THE SUBSTITUTE WIFE:

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"I'm not inquiring about that," Sean's gaze darted towards the office as he murmured. "What has put Mrs. Larson off? Has someone upset her?"

"I get your drift now," Lexi responded, her confusion fading away.

She brushed her fingers through her hair and said hesitantly, "It might be best if Mr. Larson queries my boss directly. As her assistant, | can't just leak information about her."

Sean noticed Lexi's barely contained annoyance and her burning desire to retort. It dawned on him. Outraged, he spat, "Is there truly someone bold enough to upset Mrs. Larson like this? It's like poking the bear!"

Stroking his chin in contemplation, he sighed. "Mr. Larson won't let this go unpunished."

Lexi blinked quickly, her lips miming a zipped lock, signifying her silence.

Sean felt a throb in his temples at her gesture. "Don't wall me off. Mr. Larson is doing this for Mrs. Larson's benefit."

More importantly, if he couldn't get to the bottom of Mrs. Larson's discontent, $\ \ \Box$

Mr. Larson would inevitably slash his wages.

Lexi hid her mouth and mumbled, "Even if Mr. Larson asked me directly, my lips would be sealed."

"Why though?" Sean queried, perplexed.

Lexi stood up straight, thumped her chest, and asserted, "My duty as an assistant is to maintain secrecy on matters my boss wishes to keep under wraps. That's a fundamental trait of a professional assistant."

"You're right," Sean concurred with Lexi's assertion.

Believing she'd staved off further questions, Lexi started to relax, but Sean's shift in tone took her by surprise. "However..."

Lexi's heartbeat accelerated, and she gave Sean a wary look, questioning, "However, what?" Sean shrugged, sighing. "Ordinarily, assistants keep things confidential. But what about the dynamic between your boss and Mr. Larson?" Lexi, a relative newcomer compared to Sean, was momentarily thrown off by his question and blurted, "They're a couple?"

Sean clicked his fingers. "Precisely! Since they're together, shouldn't there be transparency? And with Mrs. Larson's current heightened emotions, shouldn't we be extra vigilant about her welfare?" Dumbfounded, Lexi conceded, "Your argument seems... solid."

A smirk of tnumph danced on Sean's lips. He clapped Lexi's shoulder, his tone grave. "And as Mrs. Larson's right-hand woman, can you stand by while she's being hurt?"

Lexi descended into introspection, grappling with her feelings.

Slowly, she was swaying towards Sean's perspective.

Despite being unaware of the full picture, Lexi had observed Janet's low spints. Today's events had only intensified her gloominess.

If she shared what had transpired with Mr. Larson, he might be able to restore Janet's happiness. But if she spilled to Sean, she'd fail as an assistant.

She had promised Janet that as her assistant, she'd put her interests above all else. A premature disclosure could let Janet down. Seeing Lexi's struggle, Sean added, "Lexi, relax. We won't let Mrs. Larson know you shared anything. We're only looking out for her, nght?" Just as Lexi was nearing a breakdown, she retreated and offered an awkward smile. "I need a restroom break. I'll consider what to do when I return!"

"Wait!" Before Sean could protest, he watched Lexi dart into the restroom.