

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

Chapter 136

Vivienne blinked, taken aback. "Really?"

Recovering quickly, she put on a mask of modest brilliance. "It was just an idea I threw out there. I didn't expect you to be so impressed by it."

Julian looked up at her, unspoken admiration shining in his eyes. "Cellular repair is the holy grail of gene therapy. This approach heavily utilizes homologous recombination and the CRISPR gene-editing system. Compared to traditional methods, it bypasses the risks of random insertion mutations. And using a homologous control group is the fastest way to verify the results. It's a stroke of genius that you thought of this."

Vivienne didn't understand a single syllable of the scientific jargon, but the praise went straight to her head. "It wasn't that difficult, really."

"So, what are the final conclusions?" Julian asked.

"Conclusions?" Vivienne echoed blankly. "Weren't they included in the file?"

"No. The proposal only contains the raw data."

Panic seized her chest. She had no idea what the conclusions were—she had stolen the entire concept from Willow. Desperate to cover her tracks, she lied through her teeth. "Oh, right, I remember now. We haven't finalized the conclusions because the sample size isn't large enough to be statistically significant yet. I'll be overseeing the next phase of testing soon."

Julian nodded, satisfied with her excuse. "It's a phenomenal concept. I want to roll this out as an internal initiative across the company. How would you feel about taking the lead as the project director?"

Normally, Vivienne would kill for that kind of spotlight, but this time, it terrified her. She quickly waved off the offer. "It was just a fleeting moment of inspiration. If we want to implement it company-wide, it's going to take months of rigorous validation. Plus, my hands are completely tied with the Merit Biotech deal right now. I just don't have the bandwidth."

"Fair enough. We'll revisit it later." Julian didn't press the issue and returned his focus to the documents.

However, the deeper he read, the more irritated he became. Aside from the brilliant experimental data and the overarching framework, the rest of the proposal was littered with amateur mistakes. The tone was completely disjointed—one paragraph read like it was written by a world-class scientist, and the next sounded like a high school biology project. It was no wonder Merit Biotech had kicked it back.

He dropped his pen and pinched the bridge of his nose in exhaustion. "You mentioned this was rejected by Merit's new VP?"

Seeing an opening, Vivienne immediately stepped behind his chair and began massaging his shoulders. "Yes, it's her. Word on the street is she has zero actual experience and just loves throwing her title around to feel important. If it weren't for her ego trip, we wouldn't be jumping through these hoops."

Hearing her complaints, Julian quietly disagreed. He didn't say it out loud to spare Vivienne's feelings, but his curiosity about Merit Biotech's new VP was piqued.

Even though they hadn't formally met, her swift rejection of this schizophrenic proposal proved she was meticulous, detail-oriented, and possessed a deep understanding of genetic technology.

"The revisions are done. Go ahead and submit it," Julian said abruptly.

"That fast?" Vivienne beamed. "I knew you were a genius, but I didn't think you'd fix it this quickly."

She reached out to continue rubbing his shoulders, but Julian dodged her hands. "I have other meetings to prep for. You have the files, I won't walk you out."

"Oh. Okay." Catching the cold dismissal in his voice, Vivienne swallowed her pride. She gathered the revised paperwork and practically fled the office.

The moment she stepped into the elevator, she fired off the digital files to Clarence. She followed up with a vicious warning text: Julian himself had rewritten the proposal. If Clarence screwed this up, she would ruin him.

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Clarence was practically sweating bullets until he opened the revised files. The moment he scanned the pages, his confidence skyrocketed. He could guarantee there wouldn't be

any issues this time. Not only were the glaring data errors scrubbed clean, but the entire logical flow and structural framework had been masterfully overhauled. The proposal was so bulletproof he wouldn't even need to manipulate the grading system behind the scenes for Sinclair Group to win the bid.

A smug sneer curled his lips. He was going to take this masterpiece and shove it right in Willow's face.

