sounds, Willow noticed a crucial detail.

She held her breath, carefully analyzing the way the wind sounded and the echoes it created. The howling bounced off stone walls, returning in layered, fractured acoustics—a sound impossible in an open field. After a moment of intense listening, she was certain: they were trapped inside a mountain cave.

She turned to Leo. "I think we're inside Shadow Creek Grotto or a cave like it."

Leo was stunned, instinctively looking around the pitch-black space in disbelief. "A cave? How can you tell?"

"The wind sounds wrong," Willow explained. "Wind in an open field blows straight through. But here, the sound folds back on itself. It has an echo, bouncing off stone walls and scattering. Only an enclosed cave creates acoustics like that."

But being in a cave meant they were hidden, isolated, and incredibly unlikely to be found by a passerby.

Yet Willow refused to let that defeat her. She quickly reined in her emotions and laid out a clear, logical plan. "It's a massive storm out there right now, and there are predators roaming. Even if we tried to leave, visibility is zero. Our best bet is to conserve our energy, wait out the storm, and once things calm down, follow the natural layout of the cave to systematically find the exit."

She emphasized, "Caves are structurally complex, but if we can feel the wind, there has to be a ventilation shaft or a tunnel leading outside. We just have to find it."

Seeing her absolute calm, Leo's own anxiety ebbed. The terror gripping his heart was replaced by a steady resolve. "You got it. I'll follow your lead."

With that, the two of them found a relatively dry, sheltered corner against the rock wall and sat down quietly.

The atmosphere was thick with silence—so quiet they could hear the steady drip, drip of water falling from the stalactites.

Each drop felt incredibly heavy, a rhythmic reminder of their dire situation.

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She suddenly felt terribly guilty toward Leo. He hadn't been in New York City for long, and he was already caught up in this mess. It was incredibly bad luck on his part.

"I'm so sorry. I dragged you into this. Vivienne has been targeting me from the start; all of this resentment was meant for me alone." The more she spoke, the more the guilt gnawed at her. "You left your hometown to come to New York City, worked your ass off, and haven't even gotten to enjoy any stability or perks yet. Instead, you're dragged into this death trap because of me. I really am sorry."

That was just how Willow was. If she were suffering alone, she could handle it. But the moment someone else got caught in the crossfire—especially someone she cared about—the guilt ate her alive.

But Leo didn't see it that way at all. "Boss, stop right there. Don't put this on yourself. You didn't do a damn thing wrong. Vivienne is the one who's twisted and psychotic. This is her sick vendetta, not your burden to bear."

"Besides, I chose to come to New York City. Given the mess I was in back then, if you hadn't taken me in, I probably wouldn't even have a roof over my head right now."

Mentioning Vivienne brought a flare of hatred to Leo's voice. "When we get out of here, I swear I'm going to make her pay."

They exchanged a few more words of encouragement before fatigue set in. To conserve their energy, they lapsed into a quiet silence.

In that silence, Willow's thoughts drifted far away. This time, they landed on Silas.

Normally, at this hour, they would already be on a video call. But given her current predicament, that call was definitely not happening.

She couldn't help but wonder what he was doing right now. Had he realized she was missing? Or was he still buried under a mountain of paperwork, completely unaware that she had gone off the grid?

A few moments later, Willow quietly consoled herself. Maybe it was better if he was busy. At least if he didn't know, he wouldn't be terrified for her safety.

What she didn't know was that, far away, Silas was losing his damn mind over not being able to reach her.

The moment her phone went straight to voicemail, something in him snapped. When he later found out both she and Leo had vanished, his reaction could only be described as pure, unadulterated madness.

He didn't waste a single second. Calling in favors from the absolute apex of his network, he bypassed all red tape and dialed the highest-ranking government and emergency rescue authorities in the state. In an instant, the highest-tier search and rescue operation was mobilized. The mountain roads were entirely locked down under emergency protocols. The entire Appalachian Highlands region was declared a Level-1 search zone. Land, air, and water teams deployed a massive dragnet, creating a spectacle large enough to shake the entire region.

But that wasn't even close to enough.

Refusing to trust the efficiency of outsiders, he deployed the Aegis Private Tactical Rescue fleet—his own heavily armed, elite private rescue unit. The sheer scale of it was staggering, utilizing nearly half of the Elite Wing.

Dozens of high-altitude search drones launched into the night sky, swarming over the vast mountain range. Infrared thermal imaging, night-vision penetration scanners, and biometric life-detection arrays were fully engaged. They systematically scanned every inch of the ravines, cliffs, and deep woods, leaving zero blind spots.

And he monitored every single surveillance feed himself.

He couldn't afford to gamble on this.

Silas stood before a wall of monitors, his knuckles white from clenching his fists. His eyes burned with a borderline psychotic desperation, a suffocating wave of dread crushing his chest. He barked out orders relentlessly: Faster. Faster.

He rarely let his emotions slip like this. Standing beside him, Arthur was practically terrified. Judging by Silas's terrifying intensity, he was fully prepared to burn through every ounce of his wealth, manpower, and elite connections to tear the mountains apart, rock by rock, until he found Willow.

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Faced with this overwhelming scene, the most terrified person of all was undeniably Vivienne.

When she plotted this, she never imagined it would trigger a localized apocalypse.

In her mind, Willow was just a nobody employee at Merit Biotech. Even if she was sleeping with Arthur Vance, she posed zero threat. After all, Arthur was just a high-paid corporate lackey.

Besides, even if the kidnapping went off, she assumed Merit would just send a couple of people to do a token search. People went missing in these remote mountains during storms every single year.

Vivienne had even mapped out the ideal aftermath. The best-case scenario: Willow vanished off the face of the earth, never to return and ruin her life again.

The backup plan: Even if she miraculously survived and returned, her reputation would be dragged through the mud. A massive corporation like Merit Biotech hated bad PR. They would undoubtedly fire Willow to save face.

But before she could even pop a bottle of champagne, the reality unfolding before her eyes utterly shattered her delusions.

This wasn't a standard search party. This was a full-scale military-grade invasion.

A fleet of private helicopters locked down the airspace, their sweeping searchlights slicing through the pitch-black night, turning the jagged valleys as bright as day. Amphibious and ground tactical teams were fully mobilized, while a convoy of luxury SUVs snaked up the winding mountain roads. It looked like every law enforcement officer and rescue vehicle in a hundred-mile radius had been drafted.

Watching this cinematic display of power, Vivienne felt a cold sweat drench her spine.

They were absolutely hell-bent on saving Willow, no matter the cost.

Though she couldn't fathom how a nobody like Willow commanded this level of rescue, Vivienne knew she had to get out of there—tonight.

Fortunately, she was already in town. She just needed to follow her original escape route, though she had to drastically accelerate the timeline.

But there was one massive problem: she had no way to explain this to Julian Sinclair.

Before she left, she had boldly promised him results, banking on this trip to turn her life around. Now, it was a total disaster. Given the freezing tension between her and Julian, returning empty-handed would guarantee his wrath.

Making a split-second, desperate decision, Vivienne ripped off her jacket and threw herself bodily into a thick patch of thorny brush. By the time she crawled out, she was covered in bloody scratches, faking an injury to cover her tracks.

Back in Shadow Creek Grotto, the rain had finally stopped, and Willow and Leo began their blind search for the exit.

Staring into the labyrinth of jagged rocks and pitch-black diverging tunnels, Leo felt completely hopeless. "Boss, there are so many tunnels, and all these walls feel exactly the same. How are we supposed to figure this out?"

Willow stepped forward, running her fingers over a faint sliver of light filtering through a crack in the rock, then glanced down at the shallow water trails on the ground. She immediately formulated a plan. "Don't panic. There's a logic to this."

"After a massive downpour, the runoff always flows downhill. Wherever the water goes, it's bound to lead to an opening, an exit connecting to the outside."

Using the subtle environmental clues, Willow bypassed the suffocating dead ends. She navigated with precision, following the faintest glow of light on the walls and the continuous trickle of water at their feet. Her pace was steady and unhurried; every judgment she made was dead-on, entirely devoid of the frantic panic of blind guessing.

Leo stuck close behind her. Watching her deduce their way out with nothing but water trails and ambient light, the tight knot in his chest dissolved, replaced by absolute awe.

Within minutes, the claustrophobic tunnel suddenly widened. A rush of cool night air and sweeping illumination slammed into them. The sealed mouth of the cave lay open right before their eyes.

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Leo's jaw practically hit the floor.

That actually worked?

He legitimately wondered if Willow had secretly starred in some hardcore wilderness survival reality show.

But before he could ask, both of them froze, utterly paralyzed by the scene unfolding before them.

Deep inside the sealed abyss of the cave, the layers of rock had blocked out everything. They had been completely oblivious to the chaos outside. But now, standing on the open ridge, an overwhelming ocean of light flooded their vision, so blindingly bright they had to shield their eyes.

Beneath the heavy night sky, the entire sprawling mountain range was illuminated by countless high-intensity searchlights. Brilliant beams crisscrossed, violently tearing apart the darkness.

A massive swarm of search drones hovered in the air, locked in rigid tactical formations. Their blinking signal lights wove together, creating a breathtaking sea of stars against the blackness.

Heavy rescue machinery and mobile floodlights lined the winding mountain paths, forming a glowing perimeter...

This wasn't a search; this was a carpet-bombing rescue operation that completely shattered the definition of standard emergency response. It certainly shattered Willow and Leo's comprehension.

Leo stared in a trance, his pupils trembling. It took him a long time to find his voice, which came out as a bewildered whisper. "Is... is all this for us?"

Willow gazed at the staggering grid of lights and the endless fleet above. She was equally stunned, but her mind remained sharp. "I think so."

Out here in the middle of nowhere, in the dead of night, no one would mobilize this kind of apocalyptic manpower and astronomical budget unless they were specifically looking for them.

As for who possessed this kind of power, it wasn't hard to guess.

The sheer scale of this armada, the millions of dollars burned in a single night—out of everyone they knew, the only person with both the god-like resources and the motive to tear the world apart looking for them was Silas Thorne.

Leo obviously arrived at the same conclusion. Unaware of the intimate history between Willow and Silas, he simply assumed the CEO was fiercely protective of his employees. Overcome with immense gratitude, he murmured, "I had no idea Mr. Thorne valued us this much. Sending out a tactical fleet in the middle of a hurricane just to find us... I swear, I am going to work my fingers to the bone for you and Mr. Thorne!"

