

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

Chapter 121

As expected, Julian's expression darkened the moment he heard those words. He let out a cold scoff. "Like leader, like followers. They're nothing but a disorganized mob. Just because Willow elevated them when she was around, they actually think they're indispensable? Without Sinclair Group, they're nobodies."

Seeing that his temper was flaring, Vivienne quickly played the peacemaker. "It might not entirely be their fault. After all, they're just employees. They've probably been brainwashed by a certain someone."

Julian immediately knew exactly who that "certain someone" was.

"If that's the case, then let them all pack up and leave Sinclair Group just like her. Let's see if they can survive out there. I'll issue the notice today and have every single one of them fired."

Having achieved her goal, Vivienne shifted back into playing the saint. "Oh, forget it. They aren't worth the trouble. Don't be so hasty, Julian. Let me go talk to them again. I might be able to talk some sense into them."

The Merit project was at a critical stage. Even though Leo Yardley and the others refused to listen to her, she still needed them to produce the core data. If they were fired now, she would be completely stranded.

Vivienne knew exactly where her priorities lay.

"Handle it however you see fit," Julian muttered, thoroughly annoyed and lacking the patience to deal with the technical team.

"What about Willow...?" Vivienne tested the waters again. "Is she coming back?"

"Where else could she possibly go? Does she really think she can find a job in New York?" Julian's irritation spiked. He was absolutely certain she would come crawling back; he just wasn't sure exactly when she would finally beg for his forgiveness.

Unwilling to dwell on the subject, he steered the conversation back to business. "I heard Merit assigned a new VP to oversee this project. How is it? Have you reached out?"

"Not yet," Vivienne replied smoothly. "Word on the street is that it's a complete rookie who doesn't know the first thing about the industry. They just arrived and barely have any authority."

"Well, try to secure a meeting when you can. We still have to keep up appearances."

"I know. Don't you worry about a thing." After saying that, she hesitated. She wondered if she should invent an excuse to get Julian to do the project for her without exposing her own incompetence, but she was terrified he would figure out the truth.

"What is it? Something else on your mind?"

"Nothing." She wrapped her arms around Julian's neck, her voice dropping into a seductive purr. "I just want you to kiss me before I go."

For some inexplicable reason, Julian felt a sudden wave of awkwardness wash over him. It was something they had done a thousand times before, yet at this moment, it felt forced. Staring at Vivienne's expectant face, an uninvited image of Willow flashed through his mind.

Startled by his own thoughts, he quickly shoved the image away, cupped Vivienne's face, and kissed her.

When they parted, Vivienne walked out of his office with a satisfied smile. Although she regretted not tricking him into doing the project files for her, none of it mattered as long as she still had his heart.

Ultimately, even if the project went up in flames, Julian would always be there to clean up her mess.

Back in her own office, Clarence Vance called again to demand the materials. Vivienne hung up in disgust, then forced herself to open her computer and dig through Willow's old files, hoping to learn something.

Unfortunately, the data was entirely beyond her comprehension. Even when she could decipher the words, she had no idea why the formulas were structured that way. Out of options, she resorted to blatantly copying and pasting.

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Despite relying entirely on copy-pasting, the project files were still overwhelmingly complex for Vivienne. She waited until the final possible moment before forwarding the documents to Clarence Vance.

After hitting send, she added a sharp warning over the phone. "These documents are absolutely flawless. If we don't win this bid in the end, I'll hold you personally responsible."

Clarence was slightly taken aback by her arrogance, but his own unwavering confidence quickly smoothed it over. He offered a steadfast guarantee. "Don't you worry, Ms. Sinclair. This project is practically yours already."

Satisfied, Vivienne ended the call and packed up to head home.

That evening, it was just her and Toby in the house. Earlier that afternoon, Julian had mentioned that Genevieve wanted them all back at the family estate for dinner, but Vivienne had quickly fabricated an excuse to get out of it.

Genevieve had never liked her. Vivienne had always known this, so she made it a point to avoid family gatherings whenever possible. As for Toby, he hated going to the estate even more.

When Vivienne arrived home, she was surprised to find Susannah Sinclair already there, playing with Toby. Susannah had brought a mountain of new toys, and the two of them were testing them out one by one. Toby was thrilled, happily calling out to his Nana.

"Mom, what are you doing here?" Vivienne asked, genuinely surprised.

Susannah cut straight to the chase. "I heard Willow resigned. Is it true?"

"Yeah, she left last week. It's been about seven days," Vivienne said dismissively.

"Are you absolutely certain?" Susannah still harbored doubts. She couldn't fathom a world where Willow would willingly walk away. She knew exactly how deeply that girl loved Julian. There was nothing Willow wouldn't endure to protect her marriage, yet now she had voluntarily stepped down? It felt like a trap.

"It's true. She signed the resignation papers and packed her things out of the office."

"Hmph. That girl is far too scheming to just leave without a fuss," Susannah warned. "Besides, resigning doesn't mean she can't come back. This might just be a calculated move to get Julian's attention. You need to stay sharp and stop being so naive. Now that she's gone, make sure she never gets the chance to return."

"I know, Mom," Vivienne whined, linking her arm through Susannah's. "But no matter what kind of tricks she plays, I don't care. I have you, and I have Julian's affection. I'm not afraid of her."

"You're just too innocent," Susannah sighed, helpless against her daughter's sweet-talking. "Never mind. You've always been this way. I suppose you can't change overnight."

Vivienne rested her chin on Susannah's shoulder, her brow furrowing. "By the way, Mom, Grandma asked everyone to go to the estate for dinner tonight. Why didn't you go?"

"If you and Toby aren't going, why would I?" Susannah scoffed. "Besides, I lose my appetite the second I have to look at that woman's face. I just made up an excuse and declined."

She was talking about Genevieve. They had never seen eye to eye. In the entire Sinclair family, the only people Genevieve ever bothered having a real conversation with were Julian, and previously, Willow.

Meanwhile, when Julian arrived at the estate, Genevieve didn't seem the least bit surprised to see him walk in alone. It was as if she had expected it.