Marching into her office, he didn't even hand over the files first. Instead, he immediately dropped Julian's name, arrogantly declaring that the CEO of Sinclair Group had personally overseen the redesign. He practically demanded she treat the proposal with the utmost respect.

To his disappointment, Willow didn't bat an eye. She couldn't care less whose name was attached to the document; she only cared about the actual science. Still, she was mildly surprised. Julian was famously ruthless with his time. The fact that he was willing to personally rewrite a vendor proposal just to bail Vivienne out was quite the statement.

The revised document was far denser than the original draft, and Willow took her time reading through it.

As the minutes ticked by, Clarence grew increasingly impatient. He had fully prepared himself for another lecture and had a dozen rebuttals locked and loaded. But when Willow finally looked up, her answer threw him completely off balance.

"This draft is acceptable," she said flatly. "You may push it forward through the standard company protocols."

"What?" Clarence stammered, entirely unprepared for the green light. "Are you serious?"

Willow didn't bother justifying her decision to him. Her professional code was simple: focus on the work, not the politics. She only cared about competence and results. Even though she knew she was dealing with Sinclair Group and would inevitably have to cross paths with Julian again, as long as the partnership benefited Merit Biotech and advanced the project, she was more than capable of burying her personal grudges.

"I said the draft is acceptable, not that the contract is theirs," Willow reminded him sharply. "There are still several rounds of rigorous vetting to get through. Only if Sinclair Group passes every single audit will they secure the bid."

"As long as you don't deliberately sabotage it, they won't have a problem," Clarence muttered under his breath. He knew the subsequent protocols like the back of his hand; he could navigate them in his sleep.

"Excuse me?" Willow hadn't quite caught his mumble.

"Nothing," Clarence replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "It just goes to show that doing good work is never as effective as dropping the right name."

In his mind, Willow had only approved the proposal because she was terrified of offending Julian. His respect for her plummeted even further. All her righteous grandstanding about professional accountability was nothing but a performance. At the end of the day, she was just another spineless corporate bootlicker, bending the knee to the highest authority.

Willow couldn't even begin to decipher his unhinged logic. The man wasn't making any sense. Too exhausted to entertain his petty drama, she gave him an ultimatum. "If you want to move this forward, go file the paperwork immediately. If you'd rather waste my time, I'll go ahead and evaluate the other four companies."

That lit a fire under him. "I'm doing it! I'm filing it right now!"

The second he stepped out of her office, Clarence called Vivienne. Even though the ink wasn't dry on the contract, he was desperate to claim credit for the victory.

He spun a narrative where half the success was due to his brilliant negotiating skills, and the other half was thanks to Vivienne bringing Julian on board. He smugly recounted how the terrifying new VP had instantly caved the moment Julian's name was dropped.

Listening to the recap, Vivienne scoffed. So, this legendary VP was nothing special after all. She had been stressing over how to handle the new executive, but it turned out to be a waste of energy.

Everyone had a weakness. And now that she knew the new VP was easily intimidated by power, she knew exactly how to play her.

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The subsequent corporate audits moved at breakneck speed. Less than a week later, the official announcement was made: Sinclair Group had won the bid.

To celebrate Vivienne's victory, Julian hosted a lavish dinner at The Sapphire Lounge, New York City's most exclusive private club, a sanctuary reserved strictly for the ultra-wealthy and elite.

Inside the private dining room, Vivienne sat in the seat of honor, her face glowing as she soaked up the endless stream of compliments.

Toby was the first to speak up. He didn't understand what a corporate bid was, but he loved mimicking the adults. "Congratulations, Auntie! Auntie isn't just the prettiest girl in the world, she's the smartest too! You're the best!"

With a giggling cheer, he threw himself into Vivienne's arms.

In public, he still referred to her as "Auntie." Vivienne had carefully coached him: at home, he was allowed to call her "Mommy," but around outsiders, "Auntie" was the safer play.