Truthfully, Willow hadn't expected it either.

Standing bathed in the brilliant light, she didn't say a word. She just quietly watched the drones hovering in the sky and the search beams sweeping across the peaks.

She had figured Silas would send a team to look for her. She just never fathomed he would go to these absolute extremes.

Meanwhile, at the command center, Silas finally received the update: the tactical team had locked onto Willow and Leo's coordinates.

The second the news hit, he didn't hesitate for a fraction of a second. His voice was a lethal command as he ordered his chopper into the air immediately. And he added one non-negotiable condition: he was going with them.

Hearing this, Arthur's heart lurched.

He knew Silas was deeply invested in Willow, but he had never imagined it ran this dangerously deep. Insisting on flying into a treacherous mountain zone in the immediate aftermath of a severe storm meant he was completely disregarding his own life.

Arthur was his right-hand man, but he also bore the responsibility of safeguarding the entire Thorne empire. Trying to be the voice of reason, he pleaded, "Mr. Thorne, since we have their location, please wait here. Let the extraction team bring them back. You'll see her soon enough."

But Silas shut him down with a single, ice-cold sentence: "Everything else is negotiable. This is not."

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Fifteen minutes later, Silas's chopper arrived at Willow and Leo's coordinates.

A fleet of private helicopters tore through the clouds, hovering majestically over the desolate woodland. The massive rotors whipped up gale-force winds, flattening the surrounding trees and grass in a terrifying display of raw power.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the clearing, Willow and Leo tilted their heads back, staring in sheer shock at the choppers suspended directly above them.

Deploying this many helicopters simultaneously was a staggering financial burn. It was glaringly obvious that Silas had spared zero expense to save them. Leo couldn't help but do the mental math, trying to calculate how many lifetimes he'd have to work to pay off the cost of this rescue.

Soon, the lead helicopter slowly descended. The instant the cabin doors slid open, a tall, commanding figure stepped out. Dressed in an impeccably tailored dark suit, the man moved with a dominant, predatory grace, entirely unfazed by the chaotic elements. An aura of absolute, bone-chilling authority radiated from him.

One glance was all it took for Willow and Leo to recognize Silas Thorne. They both froze in their tracks.

The sheer scale of the rescue was already beyond comprehension, but to think Silas had personally come out here?

In this kind of weather, in this godforsaken place—he had actually shown up.

And wasn't he supposed to be in Seattle for a major conference right now?

Leo was genuinely blown away. Was he truly that vital to Silas Thorne? He couldn't resist looking over at the billionaire, hoping to find validation in his eyes. Sadly, he found absolutely nothing.

Because from the second Silas stepped off that chopper, his dark, intense gaze was locked exclusively on Willow. The chaotic swarm of mercenaries and the deafening roar of the rotors simply ceased to exist for him. He moved fast and with lethal intent, marching directly toward Willow with long, powerful strides that betrayed his frantic, desperate relief.

Reaching her, he didn't utter a single syllable. He simply reached out and yanked her fiercely against his chest.

The sudden, crushing embrace sent a jolt straight through Willow's heart. Startled, her first instinct wasn't to push him away.

Because in that exact moment, she realized how desperately she needed comfort—especially his.

When she had been trapped in the dark, held at the mercy of thugs and abandoned to die, she had violently repressed her terror, remaining cold and analytical to lead Leo out alive. But the second she laid eyes on Silas, the second his strong arms locked securely around her, all her hardened armor shattered into a million pieces. A lump formed in her throat, and the dam of her suppressed emotions finally broke.

Willow couldn't even explain it herself, but the tears just fell.

For Silas, it was the exact opposite. From the moment he received the call that she had been kidnapped, his nerves had been pulled taut over a razor's edge. His heart had been trapped in a suffocating free-fall, practically stopping in his chest.

It wasn't until this very second, physically feeling her warmth, wrapping his arms around her solid, breathing body and confirming she was safe, that his suspended heart finally crashed back into his ribs and began to beat again.

Standing just a few feet away, Leo took in the emotional reunion, completely overwhelmed by gratitude and awe.

In his mind, Silas was the ultimate, benevolent boss. To launch an apocalyptic rescue mission just for him and Willow was one thing, but to immediately offer a consoling hug the moment they were safe? That was next-level leadership.

Warmth flooded his chest, and he began mentally rehearsing the profound, tear-jerking speech he would deliver when it was his turn to receive Mr. Thorne's comforting embrace.

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But a second later, Silas merely threw a cool, dismissive nod in his direction as a greeting. His expression was utterly detached—exactly how he always looked at Leo, entirely devoid of the raw intensity he had just showered on Willow.

Then, without warning, Silas bent down and effortlessly scooped Willow into his arms. He didn't spare Leo another glance as he turned and carried her straight onto the helicopter, his strides long and purposeful.

Leo was left standing alone in the clearing, staring blankly at their retreating figures. He stood frozen in the howling wind, looking hilariously pathetic and deeply awkward.

Arthur materialized perfectly on cue, wearing a sympathetic, professional smile. "Manager Yardley, you've been through a horrific ordeal tonight. I'm so sorry you had to endure this."

Leo snapped out of it, offering a painfully awkward, forced smile.

Seeing this, Arthur smoothly covered for Silas. "Please don't take it personally. Mr. Thorne didn't mean to ignore you. When he found out you were trapped in that cave, he was out of his mind with worry. He's just concerned Director Horgan might be injured, and since she's a woman, he wanted to prioritize getting her out of the cold. He didn't have time for pleasantries, but I assure you, he cares deeply."

Within a few sentences, Leo's embarrassment vanished. He fully bought into the narrative that Silas valued him. After all, you didn't just casually experience a tactical military rescue on a Tuesday.

He quickly shook his head. "No, no, I totally get it. I'm not offended at all. Mr. Thorne went to unbelievable lengths to save us tonight. I couldn't be more grateful."

"I'm just glad you're safe," Arthur smiled, gesturing toward another chopper. "Please, follow me. Let's not linger out here. It's too remote and dangerous. You can ride back with me in the second chopper."

Reminded of his exhaustion, Leo felt the physical toll of the night crash into him. He nodded eagerly and followed Arthur aboard.

The chopper lifted off smoothly, flying steadily toward their destination.

Inside the insulated, quiet cabin, the tension finally drained out of them. Arthur, sharp as a tack, needed to know exactly what had gone down. He gently prodded Leo to explain the timeline of the ambush and their time in the cave.

Having bottled up a night's worth of pure terror and rage, Leo was more than happy to vent. He spilled everything without hesitation. From Vivienne's constant, petty sabotage on the road, to the suspected chemical incapacitation at dinner, to waking up bound and abandoned in a pitch-black abyss, he laid out every damning detail for Arthur.

When he got to the drugging, though, he clarified that it was just his and Willow's theory, as they had zero hard evidence.

Arthur listened in dead silence, his face growing darker by the second as he mentally cataloged every piece of information.

He asked Leo why he was so certain Vivienne was the mastermind. Was it simply a case of corporate sabotage because she wanted a piece of this project?

Leo shook his head. He leaned in a little closer, fully intending to spill the tea about Vivienne and Julian's relationship. But at the last second, he bit his tongue. That was Willow's private business, and it wasn't his place to broadcast it. If anyone was going to tell them, it should be Willow.

So, despite desperately wanting to expose the drama, he held back and instead rattled off a list of Vivienne's other toxic traits.

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Fifteen minutes later, they touched down. They were back at Mayor Henderson's residence, which had been converted into a temporary command post.

The sky was still suffocated by a heavy gray gloom; dawn had yet to tear through the night. But the courtyard was entirely ablaze with light. Emergency floodlights and heavy-duty work lamps bathed the entire property in a blinding, daytime brilliance.

The yard was packed with people. On one side stood Willow's Merit Biotech colleagues. Having already witnessed Silas's terrifying wrath earlier, they stood rigid, their eyes wide with exhaustion and residual horror.

On the other side stood the tactical strike team Silas had flown in overnight. They stood tall and imposing, radiating an icy, lethal discipline. The air around them was so oppressively cold that no one dared make a sound.

Long story short, when Willow returned, she stepped into an atmosphere thick enough to cut with a knife.

The chopper landed, and Silas reached out to carry her again, but Willow instinctively shrank back.

Doing that on the mountain was one thing—there were barely any people around, and she had still been in shock. But doing it here, in front of a massive crowd? Especially when she wasn't physically hurt? It was totally unnecessary.

"I'm fine, really. I can walk."

But Silas was having absolutely none of it. His arm slid seamlessly around her waist and under her knees, and with unyielding dominance, he swept her off her feet. His grip was gentle but offered zero room for negotiation as he marched her straight toward the house.

Left with no choice, Willow buried her face against his broad shoulder, desperately trying to become invisible.

Just as they stepped inside, Arthur and Leo arrived on the second chopper.

Arthur immediately addressed the crowd, thanking everyone for their assistance that night, emphasizing that without them, Willow and Leo wouldn't have been rescued so quickly. He then smoothed over the tension: "Everyone, you can relax now. Director Horgan is back safe. Please return to your normal duties. There's no need to stand out here in the cold."

Then, he turned to the mayor. "Thank you for coordinating with us tonight, Mayor Henderson. Please, go get some rest. You shouldn't stay up any longer."

Mayor Henderson was terrified and guilt-ridden. They had vanished from his property; he bore responsibility for that. But given the circumstances—that everyone had been drugged—he had been completely powerless to stop it.

Yet he didn't dare waste their time with excuses. He knew instantly that these men were apex predators he could not afford to cross—especially the billionaire who had just carried Willow inside.

Silas possessed a bone-deep, aristocratic superiority. Cold, aloof, and utterly dominating, he commanded total submission without saying a word, suffocating everyone in his presence.

So, the mayor kept it brief. "I am incredibly sorry that this happened under my roof. Truly, my deepest apologies. If there is absolutely anything else you need, please just say the word. I won't hesitate."

Seeing the sheer panic on the older man's face, Arthur nodded, his demeanor shifting to polite diplomacy. "You're being too hard on yourself, Mayor Henderson. This was a premeditated attack by an outside party. It is not your fault."