"Grandma," Julian greeted her with a warm smile. He knew his grandmother's tough exterior hid a soft heart better than anyone.

He pulled out a chair at the dining table and casually reached for a serving spoon.

"You actually have the nerve to eat?" Genevieve snapped, right on cue.

Julian kept smiling. "Didn't you invite me over for dinner? Now you're trying to starve me?"

"Don't get smart with me." Despite her harsh tone, there was no real malice in her voice. "I heard Willow left the company?"

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"Yeah," Julian replied plainly.

"When did this happen?"

"Don't you already know?" Julian scooped a ladle of soup into her bowl. "With how fast news travels to you, you probably knew before I did. Just say what's on your mind. You don't need to beat around the bush with your own grandson."

"You foolish boy!" Genevieve slapped his arm, thoroughly annoyed. "You can act like you don't care now, but there will come a day when you regret this."

She had indeed found out about Willow leaving Sinclair Group the previous week, but she hadn't realized how severe the situation was. She had been waiting for Julian to come to her for advice, genuinely surprised by how stubbornly he was holding out.

Hearing her words, Julian simply raised an eyebrow. He honestly wondered if that day would ever come. Regret? Highly unlikely.

Seeing his nonchalant expression, Genevieve's anger flared. "Let me ask you this. Why did you approve her resignation? Did you force her out? Did you and that Vivienne team up because you couldn't stand seeing her in the office?"

Truth be told, he hadn't forced her to resign, though he had fully intended to banish her back to Seattle. As for the resignation approval, that was entirely an accident.

Julian had no desire to rehash the details. He let out a long sigh. "You didn't call me over here just to lecture me, did you?"

"Of course not. The damage is done, and yelling at you won't change a thing. Will it bring Willow back?" Genevieve glared at him, looking like she wanted to smack him again.

Julian's smile remained steady. "You could always try."

"I am not in the mood for your games," Genevieve cut him off. "Call Willow right now. Right here in front of me. Invite her over for dinner this weekend."

"I really can't help you with that. It's not that I won't, I literally can't."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I have absolutely no way to contact her." Julian pulled out his phone, opened his messaging app, and swiped to his call log, sliding the device across the table. "See for yourself. She's blocked me on everything."

"You deserve it," Genevieve blurted out. Frankly, if she were Willow, she would have done far worse.

But Julian was still her grandson. "Fine. I'll invite her myself. You make sure your schedule is completely clear this weekend."

"Depends on my workload."

"It doesn't depend on anything! You will be here, do you understand me?"

Genevieve was a woman of action. One second she was sitting at the table, and the next she was ordering the staff to clear the plates, effectively kicking Julian out of the house.

"Grandma, you can't be serious. Kicking me out halfway through dinner? Since when is that fair?" Julian let out a breathless laugh.

"Out," Genevieve commanded, waving him off. "Skipping one meal won't kill you."

She marched back to her room and immediately dialed Willow's number. When the call connected, she didn't bring up the resignation. Instead, she warmly expressed how much she missed her and asked if Willow was free for dinner on Saturday.

Willow was currently on her way home. Hearing the request, her immediate instinct was to decline. She had drawn a hard line with Julian, and the divorce proceedings were about to begin. Returning to the Sinclair estate felt wrong.

She hesitated before speaking softly. "I'm so sorry, Grandma Sinclair, but I already have plans on Saturday."

"Then let's do Sunday. Please come on Sunday. Or whenever you're free, just name the time and I'll make it work."

Hearing the desperation in the older woman's voice, Willow found it impossible to say no. Genevieve had always been incredibly kind to her.

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In the end, Willow relented. "I'll see how my schedule looks. If nothing comes up, I'll be there."

"Wonderful, wonderful. I'll be waiting for you."

The moment Genevieve ended the call, she dialed Julian. Her tone instantly shifted back to a stern command, ordering him to keep his Sunday completely clear and to return to the estate. She emphasized twice that he was to come alone—no Vivienne, no Toby.

Sunday morning arrived quickly. Since it was a lunch arrangement, Julian was up early. He carefully selected a tailored charcoal suit, paired it with a matching tie, and even took the time to style his hair with texturizing spray, sweeping it back effortlessly.

Watching him get ready, Vivienne felt a knot of suspicion tighten in her chest. She hadn't heard of any important banquets happening today. Why was he suddenly putting so much effort into his appearance?

"Julian, do you have some free time today?" she asked casually. "My favorite boutique just got their new collection in. The sales rep said there are a lot of pieces I'd love. I was hoping to go take a look. Could you come with me?"

Julian didn't even look up as he adjusted his tie. "I don't know the first thing about fashion. Just take one of your friends."

Vivienne masked her disappointment. "But I only buy these things to look good for you. You don't need to know fashion, you just have to pick what you like on me."

Julian walked over and gave her head a dismissive pat. "Be good. Go with your friends. Take the card I gave you and buy whatever you want."

In the past, this kind of blank check would have made Vivienne ecstatic, but today, she couldn't shake the feeling that he was intentionally trying to get rid of her.

She refused to back down. "You don't have any plans today either, so just come with me."

"I'm going to the estate to have lunch with Grandma."

"Just you and Grandma?" Vivienne pressed.

Julian finally lifted his gaze. He didn't say a word, but his eyes grew cold.

Vivienne immediately backpedaled. "I'm not checking up on you. It's just been a while since I visited her. I was wondering if I could come with you."

"No need," Julian rejected her flat out. "You don't even like going there, so don't force it. It'll just make everyone miserable."

"But..."

"No buts. I'm leaving. Make sure you tell the nanny to keep an eye on Toby when you go out."

Vivienne stared at his retreating back and stomped her foot in frustration. But her hands were tied. She knew Julian's temper too well to openly defy him.

Julian arrived at the estate early. Willow wasn't there yet, so he sat in the parlor chatting with Genevieve.

Genevieve looked him over, relatively pleased with his effort. "Not bad. At least you know how to clean yourself up. Maybe you aren't completely hopeless."

Julian chuckled. "Don't I always look like this?"