Vivienne caught him, planting a kiss on his cheek. "Aren't you the sweetest! But you know, your dad did a lot of the hard work for this project. If he hadn't stepped in, we might not have won. Go on, say thank you to your dad."

Eager to please, Toby spun around to face Julian. "Thank you, Dad! I'm gonna learn everything from you so when I grow up, I can be a strong man and protect Auntie just like you do!"

He had always been fiercely manipulative with his affections. His little speech had the entire room bursting into laughter. Seth Sterling was so delighted he scooped the boy up and spun him in circles.

"You hear that? You're going to grow up to be a responsible man, Toby. You and your dad are going to keep Vivienne safe from everything!"

Once Toby was set back down, the conversation naturally drifted to the Merit Biotech deal. Since Vivienne had already gossiped about the friction with Merit's new VP, the entire table was up to speed on the drama.

Seth was the first to scoff. "And here I thought this new VP was some kind of untouchable crusader. Turns out she folded like a cheap suit the second Julian's name was dropped. I despise bureaucrats like that—incompetent hacks who just want to throw their weight around. You shouldn't have given her an inch from the start. Flashing your trump card and putting her in her place is the only way to deal with that trash."

Vivienne put on a mask of shocked innocence. "Oh, I'm sure it wasn't that malicious. Maybe we're just overthinking it. I bet she was simply following standard protocol."

This was her classic playbook. She was the one who ignited the rumor, she was the one who painted the target on the VP's back, but the moment the crowd turned into a mob, she played the gentle peacemaker.

Seth immediately took the bait. "Protocol, my ass! You're way too naive, Vivienne. You haven't seen the kind of snakes out there. I've been in this game a long time, and I know a power-tripping bully when I see one. You secured the bid, sure, but you need to watch your back around a woman like that."

Seeking validation, Seth looked across the table. "Am I right, Julian?"

Julian raised an eyebrow. He didn't say yes, and he didn't say no. He merely gave a dismissive chuckle and let the topic die.

Honestly, the initial rejection of the proposal had completely aligned with his expectations. Winning the bid had also been exactly what he anticipated. Looking at the situation objectively from a managerial standpoint, he completely understood and respected the Merit VP's actions.

Far from wanting to mock her, he was increasingly eager to meet her.

Feeling the awkward silence after Julian iced him out, Seth scrambled to regain control of the room. Desperate for an easy laugh, he decided to bring up his favorite punching bag: Willow.

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Historically, whenever the energy in their clique dipped, offering Willow up for slaughter was a guaranteed crowd-pleaser. The moment her name was dropped, everyone would exchange knowing smirks, and the ridicule would flow like wine.

Leaning back in his chair, Seth deployed his usual cruel tone. "Does anyone know which rock Willow crawled under? Now that she's been exiled from Sinclair Group, she probably can't even afford groceries. I bet she's just locked in her apartment, crying her eyes out all day."

He chuckled at his own joke, waiting for the chorus of laughter.

Instead, dead silence blanketed the room.

Lucas Lane stared at his glass, refusing to engage. Lately, whenever Willow's name came up, his mind involuntarily flashed to her striking amber eyes, and a strange, suffocating tightness gripped his chest. Unable to explain the sudden guilt, he chose to keep his mouth shut.

Hugo Harrington, as usual, ignored the bait. In fact, Seth's cruelty genuinely disgusted him. He was the only one in the room who knew Willow had already secured a new job—though he didn't know the specifics—but he had zero desire to share that information with this pack of wolves.

Julian also remained terrifyingly silent. Ever since he had seen Willow's stunning physical transformation, a tectonic shift had occurred in his psyche. The sadistic thrill he used to get from tearing her down had completely evaporated. It just wasn't fun anymore.

Seeing the heavy hitters of the group ice Seth out, Vivienne wisely held her tongue. She desperately wanted to join the pile-on, but she wasn't about to stick her neck out if the men weren't participating.

The suffocating silence left Seth stranded. He let out a nervous, strained laugh. "What's the matter with you guys? Why is everyone acting like someone died? Did you all get hexed or something?"