Arthur paused, his gaze sweeping over the freshly cleaned courtyard and the hastily cleared rooms. He added sincerely, "We've intruded on your village enough today, and we ask for your continued patience. We still have to wrap up the project, so we'll likely be staying a few more days. We appreciate your hospitality."

"Of course, of course!" the mayor rushed to say. "Whatever you need, just give the order!"

Arthur exchanged a few more brief pleasantries before excusing himself. He had far more critical matters to attend to.

Inside the bedroom, Silas hadn't spoken more than three words since he walked through the door. Honestly, he had been exactly the same on the helicopter. He maintained an absolute, brooding silence, but his dark, piercing eyes remained rigidly fixated on Willow, entirely unwilling to let her out of his sight.

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"Are you hurt?" As soon as the words left his mouth, he reached out to examine her condition himself.

He gently pinched her cheeks, scanning her face from top to bottom. Then he checked her eyes, ears, and nose, not missing a single detail.

Once he confirmed her face was uninjured, he asked her to open her mouth, carefully inspecting her oral cavity and teeth.

Willow obediently complied throughout the entire process. But when he asked her to take off her jacket and roll up her pant legs for a further check, she hesitated.

She felt it was unnecessary, and having him examine her body felt a bit too intimate.

Silas did not overthink it. Assuming she was just cold, he turned to shut the door tightly, moved her away from the draft, and said softly, "Be good. Let me take a look; it will be quick. It was pouring out there, and you were exposed for so long. I will not have any peace of mind until I see for myself."

Seeing his earnest demeanor, Willow felt she was overthinking things. His expression was calm and composed, radiating nothing but pure concern. She relented and took off her jacket.

Silas carefully inspected her arms. After confirming there were no scrapes or bruises, he gently rolled up her pant legs.

Although Willow had silently agreed, she still felt awkward and flushed under his intense, focused gaze. Her bare skin was exposed to the cool air and his piercing eyes. Her ears burned slightly as she whispered, "Are you done?"

The moment the words left her lips, the man's demeanor shifted drastically.

The calm in his dark eyes instantly vanished, replaced by a heavy, somber shadow, carrying an uncontrollable, freezing intensity.

Confused, Willow followed his gaze and noticed the chaotic, crisscrossing scars on her calves. Given her frantic escape, such injuries had been completely unavoidable.

She shifted her legs, trying to cover them. "It is nothing. Just some minor scratches. It does not matter."

She reached out to pull her pant legs down, wanting to hide the unsightly marks.

But Silas's fingers lightly blocked her hand, firmly stopping her movements. He refused to let her hide.

His gaze swept over her calves inch by inch. The longer he looked, the colder his eyes became. He found several more hidden, tiny cuts concealed in the folds of her skin that were impossible to notice without a close inspection.

Seeing his expression, Willow thought he was going to lose his temper. Instead, after a long silence, he simply asked, "Does it hurt?"

Willow shook her head, then nodded. She knew he would not believe her if she claimed it was completely painless, so she opted for a middle ground. "Just a little."

Hearing this, Silas did not say another word. He simply leaned over, placed his hands firmly under her arms, and effortlessly lifted her up like a child, placing her on the adjacent bed. Then, he began to take off her shoes.

For a moment, Willow was stunned and incredibly embarrassed. The last time she had been carried like this was by Martha Mercer when she was a little girl. She had not experienced anything like it in years.

"Sit here and do not move. I am going to get the first-aid kit," Silas said.

Still reeling from his unexpected action, Willow did not argue and just obediently nodded.

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Silas quickly returned, carrying a sleek, well-organized first-aid kit. He crouched down and began applying ointment to her wounds with gentle, deliberate movements.

He opened the ointment and gauze, meticulously cleaning the cuts before slowly applying the medicine. His technique was practiced and precise, clearly demonstrating a high level of expertise. However, Willow noticed a faint, almost imperceptible tremor in his steady fingers.

Watching his focused profile, Willow felt a mix of admiration and awe. "How do you know how to do all this?"

Was there anything in the world this man could not do?

Without stopping his movements, Silas replied evenly, "I received special training when I was young."

Children born into the pinnacle of high society were never just taught academics and business. First aid, survival skills, wound care, and wilderness rescue were all drilled into their instincts through rigorous, hands-on training by private experts.

Intrigued, Willow asked, "What else did you learn when you were young?"

"First aid, self-defense, horseback riding, driving, foreign languages, history, the arts, business... basically anything you can think of, I learned it."

Silas spoke casually, as if listing items on a grocery list, but Willow was absolutely stunned. "That much? You must have had an exhausting childhood."

"It was alright. I got used to it." Being born into a family like his came with heavy responsibilities. Silas did not feel burdened by it; he enjoyed the privileges his family provided, so he naturally fulfilled the obligations that came with them.

Silas had no desire to dwell on the topic. He gently patted her leg, gesturing for her to pull her pants up a little higher so he could apply the ointment more easily.

Willow complied. Her eyes fell on his hands again, and she grew even more puzzled when she noticed the slight trembling had not stopped.

Logically, someone with such masterful, practiced skills would have steady hands and a calm heart. Why were his fingertips shaking while applying the medicine?

She could not help but ask, "If you are so professional, why are your hands shaking?"

Hearing this, Silas paused. He finally looked up, his deep eyes locking onto hers. His voice was low, resolute, and laced with a unique blend of emotion and restraint. "Technique and professionalism are a result of practice."

"But the trembling is because it is you. If it were anyone else, my hands would not shake at all."

Let alone anyone else, even if he were treating his own wounds, he would not flinch.

Willow lowered her eyelashes, not fully grasping the profound meaning behind his words. She assumed her bruised and battered skin was simply too shocking and had unnerved him. She stayed quiet, watching silently as Silas meticulously applied the ointment and bandaged her wounds.

It was not until the dressing was completely finished that Willow spoke up again, ready to explain the events leading up to her ordeal. But Silas stopped her, telling her not to dwell on it for now. The most important thing was for her to get some proper rest.

Willow still felt uneasy. "But if I do not tell you, I am afraid you will not have any leads to investigate."

"What, you do not trust me?" Silas frowned slightly.

"That is not it," Willow replied. She would never doubt the capabilities of a man who could mobilize such a massive rescue operation. "I just wanted to provide more clues."

"I care far more about your safety than any clues. Even if we need to discuss it, I want to wait until you have slept." Willow might not have realized her current state, but Silas saw it with absolute clarity.

Her nerves were strung incredibly tight, and she was in a state of heightened hyperarousal. Although she was speaking normally and thinking clearly, the undeniable exhaustion in her eyes gave her away. She was holding herself together by sheer willpower.

She was clearly drained to the bone, yet she refused to let her guard down for even a second.

Silas did not want her to be like this. At least in front of him, she did not need to be so strong.

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Willow wanted to say more, but Silas gently interrupted her. "Be good and get some sleep. I will handle everything. Just rest, and everything will be fine when you wake up."

Those words worked like magic, especially coming from him. The chaotic panic and lingering fear in Willow's heart were instantly soothed.

Her previously restless mind settled into a calm stillness. She nodded, stopped overthinking, and obediently closed her eyes, sinking into a peaceful silence.

He had it all under control.

He would solve it.

Willow was genuinely exhausted, and with the residual effects of the chemical incapacitation in her system, her eyelids grew heavier. A sweeping wave of drowsiness engulfed her, and she soon drifted off, her breathing turning soft and rhythmic.

Silas sat quietly by the bed, neither moving nor making a sound to disturb her. He simply watched her in absolute silence.

As the light shifted outside the window, he kept his gaze fixed on her peaceful sleeping face. His usually cold and sharp features softened completely, his eyes brimming with deep tenderness and an unspoken heartache as he silently stood guard over her.

An unknown amount of time passed before the phone beside him vibrated softly, breaking the quiet of the room.

Silas looked down and picked it up. It was a message from Arthur Vance, briefly informing him that they had a lead on the day's events.

He stood up slowly, his movements careful and deliberate, terrified of waking her.

Before walking out the door, he casually glanced at the time on his phone, suddenly realizing he had been sitting by her bed, completely immobile, for three solid hours.

As soon as he stepped outside, Arthur reported to him. "Mr. Thorne, we have basically figured out what happened. But the rain was too heavy, and this area is far too remote. The perpetrators covered their tracks well; there is practically no hard evidence left."

Silas gave a curt nod, his expression unreadable. He was a ruthless and decisive man, but never arrogant. Given the difficult circumstances, Arthur and his team had done an exceptional job piecing the timeline together so quickly.

Besides, when Silas wanted something done, he never needed anything as trivial as evidence.

He parted his lips, his voice as cold as ice, devoid of any warmth. "Move on them directly. Every grievance Willow suffered, every hardship she endured, Vivienne must experience exactly the same. Not a fraction less."

Arthur looked troubled and chose his words carefully. "Mr. Thorne, the target left the area early. Based on the route, she should be on her way back to New York City by now."

A sudden, violent darkness surged in Silas's eyes, cold and piercing. He did not hesitate for a second. "Then drag her back."

Arthur was stunned, completely unprepared for such a drastic command. He gently reminded him, "Mr. Thorne, we still have an ongoing partnership with the Sinclair Group."

Silas did not care in the slightest. "Canceling a partnership takes just one word. You can start reviewing the breach of contract clauses right now."

"But she is technically part of the Sinclair Group. From what I understand, she is the adopted daughter of the Sinclair family."

Hearing this, Silas raised an eyebrow. "Do you honestly think I care about that? Even if she were a biological Sinclair, what difference would it make?"

"Uh..." Arthur was at a loss for words. His concerns were based on practical considerations. While breaking ties would not severely impact the Thorne family's empire, it would undoubtedly cause a headache if the senior board members found out.

In the past, Silas would have taken such advice into consideration. But this time, he was entirely deaf to reason.

Arthur was out of options and tried to find another angle, but Silas was no longer listening. He noticed the lights flick on in Willow's room nearby. Assuming she had woken up, he cut the conversation short. "Enough. The decision is final."

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When Silas entered the room, he saw that Willow was indeed awake.

She had not gotten out of bed and was still wearing the clothes she had fallen asleep in. Her long hair cascaded loosely over her shoulders, framing her delicate collarbones. She sat quietly at the edge of the bed, her expression gentle and silent, looking so incredibly docile it made his heart melt.