"Only when you're trying to impress strangers. You certainly never made this much of an effort for Willow. If you had, maybe she wouldn't have left."

"Grandma, I did exactly what you asked. Can you spare me the lecture?"

Genevieve scoffed. "Do you think I enjoy it? Just looking at you gives me a headache."

Julian raised his hands in mock surrender. Genevieve let the subject drop, and the two shifted to idle chatter until a maid entered to announce that Willow had arrived.

Genevieve's face lit up, and she hurried toward the door to welcome her. Julian initially planned to stay seated, but after catching a sharp glare from his grandmother, he reluctantly stood and followed.

As soon as he stepped outside, he saw a slender, elegant figure walking up the snowy path.

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Snow was falling gently, casting a bitter chill over the estate. Willow wore a cream-colored winter coat paired with a soft beige scarf. Her luminous skin and bright eyes made her look like a vision stepping out of the winter frost.

This was the first time Julian had seen her face-to-face since she left Sinclair Group. The last time had been just a glimpse of her back. He had sensed a change then, but seeing her now hit him like a physical blow.

He raised an eyebrow. If she had lost weight to get his attention, it was certainly working.

Before Willow even reached the porch, Genevieve hurried down the steps into the freezing wind, taking Willow's freezing hands in hers. "Oh, my dear, look how much weight you've lost. Have you been overworking yourself? Are you eating properly?"

Willow squeezed her hands warmly. "I'm fine, Grandma Sinclair. I've been eating perfectly. I just started working out recently, so I toned up a bit."

"Exercise is fine, but don't overdo it. It breaks my heart to see you this thin."

"I promise I'm fine. It's freezing out here, let's go inside." Willow gently guided the older woman toward the door.

She was carrying a few gift bags, which made walking up the steps a bit awkward. Genevieve noticed and immediately turned to Julian. "Julian, go help Willow with those."

Julian didn't argue. He reached out to take the bags, but Willow sharply pulled them back, dodging his hands completely.

"No need. I've got them. Let's go inside, Grandma."

She didn't spare Julian a single glance. She treated him as if he were entirely invisible.

Truthfully, before arriving, Willow had considered the possibility that Julian might be here. She knew Genevieve still held onto the hope of fixing their marriage. But Willow found she simply didn't care anymore. Standing in front of him now, her heart was a stagnant pool. She felt absolutely nothing.

Besides, she actually needed to see him. It was time to finalize the divorce agreement.

Julian stared at his empty hands, a small, self-deprecating smirk playing on his lips, before turning and following them inside.

As soon as they entered, Genevieve started barking orders at the staff. She had personally curated today's menu, ensuring every dish was one of Willow's favorites, yet she still fussed over the details.

"Mrs. Higgins, have the kitchen prepare another hot soup. Willow has lost weight, she needs something nourishing."

"Hanna, go pack up those premium health supplements and imported vitamins we brought back from abroad. Make sure Willow takes them home."

"And bring out the fruit platter immediately. Let Willow have a snack first."

The entire household sprang into a flurry of motion under her command.

But the busiest person of all was Genevieve herself. Seeing Willow like this genuinely broke her heart. Yes, she looked stunning, but Genevieve knew the agonizing emotional toll that must have fueled such a transformation. No elder could look at a child they loved suffering like that and not feel the ache.

She desperately wanted Willow and Julian to work things out, but at her core, she just loved Willow. She wanted them together because she thought it was best for the girl.

Willow felt utterly overwhelmed. "Grandma, please stop fussing. I'm really not hungry yet. I just want to sit and talk with you."

"We can talk and eat at the same time. It's no trouble at all."

After a brief round of appetizers, the main course was served. Since it was just the three of them, the standard arrangement would be for Willow and Julian to sit on either side of Genevieve. However, Julian purposefully chose the seat directly next to Willow.

Willow gave him a cold glance but said nothing. She simply ignored him, refusing to even guess at what kind of twisted game he was playing.

If she didn't care, then it didn't matter.

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Throughout the meal, the conversation flowed almost exclusively between Willow and Genevieve. On the rare occasions Julian tried to interject, Willow would instantly fall silent and focus on her food, actively avoiding any form of engagement.

Her blatant disregard was obvious to Genevieve, and certainly obvious to Julian. Yet he seemed entirely unbothered, merely offering a faint, amused chuckle.

Right on cue, a steaming tureen of rich bisque was brought to the table. A maid carefully served Genevieve a bowl first, then handed the next one to Julian. Instead of keeping it, he smoothly slid the bowl toward Willow.

Willow acted as though the bowl didn't exist. She turned her body slightly toward the older woman. "This vegetable dish is wonderful, Grandma. You should have some."

Knowing full well she was ignoring him on purpose, Julian didn't get angry. He simply picked up a spoon, stirred the creamy soup, and nudged it closer to her again.

Willow still refused to acknowledge it.

The two of them fell into a silent standoff—one relentlessly pushing the bowl, the other stubbornly refusing to take it. The nearby staff exchanged nervous glances, entirely unsure of what to do.

Eventually, Julian lost his patience. He leaned in, forcefully sliding the bowl directly in front of her plate. Unwilling to back down, Willow raised her arm and shoved the bowl back toward him.

She pushed with force, completely misjudging the angle. The sudden motion sloshed the scalding bisque over the rim, splashing directly onto Julian's tailored suit, leaving a massive, dark stain across the fabric.

The maids gasped and rushed forward with napkins to do damage control. Willow, however, remained entirely expressionless. She watched the chaotic cleanup with dead eyes, her gaze drifting toward Julian with undisguised annoyance.

The stain was too severe to handle at the table, forcing Julian to excuse himself. Before stepping away, he cast a lingering look at Willow. His eyes held a complex storm of surprise, anger, and a dark spark of intrigue she had never seen before.

Willow broke eye contact, radiating an icy indifference, and calmly resumed eating as if absolutely nothing had happened.

Genevieve took in the entire scene in silence.

She finally realized that the young woman sitting beside her hadn't just changed her appearance—she had fundamentally hardened. She was decisive, ruthless, and completely unforgiving, especially when it came to Julian.