Still, no one engaged.

Humiliated, Seth scanned the faces around the table before shooting an apologetic, desperate look at Vivienne.

Vivienne gave him a flat glance and looked away. Her complete focus was locked onto Julian and Hugo. Neither of them had reacted with their usual cold mockery when Willow's name was mentioned. The sudden shift in their attitudes made her blood boil with irrational jealousy.

Unable to endure the agonizing tension any longer, Lucas finally stepped in to play peacemaker. "Let's drop it. Why are we talking about irrelevant nobodies? Let's just eat. Tonight is all about celebrating Vivienne's massive win. She's the star of the show."

The tension broke, and everyone took their seats as the conversation pivoted safely back to Vivienne's brilliance.

Soon, the private dancers and musicians Julian had hired took the stage, and the room was once again filled with loud, chaotic energy.

Halfway through the night, Seth slipped out to use the restroom. As he was walking back down the opulent corridor, a slender, breathtakingly elegant woman walked past him.

He froze, utterly mesmerized.

Even though he had only caught a glimpse of her back, her graceful posture and radiant aura were undeniable. If her back looked like that, he could only imagine how stunning her face must be.

Like a man possessed, he immediately chased after her. But she moved quickly, and by the time he rounded the corner, she had vanished into the labyrinth of the lounge.

He trudged back into the private dining room, looking utterly defeated.

Noticing his dramatic shift in mood, Lucas nudged him. "What's wrong with you? You go to the bathroom and come back looking like a ghost stole your soul."

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"Is it that obvious?" Seth forced an awkward laugh. Actually, 'stole his soul' felt like an incredibly accurate description.

Lucas didn't dignify that with an answer, merely shooting him a deadpan look.

Unable to hold it in, Seth practically exploded. But before he spoke, he checked over his shoulder to make sure Vivienne wasn't paying attention. Leaning in, he lowered his voice to a frantic whisper. "I have to tell you something. I just saw the most gorgeous woman on the planet."

Lucas rolled his eyes so hard it hurt. "And I'm supposed to be shocked by this?"

In their billionaire social circles, supermodels and actresses were a dime a dozen. A pretty face was the least surprising thing in New York City.

"No, you don't get it! This was different. I'm telling you, it was completely different!" Seth practically vibrated with excitement. "I only saw her from behind, but I swear to god, I already know her face is going to be absolute perfection!"

"So, let me get this straight," Lucas drawled, ruthlessly mocking him. "You didn't even see her face?"

"That's not the point!" Seth hissed, deeply offended. "I'm telling you, she was a literal goddess. I have never seen anyone with that kind of magnetic presence in my entire life."

Lucas just chuckled and turned his attention back to his drink, entirely dismissing the rant.

Completely deflated that no one believed him, Seth slumped in his chair. The phantom image of the woman's graceful silhouette hijacked his brain. He spent the rest of the banquet fidgeting, his eyes constantly darting toward the door, praying for a second chance encounter.

Meanwhile, Willow was experiencing The Sapphire Lounge for the very first time. Jade Yates had insisted on treating her to dinner, and the legendary exclusivity of the venue definitely lived up to the hype.

After returning from the restroom, she chatted with Jade for a bit before they decided to call it a night. As they walked toward the exit, they casually debated their plans for the upcoming weekend.

Suddenly, Jade's phone rang with an urgent crisis from the law firm. She waved for Willow to hold on and stepped aside to take the call, gesturing for her to wait in the grand foyer.

The opulent lobby was bustling with New York City's elite. Disliking the chaotic energy, Willow retreated to a quiet alcove near a massive floral arrangement. Just as she settled in, a loud group of men and women approached from down the hall.

Wanting to avoid the drunken commotion, she instinctively took a step back into the shadows.

It was that exact, subtle movement that caught the eye of Seth, who was walking out with the rest of his entourage.