Silas approached her, subconsciously lowering his voice. "Why didn't you call me when you woke up?"

"I just woke up," Willow replied, her voice soft and sweet.

Silas felt his chest tighten with affection. He closed the distance, reaching out to feel her forehead. "Not bad. You do not have a fever. Do you feel unwell anywhere else?"

Willow shook her head.

"Are you hungry? I can have someone bring you some food."

It was already late morning, and over ten hours had passed since her last meal. Reminded of this, Willow realized she was genuinely famished.

Silas noticed her reaction and asked before she could speak, "What do you want to eat?"

"Anything is fine, as long as it is a little light."

"Alright."

Silas turned and stepped out to give a few instructions before quickly returning.

A short while later, the food arrived. It consisted of oatmeal, simple side dishes, and soft, steamed sandwiches. In a remote place like this, it was the best meal money could buy.

As Willow ate, Silas stayed right beside her, quietly watching her. His gaze remained fixed on her, carefully observing her condition. When he saw that she had a decent appetite and managed to finish the entire breakfast, the knot of tension in his chest finally unraveled.

He waited until she was completely finished before bringing up business. "I will help you pack in a bit. We are heading back to New York City today."

Willow looked up in surprise. "Today? So soon?"

Soon?

Silas felt it was not soon enough. The moment he learned she had been in danger here, he wanted nothing more than to whisk her away instantly.

But he noticed the trace of regret in her eyes, assuming she was worried about abandoning her research project. He explained patiently, "You do not need to worry about the rest of the research. I will have another team take over. All the data and records will be compiled and sent to you once you are back in New York City. It will be exactly the same as if you finished it yourself."

As if needing to clarify his stance, Silas added, "You know the only reason I let you come here in the first place was under the assumption that you would be safe. That condition has been broken. It is not safe here, and I absolutely cannot let you stay and take any more risks."

He was right, and everything he said was out of concern for her well-being. Willow knew she was in the wrong here and had no grounds to argue.

She agreed to return, but she wanted to negotiate the timeline just a little.

"I know I was in the wrong this time, and I am sorry for making you worry, so I agree to go back to New York City. But could we push the departure back just a little? Maybe leave in two days?"

Silas's expression shifted slightly. "Why?"

"I still have a personal matter to wrap up," Willow explained softly, a warm glow in her eyes. "You know Ethan, our main subject for this research. I promised him I would spend these last two days with him and finish a few things we agreed on. Just two more days to tie up loose ends, and then I will leave immediately. Is that okay?"

"Ethan?" Silas searched his memory. He vaguely recalled her mentioning the boy, but he had not paid much attention to him.

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Seeing that Silas was wavering, Willow quickly pressed her advantage. "Yes, I told you about him. He is incredibly sweet; you will definitely like him when you meet him. He has had such a hard life, dealing with this illness. He has been different from everyone else since the day he was born. Please, just let me stay two more days. Okay?"

Silas frowned. He did not care about any of that. Whether the kid was sweet or tragic meant absolutely nothing to him.

His mind was entirely consumed by the deadly dangers she had faced the day before. His only desire was to drag her away from this perilous place immediately; he had zero mental bandwidth for a random child.

Silas pressed his lips together, fully intending to refuse. But as he looked down, he met Willow's gaze.

She was looking up at him with wide, glassy eyes, filled with a pitiful, pleading vulnerability. There was no stubborn demanding, just a quiet, gentle, and utterly sincere hope that he would say yes.

It was a look he simply could not refuse.

He could not bring himself to do it.

The standoff lasted less than three seconds before he finally caved, a hint of helpless compromise in his tone. "Just this once. Two days is my absolute limit."

Willow's eyes immediately curved into bright crescents, sparkling with delight. She nodded eagerly. "Okay! Thank you! Two days is all I need. I promise I will not ask for a single minute more, and we will leave right after."

Silas was entirely at her mercy. "But I have conditions. First, you must undergo a complete physical examination. You can only stay if the doctor explicitly clears you. Second, I am staying here for these two days, and we leave together when you are done."

Willow had no objections to the first condition, but the second one made her pause. "If you stay here for two days, what about all your meetings?"

She knew exactly how demanding his schedule was. Back at the Sinclair Group, his meetings ran back-to-back all day long.

"I will cancel them," Silas replied without a shred of hesitation. If he could not cancel them, he would take them remotely.

"Maybe you should just..."

"If you want to stay here, I am staying with you."

He left zero room for negotiation. Willow had no choice but to nod in agreement. Regardless, he had agreed to her terms, so she knew when to quit while she was ahead.

Once they reached an agreement, Silas called his personal doctor in to examine her. He only breathed a sigh of relief after the doctor confirmed she was perfectly fine.

With permission granted, Willow excitedly changed her clothes and got ready to leave.

This time, their group consisted of her, Leo Yardley, and Silas.

The three of them quickly arrived at Ethan's house. Ethan was sitting obediently on a small stool, holding a notebook and mumbling to himself. It looked like he was memorizing English vocabulary.

Hearing footsteps, he immediately looked up. His clear, bright eyes first landed on the familiar faces of Willow and Leo, then shifted to the man standing behind them.

The man was tall and exuded an air of overwhelming nobility. Dressed in simple, dark clothing, his aura was chillingly arrogant, his deep eyes aloof and distant. He radiated an unapproachable energy, his handsome face set in severe, humorless lines.

He was an intimidating stranger with a terrifyingly cold presence.

Ethan was naturally timid around strangers, but he immediately stood up, bowed slightly, and said, "Hello, Willow. Hello, Leo. Hello, Mr. Thorne."

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This was the first time Silas had ever laid eyes on Ethan.

The moment he saw the boy, a flash of genuine shock rippled through him.

Prior to this, he had only heard fleeting mentions of this disease from Willow or read brief, clinical summaries in the news. He knew these patients suffered immensely, but he had never witnessed it firsthand.

Seeing it in person was infinitely more devastating than simply hearing about it.

The boy's fragile frame could not even fill out his loose clothing; he looked so terribly thin that a strong gust of wind might blow him over. His inability to stand up straight, the faint scars mapping his face, and the undeniable timidity and gentleness in his eyes—every detail hit Silas hard. A man accustomed to the ruthless slaughter of the business world and the glittering vanity of high society found his heart inexplicably sinking, his brows furrowing tightly.

Fate had shown this child zero mercy.

Because of that, even though he was slightly annoyed by the boy's choice of greeting, he kept his mouth shut.

Calling Willow by her first name, but addressing him as Mr. Thorne? It made him sound like an entirely different generation.

But Silas was not about to bicker with a sick child. He swallowed his petty annoyance and offered the polite, obedient boy a courteous nod. "Hello."

Although Silas had deliberately tried to soften his tone, his overpowering aura still sucked the air out of the room, plunging the space into a heavy, tense silence.

Leo Yardley, ever the observant assistant, wisely kept his eyes down and his mouth shut, fading into the background to minimize his own existence.

Willow easily picked up on the awkward shift in the atmosphere and stepped forward to mediate. "This is Silas, my boss. He tagged along to see you today."

Hearing himself reduced to just a boss again, Silas wanted to groan. Was he really just a boss?

A flicker of invisible frustration and helpless dissatisfaction crossed his eyes. But Willow was entirely oblivious, her attention entirely focused on Ethan. "How have your studies been going these past two days?"

At Willow's question, the nervousness in Ethan's eyes melted away. His bright eyes filled with earnest determination as he nodded vigorously. "I have been good! I have been memorizing vocabulary and doing my practice questions every day, using the method you taught me. I have just been waiting for you to come over and check my work."

The boy's voice was soft, laced with a fragile, hopeful anticipation.

A wave of warmth flooded Willow's heart. Her eyes curved into a sweet smile as she gently praised him. "That is amazing. I knew I could count on you. You are so disciplined; I bet you did a fantastic job."

Basking in her praise, a faint smile ghosted across Ethan's pale face, lighting up his features.

But a moment later, the light in his eyes dimmed as his thoughts shifted. He hesitated for a few seconds before asking, his voice trembling with tentative worry, "Willow, are you okay? I heard some bad things happened in the village, but my parents would not tell me anything. They said I am just a kid and do not need to know. But I was so worried about you."

Looking at the pure, genuine concern in the boy's eyes, Willow felt incredibly touched. She gently ruffled his soft hair. "Do not worry, I am perfectly fine. I ran into a tiny bit of trouble earlier, but it is completely resolved now. Everything is absolutely fine."

"Really?" Ethan pressed, still not entirely convinced.

"Of course it is true," Willow smiled, her tone firm and soothing. "Look at me, I am standing right here, safe and sound, aren't I? There is no need to worry about me."

With that, she sat down on the cushion beside Ethan, pulling out the study materials she had prepared for him. She patiently opened the books, carefully explaining the concepts he had missed, word by word.

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Her voice was soft and gentle, her explanations clear and easy to understand. Whenever Ethan struggled with a concept, she patiently broke it down, guiding him step by step without a single hint of frustration.

After the tutoring session, she asked about his recent physical condition and symptoms, gently reminding him of various details he needed to watch out for.

Throughout the entire visit, Silas sat quietly off to the side, silently observing her interaction with Ethan. Although his face remained an impassive mask, a storm of emotions surged within him, his understanding of her deepening profoundly.

He had seen countless people in high positions, swimming in wealth and power.

Whether they were corporate elites, wealthy aristocrats, or high-society figures dabbling in charity and field research, they all carried an innate sense of superiority. Even when they doled out kindness or helped the less fortunate, their arrogant detachment always bled through. Their charity was always tainted with a condescending pity, radiating a deliberate, performative savior complex.

But Willow was entirely different.

She genuinely lowered herself to connect with this boy who was ravaged by illness. She was endlessly patient, incredibly gentle, and meticulously attentive.

She displayed zero condescension, no forced pity, and absolutely no wealthy superiority.

Her gentleness was not an act, and her kindness was not a show. It was a pure, unadulterated goodness radiating from her very bones. She truly ached for Ethan and genuinely prayed that this tragic boy would find peace, safety, and a path to recovery.

Silas quietly stared at Willow's soft profile, watching her patiently guide the boy. The icy edge in his eyes melted away completely, replaced by a profound, overwhelming tenderness.