It was a good thing, of course. Hardship forced people to grow. But as for her and Julian...

Genevieve let out a silent sigh, swallowing the lecture she had prepared. There was no point anymore. She had to let them handle their own wreckage.

For the rest of the meal, she didn't pry. She dropped the subject of Julian entirely and kept the conversation light, focusing on everyday matters.

To her surprise, Willow was the one who shifted the tone. "Grandma Sinclair, I probably won't be able to visit as often moving forward."

She didn't spell it out, but the implication was crystal clear. She had already severed her professional ties with Sinclair Group. Now, she was severing her personal ties to the family.

Knowing there was nothing she could do to stop it, Genevieve simply reached out and patted her hand. "No matter what happens, I am still your grandmother. This will always be your home, and you are welcome here whenever you want."

"I know. Please take care of your health." Willow could never bring herself to be cold to Genevieve. The bond was too deep to discard.

Just as they were finishing up, Julian returned. He didn't eat, choosing instead to sit quietly, his eyes occasionally darting over to study Willow.

Shortly after, Willow stood up to leave, and Julian immediately mirrored her, announcing his departure. Genevieve didn't try to make them stay. Instead, she asked Julian to drive Willow home. Her reasoning was practical—it was impossible to hail a cab around the estate—but she also wanted to give him one final, desperate chance to fix things.

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Genevieve didn't hold her breath. She had thrown it out as a casual suggestion, fully prepared to have her private driver take Willow if she refused.

To her absolute shock, Willow didn't argue. She agreed without a second thought.

Genevieve beamed with relief, while Julian simply raised an eyebrow. It was the first time all day she hadn't rejected him outright. He was deeply curious to see what kind of game she was playing.

Once they were both secured inside the sleek interior of his car, Julian broke the silence. "Address."

"The nearest subway station." Willow's tone was just as frigid as it had been at the table. She refused to give him a single unnecessary word.

Julian scoffed. "If that's the case, why did you even agree to get in my car?"

"I didn't want to make a scene in front of Grandma."

"You think you haven't made enough of a scene today?" Julian turned his head to glare at her. "Quitting, giving me the cold shoulder, throwing a tantrum at the dinner table. How many times do you expect me to tolerate this?"

So this was what he considered a 'scene'? All she was doing was feeding his old tactics right back to him—and on a much smaller scale—yet he was already losing his mind?

Willow let out a humorless laugh, struck by his sheer arrogance.

"No one asked you to tolerate anything."

Julian interpreted her coldness as a petty outburst. In his mind, she was just lashing out because she was struggling after leaving Sinclair Group. Feeling generous, he adopted a patronizing tone.

"What? Having trouble finding a job out there?"

"I'm sure you've heard that Sinclair Group is negotiating a major partnership with Merit Biotech. If you want to come back now, I suppose it's not entirely off the table. I can arrange a position for you at headquarters. And if you really refuse to go back to Seattle, we can make that work too, but you have to guarantee..."

"Julian," Willow interrupted, utterly repulsed by the sound of his voice. "The only reason I got in your car today was to ask you one question. When are you signing the divorce papers?"

The words hung in the air. Julian froze, slamming his foot on the brake and jerking the car to a halt on the side of the snowy road. "What did you just say?"

Willow stared at him, convinced he was playing dumb just to drag this out. But the sheer shock on his face looked genuine. Swallowing her irritation, she repeated herself.

"A month ago, I dropped the divorce agreement off at your office. Even if you wanted your legal team to review it, you've had more than enough time. If you have revisions, make them now. I want this handled by the end of the month so we don't delay the proceedings."

Julian's mind raced. He remembered her walking into his office with a stack of documents a month ago. He had assumed it was just another pointless report and fed it straight into the shredder without a second glance.

Those files... were divorce papers?

Doing the math, that meant she had decided to divorce him and quit her job almost immediately after returning to New York.

Julian let out a dark, cynical laugh. If anyone else had pulled a stunt like this, he might have believed them. But this was Willow. The idea that she wanted to leave him was laughable. She had been begging for his mercy on the phone just days ago. He refused to believe she could cut ties that quickly.

"Divorce?" he echoed, his voice dripping with condescension. "You expect me to believe those words coming out of your mouth?"

"I know you too well, Willow. You are relentlessly stubborn. For years, you've never looked at another man but me."

"Besides, have you actually thought about the consequences of divorcing me? Who's going to hire you? How are you going to pay your mother's medical bills? How do you expect to survive in New York? Stop this childish act while you still have a way out."

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This was probably the most emotion Julian had ever shown in front of her, and certainly the most words he had ever strung together in a single breath.

Yet, Willow felt absolutely nothing. Not a ripple of sadness, not a spark of hesitation. She didn't want to waste another second breathing the same air as him, let alone explain herself.

"When are you signing the papers?" she demanded flatly.

"I've never seen any papers."

Willow knew he was deliberately making things difficult, but she forced herself to stay focused on the end goal. "Fine. I'll have a new copy sent to you. If you have conditions, state them. I want this finalized before the end of the month."

"Don't waste your breath. I'm not signing anything."

"Why?" Willow was genuinely bewildered. Wasn't this exactly what he and Vivienne had been dreaming of?

She just wanted to cut him loose and walk away cleanly. Willing to make concessions, she tried again. "The terms are negotiable. If you want something specific, just name it. My only requirement is that we do this as fast as possible."

She laid all her cards on the table, assuming her total surrender would satisfy him. Instead, he stared at her like she was a bug on his windshield and delivered a glacial response.

"Since when do you get to dictate terms to me? You don't have the right. Even if we do divorce, I will be the one to initiate it."

Willow was out of patience. She pulled her final move. "If that's how you want to play it, I'll just file a lawsuit for divorce."

Instead of getting angry, Julian let out a dark, mocking laugh. "Go ahead and try. Let's see if a single law firm in New York dares to take your case."

Willow stared at the monster sitting next to her. "You are an absolute bastard."

She reached for the door handle, unwilling to endure his presence for another fraction of a second.