He had been scanning the crowd like a hawk, and the moment he locked onto that familiar, elegant silhouette, his heart stopped.

"That's her!" Seth screamed at the top of his lungs.

The sudden, unhinged shout made the entire lobby freeze. Julian and Hugo frowned in absolute bewilderment, while Vivienne openly grimaced, deeply embarrassed by his classless public outburst.

Only Lucas knew exactly what was happening.

Following Seth's frantic pointing, Lucas's gaze landed on the woman standing in the alcove. She had a breathtakingly slender figure, radiating a serene, untouchable elegance that commanded the room. In a fraction of a second, Lucas completely understood Seth's obsession. Even from behind, her aura was so intoxicating it was hard to look away.

Lucas turned, about to throw a teasing comment at his friend, but Seth was already gone.

Completely abandoning Vivienne and the rest of the group, Seth sprinted across the marble floor toward the alcove. His heart hammered against his ribs. He didn't care about anything else—he just had to see the face of the goddess he was going to conquer.

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Seth hesitated before approaching the beautiful woman, stopping a few feet away, feeling his heart pound wildly against his ribs. Gathering his courage, he spoke up, "Hi, I'm Seth Sterling. Could I get to know you?"

Willow was in the middle of typing a text. Hearing her name, she turned around, completely stunned to see Seth standing there. The shock quickly morphed into blatant disgust.

Seth froze as well.

Up close, she was even more breathtakingly beautiful than from behind. Her complexion was radiant, her features flawless—she looked like a vision. But he never in a million years expected this woman to be Willow.

The overweight girl he used to ruthlessly mock and bully?

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks, leaving him rooted to the spot, entirely unsure of what to do with himself.

As the awkward silence stretched, Julian and the rest of the group walked over. Some of them had already seen Willow after her transformation, while others hadn't. Regardless, every single one of them was momentarily captivated by her appearance.

She was wearing a simple white sweater and blue jeans, her hair pinned up casually. It was a completely ordinary outfit, yet her stunning curves and striking features made it look impossibly chic.

She stood there quietly, like a lone lily bathed in moonlight, effortlessly commanding everyone's attention.

Julian raised a brow. Hugo and Lucas remained silent, while Vivienne glared at her, her eyes practically burning with undisguised jealousy and hatred.

Willow stared back at the group with an icy demeanor. Her initial surprise at bumping into Seth faded as she realized the entire Sinclair entourage was here for a get-together.

She wanted absolutely nothing to do with any of them. Except for Hugo.

Offering Hugo a polite, subtle nod of acknowledgment, she immediately spun on her heel and walked away.

Seth stood there in a daze long after she had disappeared. He rubbed his eyes vigorously, staring at the empty space. "Am I seeing things? Was that really Willow?"

Lucas was equally shocked by the drastic change. "It had to be her. Her features are slightly different now, but you can still tell. I just don't understand how she managed to drop all that weight so fast."

Hugo, who rarely chimed in on these matters, suddenly spoke up. "Just because you couldn't pull it off doesn't mean someone else can't."

Everyone turned to look at him, surprised by the sudden, sharp jab.

Hugo completely ignored their stares, thoroughly unbothered. "What? Am I wrong?"

When they really thought about it, he wasn't wrong. But Seth certainly wasn't going to admit that. He quickly pivoted the conversation to Julian. "Julian, did you know she lost all this weight?"

"Yeah," Julian replied flatly. Not only did he know, he had seen her several times already.

"Don't you think she looks completely different? Way prettier than before..."

Lucas suddenly elbowed Seth in the ribs, cutting him off mid-sentence. Seth glanced over and saw that Vivienne's face had contorted into a mask of pure rage.

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Vivienne already felt a crushing sense of crisis the moment she laid eyes on Willow. Seeing the entire group captivated by her made Vivienne want to snap. She wanted nothing more than to walk up and slap Willow across the face.

But to maintain the gentle, innocent persona she had carefully crafted, she swallowed her fury and forced a fake smile. "She really does look beautiful now. Her figure is stunning. I don't think I even compare to her anymore."