In that moment, he saw her true heart clearer than ever before.

She was pure, gentle, and pristine, harboring the softest, most radiant kindness. She was so incredibly precious that it made his heart ache with affection.

They stayed at Ethan's house until noon before finally preparing to leave.

Before walking out the door, Willow told Ethan that she would be heading back to New York City in two days.

The light vanished from Ethan's clear eyes, replaced by an undeniable, heartbreaking reluctance. But he understood that Willow had her own life and had to leave eventually.

"Do not be sad," Willow coaxed softly. "Medical science is constantly advancing. There are already breakthroughs in targeted treatments for your condition. Things will definitely get better. Just keep up with your treatments, and one day, you will be completely cured."

"Once your health stabilizes, you have to try to step outside and see the world. There are mountains, oceans, fireworks, and so much beautiful scenery waiting for you."

Hearing this, a tiny spark of hope reignited in Ethan's eyes. He looked at her, tentative and nervous. "Willow, if I can ever go outside... can I come find you?"

Willow smiled brightly, nodding without hesitation. "Of course you can. I will be waiting for you anytime."

While their farewell was filled with bittersweet hope, a violently different scene was unfolding at a train station hundreds of miles away.

Vivienne had just stepped off the train, dragging her luggage as she headed toward her high-speed rail transfer. Suddenly, a group of massive, towering men swarmed her from all sides. Their movements were terrifyingly fast, their grip ruthless and brutal.

Before she could even scream, her arms were pinned behind her back. She was forcefully dragged and unceremoniously shoved into a waiting van parked nearby.

The van door slammed shut with a heavy thud. The entire ambush took mere seconds—clean, efficient, and merciless.

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The soundproof glass of the van severed all noise from the outside world, turning the cramped interior into an icy, suffocating cage.

Vivienne was pinned brutally against the backseat by two massive men in black suits. The rough ropes dug agonizingly into her wrists, and her expensive designer clothes were pulled into wrinkled ruins. She thrashed violently, twisting her shoulders like a madwoman. "Who the hell are you?! How dare you kidnap me?! Do you have any idea who I am?!"

Her screams echoed in the silence. No one answered.

She raised her voice, her tone sharp and shrill, screaming again. "Let me tell you, I am Vivienne from the Sinclair family! You must have a death wish to lay a hand on me! If you want to live, let me go right now! Otherwise, when my brother finds you, you will be dead meat!"

The threat hung in the air, met with dead silence.

The four men in black sat straight, radiating a cold, murderous aura. They remained entirely mute, their movements crisp and professional. They lacked the sloppy arrogance of street thugs; they were clearly highly trained operatives. They kept her limbs locked in a vice grip, completely ignoring her frantic roars, not even bothering to blink.

Their chilling silence only amplified Vivienne's terror. If they spoke, there would be room to negotiate. The absolute worst-case scenario was this terrifying silence—she had zero leverage and no idea what they wanted.

Realizing threats were useless, Vivienne immediately pivoted strategies. She stopped thrashing and softened her voice to a desperate plea. "Listen, guys, we don't have any bad blood. I know you are only doing this for the money. How about this? You let me go, and I will pay you whatever you were promised. No, wait—double! Triple! I will give you five times the amount! Just let me go."

Tears began streaming down her face, driven by genuine, primal fear. Her voice cracked, utterly pathetic and submissive. "Whatever you want—cash, diamonds, connections—I can get it for you! The Sinclair family has endless wealth. Name your price, and it is yours! As long as you let me walk away right now, I swear I will not retaliate!"

Still, silence.

The oppressive atmosphere of the van was broken only by her ragged, panicked breathing. Her desperate begging slammed against a wall of absolute ice, earning zero reaction.

Vivienne opened her mouth to plead again, but the man sitting beside her had finally lost his patience with her relentless crying. Before she could utter another syllable, he raised his hand and delivered a precise, swift strike to the back of her neck. "Shut up."

Vivienne let out a muffled groan. Her vision violently spun, and all sound and light were instantly snuffed out. Her body went limp as she was dragged down into an endless, suffocating darkness, slumping lifelessly against the seat.

An unknown amount of time later, a bone-chilling cold seeped through her clothes, violently yanking her back to consciousness from the chaotic void.

Vivienne's eyes snapped open. To her absolute horror, she realized they hadn't blindfolded her. They had made no effort to hide anything. They wanted her wide awake, staring her nightmare directly in the face, fully conscious of her own doom.

Fighting off the nauseating dizziness, Vivienne frantically scanned her surroundings.

The desolate wilderness, the gaping mouth of a deep cavern, the damp, rotting stone walls, and the jagged rocks and overgrown weeds near the entrance...

She knew exactly where she was.

It was Shadow Creek Grotto—the very same abandoned, terrifying cave she had personally scouted and selected when she orchestrated the chemical incapacitation and kidnapping of Willow and Leo Yardley.

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A massive wave of terror completely consumed her. The memories of how she had plotted to destroy them aggressively merged with her current, horrifying reality, grabbing her heart in a death grip.

"No... no!" She began shaking violently, instinctively kicking and thrashing her legs, her voice shrill with absolute panic. "Let me go! Don't take me in there! I am not going into that cave!"

The oppressive darkness, the claustrophobic space, and the eerie, suffocating deadness of the location terrified her beyond belief.

Driven mad by panic, she completely abandoned her pride and dignity. Looking up at the emotionless men, she forced a sultry, desperate tone, attempting to use seduction to buy her life. "Please, guys, I am begging you... let me go. I am gorgeous, I can give you a good time. I will do whatever you want. Just please, don't lock me in here, okay?"

She battered her eyelashes, putting on a pathetic, seductive display, hoping her body could be her ticket to survival.

But the men in black were like statues carved from ice. Their eyes were cold and dead, entirely unfazed by her desperate, pathetic attempts at seduction. Not a single muscle twitched in response.

And, of course, they did not stop dragging her for a second.

The leader of the group looked down at her miserable state. His voice was deep, mechanical, and entirely devoid of human emotion. "Ms. Sinclair, we are simply following orders."

Vivienne stiffened, her whole body freezing in terror. "Whose?! Who sent you?!"

The man stared down at her with absolute authority, enunciating every word to deliver the message perfectly. "The boss told us to pass on a message: Every ounce of darkness, fear, and suffering she endured, you must experience exactly the same. Without a single fraction spared."

The words struck Vivienne like a bolt of lightning, detonating in her brain.

In an instant, every shred of hope and confusion vanished. The brutal truth stared her right in the face.

It was Silas Thorne!

It had to be Silas!

He was doing this for Willow.

And honestly, no one else had the terrifying power and sheer audacity to snatch her off the streets in broad daylight with such absolute disregard for the consequences.

She opened her mouth to scream a string of curses, but before a single sound escaped, a blindfold was violently secured over her eyes. The next second, she was shoved mercilessly into the pitch-black abyss of the cave.

Her hands were bound, her vision was stolen, and the sound of receding footsteps echoed in the cavern, plunging her heart into absolute despair. When the footsteps finally faded away entirely, she was left to drown in the suffocating, infinite darkness.

Freezing water dripped steadily from the damp cave walls. The air was thick with the foul, suffocating stench of rotting wood, decaying leaves, and muddy decay. An icy wind howled from the depths of the cave, biting into her skin and making the hairs on her arms stand on end.

Leaning on her weak, trembling legs, she managed to force herself up. But she had no sense of direction and no way to find the exit. All she could do was stumble blindly in the dark.

Once, twice, three times...

Every frantic attempt to escape ended in absolute failure. Jagged rocks sliced open her forehead and cheeks. Warm blood slid down her face, blinding her further, dripping from her chin onto the cold, unforgiving ground.

Completely drained of all physical strength, she stumbled backward, her legs finally giving out. She collapsed heavily into the freezing mud.

Yet, even in the depths of this horrifying nightmare, she felt zero remorse.

Willow! It was all her fault! If it were not for her, she would never be in this living hell! She was supposed to be leaving this godforsaken place! But they dragged her back!

She would never, ever forgive her!

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Meanwhile, back in Mayor Henderson's house, Silas was gently and patiently changing Willow's bandages.

His long, elegant fingers gripped a sterile cotton swab, his movements unbelievably light as he meticulously cleaned the wounds and applied fresh ointment. He was incredibly restrained, terrified that applying even slightly too much pressure would hurt her, radiating nothing but pure, protective caution.

The room was completely silent, filled only with the faint, soothing scent of the medical ointment and the steady rhythm of their breathing. It was a picture of absolute tranquility.

Suddenly, Silas's phone, resting on the bedside table, lit up. He glanced at the caller ID, picked it up, and prepared to step out. "Wait for me a moment, I need to take this."

"Okay," Willow nodded.

Silas quickly returned. Willow looked up at him, noticing the sharp, cold edge to his expression. Piecing it together with the fragmented words she had overheard, she asked, "Is it about the kidnapping? Did you find something?"

Silas walked closer, his gaze softening as it landed on her delicate, gentle face. He did not hide anything, answering her openly. "Yes, we found her. My men intercepted her while she was on her way back to New York City."

They had briefly discussed the situation beforehand. Though they had not gone into extensive detail, both knew Vivienne was the mastermind behind the attack.

Willow fell silent for a few seconds, quickly processing the information before asking softly, "What are you going to do? We do not have any concrete evidence. Holding her accountable through official channels will be almost impossible."

Vivienne was exceptionally cunning and had left zero hard evidence behind. Even if everyone knew she was guilty, convicting her through normal legal means was a massive long shot.

But Silas's expression remained perfectly calm. His voice was indifferent yet radiating absolute authority and control. "It is very simple."

He paused, his lips parting to deliver a chilling, uncompromising verdict. "Whatever she did to you, I am doing to her."

The words left Willow entirely stunned. It was an easy thing to say, but she knew executing such a brutal retaliation required massive resources. Even though he never complained, and even though he was Silas Thorne, she knew this level of intervention came at a steep cost.

He had already mobilized a massive search and rescue operation to find her and Leo Yardley, burning through unimaginable resources. Now, he had intercepted Vivienne in record time and was preparing to expend even more manpower, money, and energy just to avenge her. Willow felt terrible; he was doing far too much for her.

She felt like a burden, constantly dragging him into her chaotic messes.