Before her fingers could brush the metal, the locks snapped shut with a heavy *click*. A split second later, a hand shot across the console, his fingers clamping violently around her jaw, wrenching her face toward him.

It was Julian.

Willow's eyes locked onto his, burning with unfiltered disgust. "What the hell are you doing? Let go of me!"

Julian's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "What did you just call me?"

Willow glared right back, her voice venomous. "A bastard! Am I wrong? Take a look at yourself! Calling you a bastard is the nicest thing I could say!"

Julian stared at her defiance, a twisted smirk curling his lips. "Good. Very good."

His gaze dragged over her features, hungry and predatory. His grip tightened, yanking her roughly toward him. The next second, he dipped his head, aiming for her mouth.

Willow hadn't expected the assault, but her reflexes were lightning fast. Just as his breath brushed her skin, she retaliated, her palm connecting with the side of his face in a resounding crack. Using the momentum, she shoved him hard against the driver's seat. "Are you out of your mind?"

She had hit him with everything she had. A bead of blood welled at the corner of Julian's mouth.

He ran his tongue over the split skin, chuckling darkly. "I'm out of my mind? Remember your place, Willow. As long as we aren't divorced, we are legally husband and wife. Isn't a little intimacy normal?"

Willow looked at him like he was a full-blown psycho. "Do you even hear yourself?"

"Loud and clear. I also remember you being so desperate to marry me you were practically begging. You loved me to death, remember?"

Realizing reasoning with a lunatic was impossible, Willow stealthily hit the unlock button on her door panel. She threw the door open, stepping out into the freezing wind. Her parting words hung in the icy air.

"See you in court."

Slamming the door shut, she pulled out her phone to hail a ride. But the estate was miles from the city, and the heavy snowstorm meant no drivers were accepting fares.

Left with zero options, she began the grueling walk toward the subway station. Even with the bitter wind cutting through her coat, Willow felt infinitely better than she had in that car. She never wanted to experience that suffocating toxicity ever again.

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Little did she know, she wasn't the only one braving the desolate roads in this weather.

Silas Thorne hadn't gone into the office to work overtime today. Instead, he had taken his own car out for a drive. He had dismissed his driver, wanting to explore New York on his own terms—to see the city where Willow had grown up.

Through the heavy snowfall, he spotted a slender figure trudging along the shoulder of the road. With just a brief glance at her silhouette, Silas immediately knew it was Willow.

He just couldn't fathom why she was walking alone in a blizzard.

Not wanting to startle her, Silas eased his foot off the gas and coasted alongside her. He didn't honk. Instead, he rolled down the passenger window and called out smoothly, "Ms. Horgan."

Willow turned her head, her eyes widening in surprise when they met his. "Mr. Thorne? What are you doing out here?"

Silas brought the car to a smooth halt and stepped out, deliberately positioning his broad frame between her and the biting wind. "Just passing through. Where are you heading?"

"I'm trying to get to the subway station," Willow answered honestly.

"That's quite a walk from here. Get in. I'll give you a ride."

"Oh, I couldn't. I don't want to hold you up if you have somewhere to be."

"You aren't," Silas replied simply. He didn't push or rush her. He just stood there quietly, waiting for her answer.

Willow hesitated. On one hand, office rumors painted him as a ruthless, unapproachable tyrant. She was terrified of making a wrong move and offending the big boss.

On the other hand, based on her own interactions with him, the rumors seemed wildly inaccurate. He wasn't cold at all; he was incredibly stable and surprisingly helpful.

Sensing her internal debate, Silas spoke up. "What's wrong? Are you afraid of me?"

Caught off guard, Willow immediately grew flustered and rushed to deny it. "No, of course not. Why would I be afraid of a boss who is so... approachable?"

Despite her words, her eyes darted away, and her brow furrowed. She clearly wasn't used to lying. Seeing her bundled up in the snow, trying so hard to act brave when she was obviously intimidated, made something soft twist inside Silas's chest.

Without realizing it, his voice dropped an octave, turning gentle. "Relax. I don't bite."

Having him see right through her was somehow worse. Willow scrambled to save face. "Please don't misunderstand, I'm really not afraid of you."

"Then get in." Silas stepped aside and pulled the passenger door open for her.

Even though he had likely never played chauffeur for anyone, his movements were so fluid and natural it felt like he had done it a thousand times.

His calm demeanor instantly dissolved her tension. Without overthinking it further, she thanked him and slid into the leather seat.

Silas waited until she was settled before closing the door. He walked around the hood and slid into the driver's seat.

Outside, the freezing air had numbed her senses, but the moment she was enclosed in the warm cabin, Willow was immediately enveloped by the subtle scent of his cologne. It was a deep, understated blend of cedarwood and morning mist. She found she really liked it.

She glanced at the dashboard. It was immaculately clean, completely devoid of useless trinkets or clutter. It perfectly matched his commanding aura.

"Where to?" Silas asked, reaching over to turn up the heat so she could thaw out.

"Aren't we just going to the subway station?"

"If I'm giving you a ride, I might as well take you all the way to your destination," Silas replied, his tone perfectly measured and polite. "But if you're not comfortable giving me your address, just drop a pin nearby."

She was just going home. There was no reason to hide it. Willow rattled off her apartment complex.

Once the address was set, the cabin started to feel a bit too warm. She unwound her scarf and pulled it off. The motion immediately exposed her neck—and the dark, brutal bruises blooming across her jawline.

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Chapter 130

Silas was a man of immense restraint. His self-control and ability to mask his emotions were his greatest assets in the boardroom, and he was well aware of it. Yet, the moment his eyes landed on the violent bruising on Willow's jaw, that legendary control fractured. In an instant, every ounce of his pride in his stoicism vanished.

Given the location and the bruising force, Silas couldn't imagine anyone but her husband leaving such a mark. As a man, he knew exactly what kind of aggressive intimacy would leave a bruise like that.

It seemed she and her husband were deeply passionate.

He forced his gaze forward, refusing to look again. Terrified that his dark, surging jealousy would bleed into his voice and scare her, he ruthlessly crushed the emotion down.