She immediately looked at Julian, desperately hoping he would contradict her, hoping he would tell her that Willow was nothing compared to her, weight loss or not. Unfortunately, she didn't get the reassurance she sought.

Julian didn't even acknowledge the comment, acting as if he hadn't heard a single word.

It was Seth who jumped in to rescue her pride. "No way. No matter how much she changes, she couldn't hold a candle to you. You'll always be the princess of our group."

But even Seth's flattery did absolutely nothing to soothe Vivienne's spiraling insecurity.

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Meanwhile, Jade walked back from taking her phone call and instantly spotted Julian's group. She grabbed Willow's arm, her eyes flashing with righteous fury. "What are the odds? Look who we bumped into. Come on, I'm going to give that scumbag a piece of my mind!"

Willow firmly planted her feet. She didn't want Jade getting dragged into this mess. "Forget it. He's not worth the breath. Let's just go."

"Not a chance. I am not letting him get away with this today."

Jade already knew the gist of the hell Julian had put Willow through. She just hadn't had the time or opportunity to cross paths with him until now. Since he was right here, she was determined to make him pay.

Assuming Willow was just intimidated, Jade squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry, you don't have to say a word. Just stand behind me."

Without waiting for an answer, Jade marched straight toward Julian. Realizing she couldn't stop her, Willow reluctantly followed.

As Jade approached, she noticed the other men and women standing with Julian. She didn't bother looking closely at any of them. As far as she was concerned, anyone associating with him was just as guilty.

Without skipping a beat, she unleashed her fury. "Julian, you absolute piece of trash!"

She shouted it with her full chest. Her voice echoed sharply across the lobby, immediately drawing the stares of nearly everyone in the vicinity.

Jade didn't care who was watching. "Scoundrel! Jerk! Degenerate! You had a good wife and a solid family, but you just had to play the cheating game with a mistress! It's a miracle you haven't been struck by lightning!"

Her sharp gaze snapped to Vivienne. "And you must be the mistress? Face, body, class—you don't even come close to Willow on your best day. You should really take a look in the mirror before trying to steal someone's husband. Then again, a garbage man like him is only a prize to someone like you."

Vivienne's face flushed crimson. Her illicit relationship with Julian was an open secret, but no one had ever dared to humiliate her like this in public.

She was used to being endlessly flattered and protected. If things ever got uncomfortable, people in their circle politely looked the other way. She had never been publicly eviscerated like this before.

Trembling with rage, Vivienne realized she couldn't exactly start a screaming match in the middle of a lobby. Defenseless, she turned to Julian for help.

Julian finally recognized Jade. He vaguely remembered her as Willow's friend from college. "This isn't the place for your psychotic outbursts," he said coldly.

"Psychotic? I'm just stating the facts," Jade retorted. Despite her harsh words, she maintained a calm, mocking smile, entirely in control of her emotions. "If you're bold enough to do it, why are you so afraid of people talking about it?"

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"What? Oh, so now you care about your reputation? Maybe you should have thought about that before acting like a total scumbag."

"That's enough," Julian warned, stepping forward to loom intimidatingly over Jade. "I suggest you back off."

Willow, who had been standing quietly by Jade's side waiting to pull her away, immediately stepped in. She shielded Jade with her body, staring Julian down face-to-face.

"Control your friend," Julian demanded coldly.

"Control yourself," Willow fired back without missing a beat. "My friend didn't say anything wrong."

Normally, Willow would never bother arguing with him. It was pointless. But Jade was a different story. She would never let Julian intimidate or bully her best friend.

The tension in the air instantly plummeted.

Seth and Lucas exchanged stunned looks. They had never encountered a woman like Jade. In their social circles, women were always docile, gentle, and utterly obedient. This fiery, relentless aggression was entirely new to them, and they had no idea how to react.

