



THE LESSON SHE COULDN'T ESCAPE

"Please," she tried again, forcing herself to keep her voice steady. "This isn't just about me. If Imperium Bank pulls away because we delayed without reason, thousands of jobs are at risk. The Titanflex line, the subcontractors, the city district around that tower. We owe it to them to show we are efficient and reliable."

"You are very good at making other people's needs sound like leverage," Ethan said. "But I already told you. I will not entertain company matters until after two days."

Her throat tightened. The hallway seemed to shrink around her. "I spoke out of frustration earlier," she blurted. "I know I was rude to you earlier on. I was under pressure and I didn't know who you were. I'm sorry. I truly am. But please, don't make the company pay for my bad attitude."

He regarded her for a long second. She saw the grief for his grandfather behind his eyes, the restraint wrapped around his anger.

"I have no grudge against you," Ethan said at last. "But you need to learn a lesson. You need to learn how to be courteous to everyone, regardless of who they are or their status."

Her legs gave up. Camila dropped to her knees right there in the corridor, with the folder still clutched in her hands. The cold marble bit into her skin through thin stockings. She didn't care.

"I've learned," she said quickly. "I swear I've learned. I spoke horribly. I looked down on you. I was wrong. Just... don't take this out on the project. Don't take it out on my future. I have spent so much time, so

much money, so much of myself on this campaign. I have sacrificed everything. To miss that interview means all of it vanishes." 3

"That doesn't concern me in any way," Ethan replied. "Xavier Global Holdings is my responsibility and priority, and not your political ambition."

"Please Master, forgive me, I am so sorry."

Ethan's face stayed unreadable. When he spoke again, his tone was final. 1

"For the last time," he said, "I will not be attending to any official duties until after two days. And by the way, you are by no means to leave Avalora for any reason, including your politics, until I have approved the Titanflex project. If you choose to disobey my directive, you will be relieved of your duties, and any assets or benefits you have gotten from Xavier Global Holdings will be taken from you." 2

Tears spilled over before she could stop them. "Everything I own comes from Xavier," she whispered. "My home, my car, my campaign funding, my credibility. I built it all through this company. If I lose both the position here and the election, I have nothing left."

The corridor went very quiet. Only the faint hum of the air system broke the silence. Leonard's eyes dropped to the floor. He did not argue, did not plead. 1

Camila stared up at Ethan, her mind racing. No flight to Lingham. No interview. No mayoral race. If she tried to go anyway, she would lose her position and everything the company had ever given her. 1

With the Xavier group's influence, she wouldn't even be able to fight for her assets in court. Her throat closed. A sob broke free.

"Please," she said, her voice was raw. "Master Ethan, I'm begging you. Don't end my life like this. I can work double. I can take any department you assign. I'll never speak out of turn again. Just let me go for that interview. Let me secure something for myself." 2

Ethan looked down at her. For a moment, the quiet pain in his eyes deepened. His grandfather's body lay only a few meters away. The woman begging at his feet had seen his grief and still tried to push past it with deadlines and contracts. 1

He turned his head.

"Mr Leonard," Ethan said, as if the matter was closed, "do well to show me around this estate after making sure that my grandfather's body is preserved in the mortuary." 1

Leonard straightened, his shoulders squaring. A small, respectful smile touched his face, softening some of the sorrow there. "Yes, Master Ethan," he replied. 2

Ethan gave Camila one last look. She was still kneeling, tears streaking her cheeks, fingers digging into the Titanflex folder as if it were a life jacket. He did not offer his hand. He simply turned and began walking down the corridor, Leonard falling in step beside him.

As their figures moved away, the echo of their footsteps trailed off into the depths of the estate.

Camila stayed where she was on the cold floor, realizing that inside

these walls, her political dream had just died before it could even reach Lingham.