Noticing the car hadn't moved, Willow blinked in confusion. "Is everything okay?"

Silas raised a hand, tapping his own jaw to gesture to her. "You have some marks right here."

Willow immediately realized what he meant. It was from that psycho Julian grabbing her face earlier. No wonder it had been throbbing the entire walk.

She flipped down the sun visor and opened the vanity mirror. Two stark, angry red marks stood out aggressively against her luminous skin. In her head, she cursed Julian's existence for the thousandth time.

But to Silas, her reaction painted an entirely different picture. Watching her study the bruises in the mirror, he assumed she was admiring them, quietly cherishing the rough touch of the man she loved.

Suddenly, she winced. Even knowing another man had put his hands on her, knowing her heart belonged to someone else, Silas couldn't stop himself from asking, "Does it hurt?"

Willow shook her head. The pain was irrelevant; it was the absolute disgust that bothered her.

Silas didn't accept her silence. He reached over and opened the center console. He always traveled with a basic first-aid kit, and he quickly fished out a small tin of soothing healing balm.

"Put this on. It'll help it fade faster."

Willow didn't think it was a big deal, but considering her boss was the one pointing it out, she figured he was worried about her looking unprofessional at the office tomorrow. Not wanting to argue, she accepted the tin and carefully dabbed the ointment over the bruises.

Only after she finished did Silas finally shift the car into drive.

He drove at a slow, deliberate pace. Part of it was due to the treacherous icy roads, but mostly, it was pure selfishness. Opportunities to be alone with her were incredibly rare, and he wanted to drag the drive out for as long as possible.

Along the way, whenever he spotted an unfamiliar building or landmark, he would use it as an excuse to strike up a conversation. He navigated the chat flawlessly—never coming across as ignorant, but leaving just enough room for Willow to explain things, showing a genuine interest in New York.

After a few casual exchanges, he smoothly transitioned. "You know New York inside and out, Ms. Horgan. Did you grow up here?"

"You could say that," Willow replied. Her earliest memories were all anchored in the city, and since Martha and Benedict were both born-and-raised locals, she considered herself one by default.

"In that case, I have a favor to ask of you."

"You're too polite, Mr. Thorne. Just tell me what you need. If it's in my power, I'll definitely get it done." Willow's tone was thoroughly earnest. He had saved her from

freezing to death today, and even if he hadn't, he was her boss. Whatever he needed, she would make it happen.

Countless people would kill for an excuse to get close to a man like him, and here he was handing her an opportunity on a silver platter. Willow had enough corporate survival skills to recognize a networking advantage when she saw one.

"I know you can do it. My only concern is whether your family might object to the arrangement."

Her only real family was her mother, and Martha would never interfere with her career. Willow didn't hesitate. "They won't have any objections. Tell me what you need."

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Chapter 131

Silas was secretly thrilled she had agreed so readily. Even though he knew it was mostly out of professional obligation, her consent meant she didn't hate him, didn't it?

"I just moved to New York City and I'm still getting my bearings," he said. "I need someone familiar with the city to show me around. We can schedule it during the week, and it will count as your regular working hours. If we do it on a weekend, I'll pay you overtime."

"About that..." Willow hesitated. It wasn't that she couldn't do it, but she was genuinely confused. With his status and immense wealth, he could hire the best private tour guide in the country. Why ask her?

Silas noticed her reluctance. A brief wave of disappointment washed over him, but he didn't want to push her. "If it's inconvenient for your family, let's just forget it," he amended.

"Were you planning to find someone else? There are plenty of professional guides in New York City. I could recommend a few for you."

"No, it's fine. I'll just explore on my own," Silas replied smoothly. "There's nothing wrong with flying solo. It's just that on days with weather like this, it's easy to end up driving in circles."

Willow glanced out the window at the heavy snow. Getting lost in a blizzard did sound miserable.

She didn't press him further on why he wouldn't just hire a professional. If a man like him made a decision, he surely had his reasons. "If you don't mind that I'm not a professional," she offered, lacking a bit of confidence, "I could give it a try."

"Of course." A sudden smile broke across Silas's face.

It was just a faint curve of his lips, but Willow caught it. Her first thought was that the rumors about his ruthless demeanor were vastly exaggerated. Her second thought was that when he smiled, he was devastatingly handsome.

He usually carried a cold, heavy presence, so this sudden flash of warmth was like a glacier melting in the sun.

No matter how slow he drove, they eventually reached their destination. Despite his reluctance to part ways, Silas had to let her go.

Willow genuinely wanted to invite him in for a cup of coffee. He was her boss, after all, and he had driven all this way in the snow to bring her home. It was basic courtesy. But she was currently crashing at Jade's apartment, and it wasn't her place to invite guests over.

"Thank you so much for bringing me back today," she said. "The roads are slippery with the snow, so please drive safe on your way home."

It was a standard, polite farewell, but to Silas's ears, it carried a different weight. Was she worrying about him?

"Mm," he murmured.

"I'll head in now?"

Willow reached for the door handle, but Silas suddenly spoke up. "Wait a second."

She jumped, freezing in place, terrified she had somehow broken something in his luxury car.

Instead, Silas stepped out into the cold, walked around the hood, and opened the passenger door for her. "Alright, come on out."

For a split second, Willow just stared at him, unable to process the gesture.

For years, she had been conditioned to accept being ignored and neglected. Having a door opened for her was unimaginable. When she used to ride in Julian's car, he would sometimes force her out onto the street in the middle of a trip.

She never expected a powerful executive like Silas Thorne to personally open a car door for her.

"What's wrong? Are you cold?" Silas asked, stepping to block the freezing wind.

"I'm fine," Willow said, quickly stepping out. "I'll go now. Drive safe."

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Silas watched her retreating figure until she disappeared into the apartment building before finally pulling away from the curb.

He immediately dialed Arthur Vance. "Put together a comprehensive guide to New York City for me."

Assuming his boss was looking for some leisure time, Arthur eagerly suggested, "If you're looking to do some sightseeing, I can arrange it right away. I know a few luxury private tour companies that offer incredible service."