Hugo, on the other hand, watched the entire scene unfold with genuine amusement. He recognized Jade immediately from her social media posts. She was a true vanguard of justice—sharp, decisive, and refreshingly straightforward.

Jade was gearing up to hurl another insult when she finally noticed Hugo standing off to the side. She froze completely. She hadn't realized he was with them.

Did that mean he had heard every single unhinged insult she just screamed at Julian?

A tidal wave of embarrassment, regret, and utter mortification washed over her. Her mind went blank. They hadn't even officially met yet, and she had just made the worst possible first impression. How was she supposed to face him now?

But the internal panic lasted barely a minute before Jade firmly pushed it away. She wasn't sorry for what she said. Even if she had known Hugo was standing right there, she still would have torn into Julian. Defending Willow was all that mattered.

There was absolutely nothing to regret.

Having said her piece, Jade grabbed Willow's arm and marched out of the building. On the drive back, she brought up the divorce. Willow didn't hold anything back, explaining the disastrous confrontation at the Sinclair estate.

Even if Jade hadn't asked, Willow would have told her. The mutual agreement route was officially a dead end. Litigation was her only option now.

After hearing the full story, Jade cursed Julian out all over again, then gave Willow a reassuring squeeze. "Don't stress about it. I'll prep all the litigation files. Just give me the necessary details. If he wants a fight, we'll give him a bloodbath."

"Okay," Willow agreed quietly. She didn't care about anything else anymore. Her singular focus was securing this divorce.

Whether they had to drag it through court or make a public spectacle out of it, she didn't care. She was going to break free from Julian once and for all.

Meanwhile, Vivienne was still seething over the encounter with Willow. To make matters worse, Julian hadn't said a single word to her on the entire ride back. He was clearly distracted.

Desperate to regain his attention, she showered, spritzed on his favorite perfume, and slipped into lingerie, waiting for him in bed. When he never showed up, she finally went looking for him in the study.

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The study was completely dark, save for the glow of the computer monitor. Julian sat alone in the shadows, smoking a cigarette in heavy silence.

Displayed on the screen was an old photograph of Willow from one of her past projects. Staring at it, Julian couldn't stop thinking about how she looked today.

She really had changed completely. Not just her appearance, but her entire demeanor. That timid, compliant girl who used to avoid his gaze was entirely gone. In her place was a cold, resilient woman who looked ready to fight to the death.

Julian took a drag of his cigarette and scoffed inwardly. How naive.

Suddenly, the study door cracked open. Julian quickly slammed the laptop shut and looked up to see Vivienne.

Taking in her seductive attire, his eyes narrowed slightly.

Vivienne glided toward him, purposefully settling onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and murmured, "Why aren't you in bed yet? I've been waiting for you."

"I've got things to do," Julian replied. He knew exactly what she was offering, yet strangely, he felt absolutely no desire. If anything, he felt a nagging sense of irritation.

He patted her shoulder dismissively. "Go to sleep. I have more work to finish."

It was a blatant rejection. The color instantly drained from Vivienne's face.

In the past, Julian was always the one initiating intimacy. To swallow her pride, offer herself, and be completely brushed off was devastating.

Coupled with the public humiliation she endured earlier that day, Vivienne's carefully maintained composure finally shattered. Tears welled in her eyes, and her voice trembled. "Julian, do you not love me anymore?"

Julian frowned. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous," Vivienne sobbed, letting all her suppressed insecurities spill over. "You barely look at me lately. You don't care about me the way you used to. I'm not stupid, I can feel the distance. I just want to know why. Is it because of Willow? Because she lost weight and looks pretty now? Are you attracted to her? Do you regret not choosing her?"

"Why are you bringing her into this?" Julian snapped, visibly annoyed. But he held back from lashing out, knowing deep down that her accusations weren't entirely baseless.

"I can't help it! I'm terrified!" Vivienne cried harder. "I love you so much, and Toby is still so young. If something changed between us, I wouldn't even know how to survive."