But Silas misinterpreted her quiet contemplation.

Seeing her cast her eyes downward, remaining completely silent, and remembering the boundless gentleness she had shown Ethan, a spike of anxiety pierced his chest.

She was so pure and kind-hearted. Unlike him, who had been forged in the ruthless, cutthroat fires of the business world, she might find his methods far too brutal and cold-blooded.

After a few seconds of heavy silence, Silas finally spoke, his voice carrying a rare, subtle trace of insecurity and muffled grievance. "What is wrong? Do you think I am being too harsh? Do you think I am a monster?"

Willow's head snapped up, her eyes wide with shock and confusion. She quickly shook her head, her gaze clear and entirely sincere. "How could I ever think you are too harsh? I am just worried about you."

She would never forget the sheer, suffocating terror of that cave for as long as she lived.

From the very beginning, Vivienne never intended to let her and Leo leave alive. The dark, damp, isolated cavern, the premeditated kidnapping—every single calculated step was designed to execute them.

If Silas had not arrived when he did, the outcome would have been unspeakable.

She owed Silas her absolute gratitude, but that did not erase her blazing hatred for Vivienne. Those were two entirely different things.

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"I'm just worried about you," Willow repeated. "So many things tangled together, time and time again. You've done so much for me, and I'm terrified this is going to drag you down."

Hearing those words, the tension holding Silas's heart hostage finally snapped. The lingering gloom in his eyes vanished entirely, replaced by a soft, spreading warmth.

He reached out, gently smoothing her hair. When he spoke, his tone held its usual unshakable composure, backed by absolute confidence. "Vivienne Sinclair is nothing. She couldn't affect me in the slightest. You don't need to worry about me."

Willow still frowned, the anxiety in her chest refusing to settle. She offered a serious warning. "But she has the Sinclair Group behind her, and Julian. The Sinclair family has deep roots in New York City, and Julian is fiercely protective of his own. If you cross them, it's bound to cause you endless trouble down the line."

Silas let out a low chuckle. His gaze was perfectly relaxed, exuding an effortless arrogance. "So what? I've never considered the Sinclair Group a threat."

Suddenly, as if a sour thought had crossed his mind, his brow furrowed. "Unless... you still have lingering feelings for him?"

That question struck Willow's absolute bottom line. She scowled instantly, her eyes flashing with unmistakable disgust and coldness. Her answer was sharp and decisive. "How could I? I feel nothing but revulsion for him."

If she had her way, she would gladly go the rest of her life without ever laying eyes on him again. She couldn't care less if he lived or died, let alone harbor any lingering affection.

Seeing the raw, unfiltered loathing in her eyes, Silas's mood instantly soared. The more she despised Julian, the happier he felt.

He knew his own mindset was terribly twisted and possessive, but he simply couldn't help it.

People always called him ruthless, a man with unfathomable depths, but only he knew the truth. When it came to Willow, he was paranoid, greedy, and constantly terrified of losing her.

He even harbored the selfish hope that she would sever ties with Julian completely and irrevocably. Only then could his heart find true peace and soaring joy.

"You don't need to do anything. Just trust me. That's enough," he promised her, seizing the moment to confirm her stance. "So, do you trust me?"

Willow nodded without a second of hesitation. "Of course. I trust you."

"Then that's all that matters."

Silas paused in thought before asking another question. "Did that Vivienne woman take such a reckless risk just because she lost the project to you?"

A wave of lingering dread tightened his chest, and his fingers subtly curled into fists. He wanted to uncover every single detail of Willow's past, refusing to overlook even the smallest clue.

This kidnapping had nearly cost him the person he cherished most. It was a suffocating wave of despair he never wanted to endure again. Therefore, the only way to permanently eliminate the threat was to dig up the root cause.

Willow gently shook her head, a trace of weary resignation washing over her delicate features. She knew perfectly well that Vivienne's actions went far beyond a simple professional defeat.

The grievances between them had piled up over the years, a tangled, messy web of hostility that far exceeded the bounds of a normal rivalry.

It was just such a complicated mess that she honestly didn't know where to begin.

Noticing her struggle, Silas immediately reined in his intense aura. He softened his voice and gently stroked her hair again, his eyes full of tender concern. "If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to. I won't ask."

He desperately wanted to know, but her comfort would always come first.

Willow shook her head again. But this time, all hesitation had faded from her eyes. She wasn't going to keep him in the dark anymore.

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Willow spoke slowly, her voice perfectly even. "She is Julian's adopted sister, the Sinclair family's ward, and practically his partner. They've been together for years, sharing a bed, and they even have a child together in secret. I am currently divorcing Julian."

As Willow laid out the twisted reality word by word, her mind was entirely anchored in the messy past, completely oblivious to the drastic shift in the man sitting beside her.

Silas hadn't absorbed a single detail of the Sinclair family's absurd drama. Other people's romantic entanglements meant absolutely nothing to him. But the moment the word "divorcing" hit his ears, it hijacked his entire being.

The air in the room seemed to freeze. A rush of pure heat surged straight to his head, his chest heaving as his temples pounded uncontrollably. His dark, fathomless eyes lit up with startling intensity. He stared fixedly at Willow, subconsciously holding his breath, terrified he had misheard her.

She... was divorcing Julian?

"You... are getting a divorce from Julian?" Silas forced himself to suppress his overwhelming emotions, his voice tight and raspy as he asked for confirmation.

Willow heard him and gave a small nod. "Yes."

With that final confirmation, every ounce of his lingering anxiety evaporated, replaced by an earth-shattering wave of ecstasy. Silas completely lost his ironclad self-control. "Good! That is absolutely wonderful!"

Hearing this, Willow looked up in sheer bewilderment. It was the first time she had ever seen this normally stoic, unreadable man display such explosive emotion.

And honestly, she didn't quite understand why he was so happy.

Catching her stunned expression, Silas snapped back to reality. He suddenly remembered that Julian was the man she had loved for years. Even if they were getting a divorce, she was likely still hurting.

He hastily shoved down the thrilling excitement threatening to burst from his chest, masking the blazing joy in his eyes. He offered a clumsy, half-hearted excuse. "I didn't mean it like that. I was just shocked, since you've never brought it up before."

In reality, that wasn't what he was thinking at all. He was soaring on cloud nine. This was, without a doubt, the greatest news he had heard in his thirty-four years of life.

If she hadn't been sitting right in front of him, Silas would have thrown his head back and laughed at the sky, popped open a few bottles of vintage liquor, and drank until he passed out.

Once he managed to steady his racing heart, he remembered the practicalities. "Divorce proceedings can be incredibly messy. Do you need my help?"

Willow firmly shook her head. She had already relied on him far too much. The previous incidents could loosely be tied to their work, but this was entirely her own personal battle. She refused to drag him into it.

Besides, even though they lost the first round, as long as the second-instance appeal followed standard legal procedures, they still had a very strong chance of winning.

Since she didn't want to elaborate, Silas didn't push. The news itself had already vastly exceeded his wildest expectations. As for everything else, he was more than happy to wait.

Fueled by sheer adrenaline, Silas didn't sleep a wink that night.

The next morning, long before dawn broke and the roosters even thought about crowing, he was already out of bed.

Since he was up so early with nothing to do, he took a leisurely stroll around the courtyard.

When he first arrived, one glance at this rustic environment had filled him with absolute disgust. The chickens, the dogs, the occasional pig squealing—it all grated on his nerves. Knowing Willow had been stuck here alone for so long had only made him angrier.

But walking through it now, everything felt entirely different.

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He actually found the quiet, huddled flock of chickens somewhat endearing. Buster, the stray dog napping by the door, looked docile and sweet. Even the faint grunts drifting from the distant pigpen felt like a charming slice of rustic life.

In just one night, his entire perspective had completely flipped.

Silas strolled leisurely through the yard, his features relaxed and at ease. Suddenly, a voice called out from behind him. "Mr. Thorne?"

He turned to see Arthur Vance and gave a brief nod.

Arthur was completely taken aback to run into his boss at this hour, especially wandering around a dirt yard. He clearly remembered Silas taking one look at the place upon arrival and scowling as if he wanted to burn it down. Where did this sudden leisurely mood come from?

He looked at him in shock. "Why are you up so early? The sun isn't even fully up yet."

Silas felt a brief flash of awkwardness at being caught, so he quickly threw out a casual excuse. "Getting a workout in."

Arthur nodded in understanding. He knew Silas maintained a strict fitness regimen. Being stranded in the backwoods without proper gym equipment meant walking was the only option left.

He decided not to intrude further. "Well, I'll leave you to it. Have a good morning."

"Right," Silas replied, stepping out of the small courtyard.

It was true what they said—when you're in a good mood, the whole world looks beautiful. He even found the wild weeds growing by the dirt road possessing a unique, rugged charm, so he stopped to pick a few small flowers.

Guessing Willow would be waking up soon, Silas finally headed back.

Carrying a tray of breakfast and the freshly picked wildflowers, he knocked on Willow's door. "Are you awake?"

A bright, clear voice immediately answered from inside.

Silas pushed the door open and walked in. "Wash up, then come eat."

Willow immediately noticed the small bundle of wildflowers in his hand. They were a delicate mix of pale pink, soft white, and pastel yellow. The petals were thin and fragile, still clinging to the cool morning dew. They weren't flashy, just gentle and elegant.

She couldn't help but smile. "Those are gorgeous. Did you pick them?"

Silas casually handed them to her. "Yeah. They looked clean enough."

Willow marveled at his attentiveness. She had been staying here for quite a while and had never noticed them, yet he spotted them on his very first morning.

Hearing her praise, Silas conveniently left out the fact that he had only just noticed them today, too.

He set the breakfast tray on the small table, smoothly changing the subject. "Come eat before it gets cold."

Silas stayed by her side the entire time she ate. Once she finished, he carefully examined and treated her wounds. By the time he was done, a full hour had passed.

Silas asked about their schedule for the day, wondering if they were heading to Ethan's house again, adding that he would come along.

At those words, Willow, who had been chatting happily, suddenly went quiet. A faint look of embarrassment crossed her face. "Um... I actually wanted to talk to you about that."

"Go ahead," Silas said, packing away the medical kit. His gaze settled on her face, his tone incredibly soft.