"I have no interest in that," Silas replied flatly. "Just prepare what I asked for."

He paused, then added, "And send me Willow's contact info."

"Right away, sir." Figuring Silas needed to discuss the project with her, Arthur forwarded the contact and then shot Willow a quick text, giving her a heads-up that Mr. Thorne might be reaching out about work.

By the time Willow saw the message, two hours had passed. She had spent the time tidying up the apartment and reviewing some research data.

She checked Arthur's warning, then spotted the pending friend request. She accepted it immediately and sent an apologetic message: [I'm so sorry, Mr. Thorne. I've been busy since I got back and just saw your request.]

Ever since he had asked for her number, Silas had been waiting. He checked his phone every few minutes, even while driving. When her message finally came through, a faint smirk touched his lips.

But the content of her text annoyed him.

Busy.

What could she possibly be busy with at home? And with whom? He didn't even need to think to guess the answer.

Silas didn't want to ask, and he definitely didn't want to know. He simply typed back: [No problem. I've been busy as well.]

Seeing his reply, Willow let out a breath of relief. At least he hadn't been sitting around waiting for her. Her guilt eased slightly. Then again, she realized she was probably overthinking it. A man in his position wouldn't waste time waiting on a text from a subordinate.

She was just about to ask what work-related issue he needed to discuss when a new message popped up: [How is your chin?]

Her chin? What did that have to do with the project?

It took Willow a moment to connect the dots. She assumed he was worried about her ability to perform her duties. [It's much better. Don't worry, it won't affect my work tomorrow.]

If it was still bruised, she would just apply extra concealer.

Silas couldn't care less about her work schedule, but since she brought it up, he let it slide. [I'll let you know when I've finalized the sightseeing plans. Naturally, we'll do it whenever it's convenient for you.]

[No problem. Just reach out whenever you're ready. I'll schedule it in advance so it won't impact our workflow.]

Silas typed again: [The wind was harsh when you got out of the car. Are you feeling alright?]

[Yes, I'm perfectly fine. Please rest assured, I won't be delayed for work tomorrow.]

Why did every single reply always circle back to work? Silas couldn't fathom it.

Meanwhile, Willow was equally baffled. Hadn't Arthur said he wanted to discuss the project? Why was he beating around the bush?

[Alright. Get back to what you were doing.]

Seeing that, Willow was completely lost. Worried he had genuinely forgotten, she offered a polite reminder: [Did you happen to forget something?]

[Forget what?]

[Weren't you reaching out to discuss a project issue?]

A project issue? Why was it always about work? Silas rubbed his temples. [Who told you that?]

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Chapter 133

Willow stared at her screen. He sounded completely clueless. Had there been a miscommunication?

Afraid she had spoken out of turn, she quickly backpedaled: [I must have misunderstood. I'm so sorry. I won't bother you any further.]

Reading her apology, Silas frowned. He had intimidated her again.

He quickly course-corrected: [It's not your fault. I do have an issue regarding the project.]

[Did Arthur say something to you?]

[Did he mention what the issue was?]

Willow hadn't planned on throwing Arthur under the bus, but since Silas asked, she decided to be honest. [Mr. Vance did mention you might have some project-related questions, but he didn't specify what they were.]

So that was it. It made sense why Arthur and Willow had jumped to that conclusion.

Silas racked his brain but couldn't come up with a single legitimate work question. He hadn't asked for her number to talk about biotech.

Finally, he typed: [It's too complicated to explain over text. We'll discuss it at the office tomorrow.]

[Understood.]

The next day, Monday.

The first thing Willow did when she arrived at her desk was review the email Clarence Vance had sent late last week. It contained the complete list of potential suppliers, along with their respective portfolios.

She went through them one by one. Ente, Liye, Bioway, Mingxin, and Sinclair Group. Out of all the candidates, Sinclair Group had scored the highest overall rating.

Willow harbored no personal vendettas when it came to business. She valued competence above all else. If partnering with Sinclair Group was the best move for Merit Biotech, she was willing to sign off on it. But the moment she opened Sinclair's proposal, her brow furrowed in disbelief.

With just a glance, she could tell the entire packet was a hastily stitched-together plagiarism of the templates she had created during her tenure at Sinclair Group. They hadn't even bothered to update several of the old project names and datasets. And this was the proposal that had somehow secured the top score?

She didn't know what Clarence was trying to pull.

If he genuinely hadn't noticed the glaring errors, he was incompetent.

If he had noticed and ignored them, he was corrupt.

Either way, Willow wasn't going to let it slide. Such negligence was unacceptable for a manager in his position.

She outright rejected the entire batch of proposals and ordered him to redo the evaluations.

When Clarence received the notification, he stormed into her office, absolutely furious. He flat-out refused to redo the work, accusing her of deliberately making his life miserable. He stood there, red-faced and yelling, for several minutes.

It wasn't until Willow calmly opened the files and pointed out every single discrepancy to his face that his anger fizzled into a panicked silence.

Standing by her desk, Clarence felt a cold sweat break out.

He had assumed Willow was just a corporate figurehead—a pretty face who didn't understand the technical side of the business. He thought he could just blow smoke and ultimately call the shots himself. He never expected her to actually read the dense scientific documents, let alone understand them deeply enough to catch his shortcuts.

He scrambled for an excuse. "These aren't vital metrics. It really doesn't matter. It won't affect the final grading outcome anyway."

"You don't get to decide what affects the outcome," Willow said, her tone deadpan and authoritative. "The final evaluation does. Furthermore, if you're making basic data errors in the preliminary stages, how can you guarantee the practical implementation won't be a disaster?"

Before he could respond, she pinned him with a sharp glare. "What I want to know is how you managed to miss something this obvious."

Instantly, Clarence's face flushed a deep crimson. He felt completely humiliated and trapped.

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Chapter 134

He was caught between a rock and a hard place, unsure of how to navigate the trap she had just set.

If he admitted he hadn't noticed the errors, he was confessing to sheer incompetence.

If he claimed he had noticed but deliberately swept them under the rug, he was confessing to sabotage and a lack of integrity.