Willow hesitated. "It's just that, when we go to Ethan's today, could you maybe... stay behind?"

Silas's immediate reaction was to assume something was wrong. His expression instantly turned serious. "Why? Did something happen?"

"No, no, everything is perfectly fine," Willow quickly explained, seeing his concern. "It's just that... with you there, we feel a bit on edge."

It wasn't that she felt on edge—it was that Ethan was absolutely terrified of him.

Last night, right as Willow was drifting off to sleep, she got a call from Ethan using his dad's phone. He had asked in a tiny voice if the 'scary uncle' could please not come tomorrow, admitting he was afraid of him.

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Hearing her explanation, Silas frowned, but he easily guessed the real reason. "It's that little kid who's scared of me, isn't it?"

After all, when Silas was there yesterday, the boy hadn't dared to meet his eyes once, only speaking directly to Willow and Leo. Was he really that terrifying? He didn't think he looked like a monster. Besides, Silas was harboring his own little grudge.

Silas furrowed his brow. While he wasn't exactly furious, he clearly wasn't thrilled. "There's no reason for him to be scared. He called me Sir, and I didn't even do anything to him."

Willow had fully braced herself for him to get angry or offended. After all, a powerful CEO getting blatantly rejected by a child was bound to be embarrassing, which was why she had tiptoed around the subject.

But she never expected Silas's reaction to be... this.

Aggrieved? And a little helpless?

In Willow's eyes, Ethan hadn't done anything wrong. "Well, you are older, so it makes sense for a kid to call you Sir."

Logically, there was nothing wrong with it, but Silas absolutely hated the fact that the boy called Willow by her first name, yet addressed him with such formal distance.

"Then why does he get to be on a first-name basis with you?"

"Huh?" Willow was completely lost. The Silas sitting in front of her was acting nothing like his usual mature, composed self. If she wasn't mistaken, was he actually complaining? Over a title?

"Maybe... because you look more mature?" she offered tentatively.

Mature? Didn't that just mean old? Silas was immediately reminded of the ten-year age gap between them.

Perhaps because he finally saw a glimmer of hope with her, he was becoming increasingly paranoid and insecure.

"Do you think I'm old?" he asked point-blank.

Willow shook her head frantically. "No way! You're in your absolute prime. You're handsome, incredibly elegant, and the most striking man I've ever met. How could you possibly be old?"

Hearing those words, the corners of Silas's lips curled up in a genuine smile. He hadn't truly been angry to begin with, just momentarily caught in his own insecurities. Besides, he was in such a fantastic mood today that nothing could genuinely upset him.

"In that case, I'll stay behind."

His rapid change of heart caught Willow off guard. "You're really not coming?"

"Yeah. I'll stay here."

"You're not mad?"

"Why would I argue with a little kid?" Silas said with a light laugh. The only person whose opinion mattered to him was Willow, and her little speech had already sent him over the moon.

"Alright then. Leo and I will head out." Seeing that he was genuinely okay with it, Willow finally felt relieved enough to leave with Leo.

With his schedule suddenly cleared, Silas had plenty of time to work, so he called a remote meeting with his board of directors.

During meetings, Silas was notoriously strict and merciless. His sharp, predatory gaze would catch the slightest error, and he would dress down anyone who slipped up right on the spot. Because of this impromptu summons, everyone logging on was sweating bullets.

But once the video connected, they quickly realized this meeting was vastly different from the norm.

Just as the executives prepared to present their reports, a series of bright roosters crowing echoed through the speakers, followed seamlessly by the sharp barking of a dog, and finally, the undeniable squealing of pigs.

The entire executive board froze in collective horror, staring at each other with panic-stricken eyes.

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Everyone knew Silas's temperament. He demanded a pristine, silent environment and absolutely loathed chaotic noise. Normally, a single cough on a call was enough to make him scowl. Today's barnyard symphony was a guaranteed death sentence.

They braced themselves for their boss's icy wrath, holding their breath in terror. But after a long, agonizing pause, the anticipated verbal slaughter never came.

On the screen, Silas sat on a crude wooden chair, wearing a tailored black suit that looked absurdly out of place against the rustic farmhouse backdrop. Yet, his expression was entirely peaceful, his brow relaxed. He looked like he was having the best day of his life.

Sure enough, a second later, his voice came through—smooth and shockingly pleasant. "Continue your reports. The background noise is on my end. Don't worry about it."

Instantly, the entire board stared at their screens in absolute disbelief, their eyes wide with shock.

Was this really their ruthless, terrifying CEO?

Not only was he perfectly fine slumming it in the backwoods, but he was actually in a phenomenal mood. They were dying to know what miracle worker possessed the power to tame the beast.

Since Silas had given the green light, the executives hesitantly resumed.

When it was the marketing director's turn, his nerves got the better of him. He stuttered, lost his train of thought, and even cited a totally incorrect statistic before someone frantically corrected him.

In the past, Silas would have cut him off and demanded his resignation on the spot. But today, Silas didn't lose his temper at all. Instead, he spoke in a gentle, encouraging tone. "There's no rush. Take your time and verify the numbers before you speak."

The rest of the executives nearly fell out of their chairs. Who was this imposter, and what had he done with Mr. Thorne?

The bizarre, barnyard-soundtracked meeting concluded with terrifying smoothness.

The moment the call ended, the corporate headquarters exploded into chaotic gossip.

"Did I hallucinate that? Mr. Thorne didn't get mad?"

"I'm losing my mind! The background noise was insane! Normally he would have terminated the call immediately!"

"And what about that botched data? He just let it slide! His patience was saintly today!"

"No kidding. It's totally abnormal. If you ask me, he must have gotten some incredible news. You know what they say—a happy man is a forgiving man."

Someone chimed in, "But he has everything. He's usually a block of ice. I'm dying to know who on earth managed to trigger such a massive mood swing."

Another laughed, "Whoever they are, they just saved all our jobs! I just pray he stays like this forever."

While the office was buzzing, Silas closed his laptop and looked toward Willow's room, his eyes brimming with affection.

Checking the time, he figured Willow and Leo would be wrapping up soon. He decided to go meet her halfway. She had only asked him not to sit in on the visit, not that he couldn't walk her back.

At the same time, deep in Shadow Creek Grotto, Vivienne was currently living through the darkest nightmare of her life. With no way out and no rescue in sight, she was breaking.

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Chapter 496

Before Vivienne was an endless expanse of pitch-black darkness, so thick it felt suffocating. There was no light, no way to distinguish day from night, only a deafening silence that slowly crushed whatever shreds of hope she had left.

Just as a wave of dizzying exhaustion hit her, threatening to pull her under, a faint rustling sound echoed near her feet.

It was soft, but in the dead silence of the cave, it was piercing.

Vivienne went entirely rigid, her frayed nerves snapping. The darkness magnified her terror tenfold. Panicking, she reached out with a numb hand, blindly swatting at the direction of the noise to figure out what it was.

The moment her fingers brushed against it, she felt something cold, slimy, and squirming with a sickening warmth.

"Ahhhhh!"

A blood-curdling scream tore from her throat. Her pupils dilated in sheer terror, her blood freezing in her veins.

It was a rat!

A scrawny, wild rat had been huddled right next to her, and startled by her touch, it frantically scurried over her hand.

Absolute panic consumed her. She violently yanked her hand back, her entire body seizing with violent tremors. A wave of intense nausea clawed up her throat, her empty stomach violently rebelling, nearly making her vomit dry acid.

She had always been terrified of creeping pests. Raised in luxury and pristine environments, she had never been subjected to anything this vile. Her scalp tingled, an icy dread shooting from her toes to the top of her head, and tears of pure terror spilled down her cheeks.

Fear, resentment, and utter despair crashed over her, threatening to swallow her whole.

But a second later, agonizing hunger pangs ripped through her stomach. She was completely empty.

She was trapped here. Nobody knew, and nobody was coming. The cave was a barren wasteland of cold stone and rotting moss. There was absolutely nothing to eat. If she didn't consume something soon, she was going to freeze and starve to death in this pitch-black hell.

It was a choice between dying and facing her ultimate nightmare.

In the dark, Vivienne bit down hard on her trembling lip. Squeezing her eyes shut, she relied on her memory of the touch, lunging out to grab the frantic, squirming rat.

A suffocating wave of revulsion tore through her, nearly making her pass out. But the next second, with no fire and no tools, she forced it down raw.

Every single bite was agonizing torture. Every swallow triggered a violent gag reflex, but she didn't dare stop.

She had to survive. She refused to die in this filthy, godforsaken hole.

She hadn't made Willow pay yet.

When the sickening ordeal finally ended, Vivienne collapsed onto the stone floor. She pulled her knees to her chest, burying her face in her arms as broken, muffled sobs echoed through the cavern, sounding utterly pathetic and unhinged.

But the more she suffered, the more her venomous hatred for Willow multiplied.

Meanwhile, in New York City, inside the bright, luxurious Sinclair estate, Toby Sinclair was throwing an apocalyptic tantrum.

He hadn't seen Vivienne in days and was completely losing his mind, screaming for his mother.

"I want Mommy... I want Mommy!"

"When is Mommy coming home? I want her!"

He had been screaming since the late afternoon, his voice now a raspy, painful wheeze. The nanny crouched beside him, desperately trying every trick in the book—candy, new toys, cartoons—but nothing worked.

Terrified of being blamed, the nanny immediately called Susannah.

"Mrs. Sinclair, please, you have to come over," the nanny pleaded. "Toby won't stop crying for Ms. Sinclair. I've tried everything. He's been screaming for hours, and if he keeps going, he's going to make himself sick."

Susannah was right in the middle of her nightly foot soak. She had spent the whole day playing Texas Hold'em and was exhausted, ready for bed. The phone call instantly ruined her night.

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But she had no choice. She couldn't just ignore her grandson, so she begrudgingly drove over in the dead of night.

The moment she pushed open the doors to Julian's mansion, a piercing, hysterical wail assaulted her ears. Susannah instantly felt a headache coming on.

Frowning deeply, she marched into the living room, knelt beside Toby, and forced her voice into a soothing tone. "Toby, sweetheart, stop crying, okay? Mommy just has some work to do. She'll be home soon."

But Toby was beyond reason. Stubborn and volatile, he refused to listen to anyone. He grabbed handfuls of Susannah's clothes, screaming even louder. "Liar! Mommy hasn't been home in forever! I want her! I want her right now!"

His shrieks echoed endlessly through the massive house. Within minutes, whatever shred of patience Susannah had left was obliterated.

Done playing the doting grandmother, she pulled out her phone and called Julian, her tone dripping with annoyance. "Julian, when exactly is Vivienne coming back? Toby has been screaming since the afternoon, and no one can stop him. If he keeps this up, he's going to hyperventilate."

On the other end of the line, Julian was still buried in paperwork. He brushed off the complaint, his voice casually dismissive. "She went out of town for business. She'll be back in a few days."

"A few days?" Susannah was not accepting that vague answer. Her voice turned sharp. "Don't play games with me! Can you hear him screaming? Where exactly did she go? She's been gone for days without a single text or call to her son. Is that normal? Call her right now. I need an exact time she's walking through that door!"

Cornered and thoroughly annoyed, Julian finally hung up and dialed Vivienne's number.

Once, twice, three times—it went straight to voicemail.

Frowning, Julian opened his corporate messaging app and checked the logistics updates. He realized Mr. Smith and the rest of the team had finished their work and were already back in New York City.

Vivienne was the only one missing.

It was only then that Julian realized something was actually wrong.

However, even with that realization, his overwhelming emotion was sheer irritation, not panic.

His desk was piled high with contracts, urgent projects needed his approval, and an endless stream of decisions awaited him. Compared to all of that, Vivienne going off the grid was just another frustrating mess he had to clean up.

But he had no choice. Even setting Susannah's nagging aside, he had an obligation to maintain the facade of a stable household for Toby.

Pinching the bridge of his nose to suppress his annoyance, Julian called his assistant. "Track Vivienne's location. Pull her travel records, her GPS history, everything. Find out exactly where she is and what's going on, and handle it immediately."

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After fighting for her life for two torturous days, Vivienne finally found a crack in the rocks that led out of the cavern.

She clawed her way through the narrow fissure, dragging her battered body into the open air. The moment her hands hit the wild grass, her strength completely vanished, and she collapsed onto the dirt.

The blinding sunlight hit her filthy, bruised face, forcing her eyes shut. A second later, a wild, hysterical laugh burst from her lungs, echoing eerily through the empty woods. Her twisted expression made her look absolutely unhinged. The laughter quickly morphed into violent sobbing, like an absolute lunatic.

Every second of the past two days had been pure agony, a brutal dismantling of her ego and her hopes.

On her first night in the cave, huddled against the freezing stone, she had been terrified but completely convinced that Julian would come for her. She was the sister he grew up with, the mother of his child. Even if he didn't care about her, he would do it for Toby. She believed he was probably already tearing up the roads to find her. But he never came. Dawn broke, and she was still alone in the dark.

So, she started making excuses for him. Maybe the drive was too long, maybe a meeting delayed him, but he was definitely coming. And maybe, just maybe, he was already on his way.

But by the second day, she sat with bloodshot eyes, pressing her ear to the rock, listening for footsteps from sunrise to sunset. When night fell again, the woods fell dead silent, and still, no one came.

It was then that Vivienne accepted the bitter truth. Julian wasn't coming. Even if he did, he wouldn't turn the town upside down the second she went missing, the way Silas Thorne had done for Willow.

The blatant difference in how they were treated stung, but she refused to accept defeat.

She didn't believe Willow was better than her; Willow just got lucky.

And luck was the cheapest currency in the world. Once she got out of here, she would turn the tables and rip everything away from Willow.

As she seethed with anger, Vivienne suddenly heard muffled voices approaching from the trees. Her eyes lit up—she was saved! But when the figures emerged, her heart plummeted.

It was two scruffy, local thugs. Their clothes were dirty and worn, and they were clutching handfuls of stolen trinkets, clearly hiding in the woods to split their loot.

They stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the battered woman on the ground. Their eyes immediately roamed over her, taking in her torn clothes and undeniable beauty. Their stares were predatory, hungry, and dripping with malicious intent.

That disgusting, calculating gaze made every hair on Vivienne's body stand on end. An icy chill shot down her spine as the sheer danger of the situation wrapped around her throat.

She instinctively scrambled backward, her heart hammering against her ribs. The joy of surviving the cave vanished, replaced by a bone-deep, paralyzing fear.

She knew exactly what that look meant. But she also knew that right now, she had absolutely no other choice.

Rather than being dragged into the dirt as a victim, she decided to take control.

In her panic, a twisted, toxic thought hijacked her mind, overriding any shred of self-respect. Thinking about how this could eventually serve to punish Julian filled her with a sick, secret thrill.

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Taking a shaky breath, Vivienne forced the terror out of her eyes. She looked up at the two men, deliberately softening her voice. "You guys... do you know the way down the mountain? Could you take me to the town?"

The thugs exchanged a loaded look, a sleazy smirk spreading across their faces as they sauntered closer.

The taller one crossed his arms, staring down at her ruined clothes. He let out a dark chuckle. "Sure, we can take you down. But listen, sweetheart, there's no such thing as a free ride."

The shorter one nodded eagerly, his eyes practically undressing her. "Yeah, we got bikes. We can get you to town in ten minutes. But we don't work for free. Be a shame to waste the gas on charity."

Hearing their words, a bleak, chilling smile touched Vivienne's lips. How could she not understand what they were asking?

She understood perfectly.

Before either man could say another word, she raised a trembling hand, gripped her torn collar, and slowly pulled it down.

As the fabric slipped away, she willingly surrendered the last shred of her dignity.

The thugs' eyes gleamed with unrestrained greed, any hesitation completely gone.

The transaction was silently finalized.

True to their word, the men eventually drove her down the mountain. But the moment they hit the town limits, they shoved her off the bike onto the dirt shoulder, laughing as they sped away.

Vivienne was completely broken. The days of starvation, freezing temperatures, and sheer terror, topped with the ultimate physical and psychological violation, completely shattered her remaining sanity.

Her vision went black, and she collapsed unconscious on the side of the road.

She had no idea how much time passed before she heard someone calling her name. She forced her eyes open and saw Julian standing over her. He stared down at her, but there was no warmth, no frantic relief in his gaze. Even seeing her in this horrific state, his eyes only held cold scrutiny.

Vivienne's stomach dropped, a violent spike of hatred surging through her veins.

She had suffered in that freezing, pitch-black hellhole for two solid days, shaking in terror, praying for him to come. But he hadn't. Now, after she had been forced into a corner and stripped of everything, he finally showed up. What good was he now?

Worse, he didn't look guilty. He didn't look heartbroken. He was just analyzing her.

Vivienne wanted nothing more than to lunge at him, scream in his face, and unleash all her festering rage. But the filthy, degrading memory of what she had just done flashed through her mind. She panicked. He could never, ever find out the truth.

Swallowing her venom, Vivienne forced tears to her eyes. She morphed into a fragile, traumatized victim who had narrowly escaped death. "Julian... you finally came..."

With her last ounce of strength, she stumbled forward, throwing herself against his chest. She grabbed his jacket in a death grip, weaponizing her real trauma to play the perfect victim.

Julian frowned, but he still caught her. "What happened to you?"

Biting her lip, Vivienne buried her toxic rage and laid the blame perfectly at another's feet. "It was Willow... She did this to me."

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Chapter 500

"Willow?" Julian's voice dropped, thick with skepticism. "Why would she hurt you?"

Vivienne's mind raced, quickly weaving her narrative. "You know she's always hated me. On top of that, the Sinclair Group was crushing her during this project. She couldn't handle losing, so she resorted to dirty, underhanded tactics to take me out."

She forced a few more tears to spill over her cheeks. "I didn't know she was this vicious. Stealing the project was one thing, but trying to kill me? If I wasn't so lucky, Julian, I'd be dead in those woods."

She buried her face in his chest, sobbing hysterically.

Julian found the crying grating on his nerves. More importantly, he didn't buy her story for a second.

He knew Willow was out here for the same project, but he highly doubted she was capable of orchestrating a kidnapping. Plus, Sinclair Group had Mr. Smith backing them, and Vivienne had constantly bragged about their flawless progress. Now she was suddenly claiming they were losing and Willow tried to murder her?

It made no sense.

Julian's jaw tightened, his tone growing sharp. "I highly doubt Willow has the capability to pull something like this off. Tell me what really happened."

Hearing him defend her, Vivienne sneered internally. She had banked on him questioning it; it gave her the perfect opening.

A flash of malicious calculation crossed her eyes, quickly masked by profound hurt. "Of course she couldn't do it alone. But what if she had help?"

Julian's expression darkened instantly.

Seizing the moment, Vivienne dropped her trump card. "You know exactly how close Willow is with Arthur Vance. And who is Arthur? He's Silas Thorne's most trusted, personal right-hand man. If he wanted to make someone disappear to help her, it would be a piece of cake."

This blatant manipulation struck Julian's absolute worst nerve.

The moment the words left her mouth, the temperature around Julian plummeted to below freezing.

Seeing his murderous rage, Vivienne felt entirely conflicted.

When he saw her battered and bruised, he hadn't reacted like this. Yet one mention of another man helping Willow, and he looked ready to burn the world down. She knew exactly what that meant.

She didn't know whether to celebrate or scream. On the bright side, the heat was off her, and Julian was far too distracted to investigate her disappearance properly. But the agonizing truth remained: his explosive reaction was entirely about Willow.

No matter how much he denied it, Vivienne knew he still cared about his wife.

After a long silence, Julian finally spoke, his voice lethal. "Where is she right now? I'm going to find her."

Seeing him ready to bolt, a chill ran through Vivienne. He certainly hadn't shown this kind of urgency when looking for her. But she couldn't dwell on it. She immediately grabbed his arm. "I'm coming with you."

Julian looked down at her battered state and opened his mouth to tell her to stay, but she cut him off. "I'm fine, really. I'll just eat something on the way. You don't know these mountains, but I've been out here for weeks. I can help guide you."

The truth had nothing to do with guiding him. She had spun too many massive lies, and she needed to stick to him like glue to make sure none of them unraveled.

Julian didn't have the patience to argue, so he simply let it go.

Moments later, his assistant confirmed that Willow's team was still stationed at Mayor Henderson's house. Without another word, Julian began the drive up into the mountains.