Weighing his options, Clarence decided to play the fool, though his tone remained defiant. "You clearly don't understand the sheer volume of paperwork involved in supplier selection. With this many files, overlooking a tiny data point or two is completely normal. It's not a big deal."

"You mean these files?" Willow tapped the stack of documents on her desk, which comprised nearly everything he had submitted. "I finished reading all of these. It took me exactly one hour. I didn't find it particularly challenging, and I certainly don't think it's 'normal' to overlook critical details."

Clarence scoffed. "Are you just trying to show off?"

"I'm trying to teach you some professional accountability," Willow fired back severely. "Your position oversees the most critical phase of this project. If the foundation cracks at your level, the subsequent implementation will completely fail."

Clarence's face hardened. "I've been managing projects for years. I don't need lectures from you."

"Yet the facts remain. You made a massive mistake."

Losing his temper, Clarence raised his voice. "What exactly do you want from me? It's just a couple of numbers! Are you really going to drag this out endlessly?"

Ignoring his outburst, Willow maintained her strict, business-like composure. "You have two options. Option one: you get Sinclair Group to provide a revised, accurate proposal within twenty-four hours. Option two: we throw their bid in the trash and select a supplier from the remaining four candidates."

The ultimatum left Clarence stunned. He had already witnessed Willow's ruthless efficiency; she wasn't making an empty threat. If she said they were out, they were out.

Still, he tried to salvage his pride. "If you do this, aren't you worried about delaying the project? What happens when Mr. Vance and Mr. Thorne come after you for slowing us down?"

He was bluffing. He had already tested the waters with Arthur and knew the executive assistant was firmly in Willow's corner.

Willow wasn't entirely certain how upper management would react, but she knew they had placed her in this role to do exactly this—clean house. "You are more than welcome to take your complaints to them," she said smoothly. "But before you go running to the boss, don't forget the clock is ticking. If Sinclair Group wants to stay in the running, today is their final deadline."

Clarence stormed out of her office with a face like thunder, grinding his teeth in frustration. Left with no other choice, he dialed Vivienne.

Despite trying to soften the blow over the phone, the moment Vivienne heard the news, she exploded.

First, she was deeply offended that anyone dared to criticize her work. She vehemently insisted her proposal was flawless—a masterpiece of corporate strategy. If there were mistakes, it was obviously because the Merit Biotech team had misread it.

When Clarence helplessly pointed out the specific plagiarized data sets, she stubbornly refused to take the blame, insisting it must have been a printing error on her assistant's end.

Clarence couldn't care less whether it was a printing error or utter incompetence. All that mattered was getting a revised proposal by the end of the day; otherwise, Sinclair Group would be disqualified.

After listening to his frantic demands, Vivienne fell silent. Then, her voice turned sharp. "Did you just say this new VP was the one who found the errors? She's the one demanding a rewrite?"

"Yes, it's her," Clarence confirmed, seizing the opportunity to drag Willow's name through the mud. "The woman is clueless, but she loves throwing her weight around. If it weren't for her, this whole process would have been smooth sailing."

"Is that so?" Willow sneered coldly. "Well, it looks like I'll have to pay this new VP a visit."

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Bravado aside, once Vivienne hung up the phone, reality set in. She had to produce an updated proposal, and she was entirely incapable of doing it herself. The plagiarized draft had already exhausted her limited abilities.

After a moment of panic, she grabbed the files and headed straight for Julian's office.

Julian was sitting at his desk, staring blankly out the window, replaying the dinner he'd had with Willow the night before. Hearing Vivienne walk in, he snapped back to reality. "What is it?"

His sudden jolt was obvious, and Vivienne frowned. She had noticed he was zoning out a lot lately. But she didn't have the luxury of dissecting his mood right now; she needed to save the Merit Biotech deal.

"Julian, do you have a minute?"

Julian glanced at his watch. "I have a meeting in thirty minutes."

Vivienne froze. He had never spoken to her like that before. In the past, no matter how swamped he was, he would drop everything the second she walked through his door. Setting a hard time limit felt jarringly cold.

She swallowed her unease. "What's going on? What's wrong?" he prompted.

Pulling herself together, Vivienne forced a helpless sigh. "It's about the Merit Biotech project. The technical documents Leo Yardley's team submitted are full of mistakes. I've told them to fix it over and over, but they refuse to listen. I'm just at my wit's end."

Playing the victim, she slid the documents across his desk.

As expected, Julian's brow furrowed the moment he started reading.

"This is what they prepared?"

"What's wrong? Is it that bad?" Vivienne asked tentatively.

"It's a complete disaster," Julian said, his voice dropping to a harsh register. "Make them rewrite it immediately. I wouldn't even approve this internally, let alone send it to a giant like Merit Biotech."

Vivienne pouted, thinking he was overreacting, but she didn't dare argue. "Merit Biotech requires the updated version by the end of the day. If I kick it back to Leo's team now, we'll miss the deadline."

Julian shot her a sharp look.

Meeting his gaze, Vivienne felt a spike of guilt, but she was out of options. She couldn't possibly go back to Leo. Bracing herself, she pleaded, "Julian, as a favor to me, could you help revise it? If you step in, I know it'll be perfect."

Julian hadn't planned on doing the grunt work, but he couldn't bring himself to reject her plea. He hit a button on his intercom. "Push my next meeting to the afternoon."

For the next few hours, Julian ruthlessly overhauled the proposal while Vivienne sat quietly beside him. Knowing absolutely nothing about the science, she didn't dare make a sound.

Halfway through, Julian suddenly paused. "Who came up with the idea for this experimental control group?"

Vivienne jumped, terrified he had found an error. She leaned in and realized he was pointing at a data set regarding "cellular self-repair metrics"—something she had blindly copy-pasted from one of Willow's old files.

Unsure of his angle, she cautiously tested the waters. "Why? Is there something wrong with the numbers?"

She had her excuse ready; the second he criticized the data, she would throw Leo and his team to the wolves.

Instead, Julian shook his head. "No, the data is flawless. In fact, it's incredibly insightful. I'd argue it's the strongest part of the entire proposal."