"Stop talking nonsense," Julian said, wiping her tears away. Seeing her cry genuinely made his chest tighten.

It was true. Vivienne had stayed by his side for years without an official title and had given him a son. Their bond was unbreakable. His current fixation on Willow was just the temporary novelty of her new attitude.

Julian pulled Vivienne into a tight embrace. "Alright, that's enough. It's my fault for making you overthink things. But you have to trust me. I promised I'd take care of you both for the rest of my life, and I will."

"Do you mean it?" Vivienne sniffled, her anxiety finally easing a fraction.

"Of course. When have I ever lied to you?"

"I believe you." Vivienne knew when to pull back and play the devoted partner, but a heavy weight still pressed on her chest.

Back when Julian showed zero interest in Willow, Vivienne had been perfectly fine living in their twisted arrangement, with Willow pushed to the side. But ever since she noticed Julian's shifting attention, her sense of crisis had reached a boiling point.

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She needed more than just a vague promise. She had to push her agenda.

Watching Julian's expression carefully, she tested the waters. "Since Willow isn't at Sinclair Group anymore, what about your marriage..."

"She'll come back eventually," Julian cut her off instantly.

As for the marriage itself, the mere mention of it dragged Julian's thoughts back to the Sinclair estate and the divorce papers Willow had slapped on the table. A surge of irrational anger flared inside him.

How dare she? How dare she be the one to demand a divorce?

He was going to call her bluff and see just how far she was really willing to take this.

Wanting to shut down the conversation entirely, Julian scooped Vivienne up into his arms and carried her straight to the bedroom.

Three days later.

Julian had just wrapped up a meeting and was reviewing project files when a courier delivered a legal summons.

Assuming it was a standard corporate dispute—which was common for a giant like Sinclair Group—he barely paid attention, intending to hand it off to his assistant to route to the legal department.

But his assistant stood frozen nearby, visibly sweating and refusing to speak. Usually, the assistant reviewed all incoming documents first, but this time, he was terrified. After glancing at the bold heading, he hadn't dared to read a single word further.

Julian grew irritated by the silence. "What? Are you deaf?"

The assistant swallowed hard. "Sir... you might want to look at this file yourself."

Frowning, Julian tore open the envelope. The first words that jumped out at him were "Divorce Petition." And right below that, clearly and unmistakably listed as the plaintiff, was Willow Horgan.

Julian let out a dark, cold laugh. So that was it. She bypassed his corporate lawyers and had it sent directly to his personal desk, ensuring he had to open it himself.

Good. Very good. She had some real nerve.

He didn't erupt in front of his assistant. He simply handed the file back. "Find out which law firm filed this. I want to know exactly who has the guts to back her."

Meanwhile, Jade was tracking the delivery confirmation online. The second it updated, she texted Willow, telling her to relax and let the legal process run its course.

But Willow couldn't relax. She knew exactly what kind of man Julian was. There was no way he was going to let this proceed smoothly.

Sure enough, right before quitting time, Jade received a message from Brenda Lynch, asking her to come to her office.

Jade didn't think twice. She put down her files and walked over. Brenda was an incredible mentor. Since Jade's first day at the firm, Brenda had taken her under her wing, guiding her through complex cases and fighting for her career. Jade owed her entire professional trajectory to her.

Jade knocked gently on the door. "Ms. Lynch?"

Brenda looked up. She didn't say a word, simply gesturing for Jade to come in and close the door.

Noticing Brenda's unusually grim expression, Jade immediately grew concerned. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Brenda didn't sugarcoat it. "Did you recently take on a new divorce case?"

Jade's only active divorce case was Willow's. She had already cleared it with management. "Yes, just one. It's my friend's case, the one I mentioned to you before. Why? Is there a problem?"

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Brenda sighed heavily. "A huge problem."

Jade took a step forward, her heart racing. "What kind of problem? Did something happen to my friend?"

"Not exactly. But this case is far more complicated than it looks, and you need to brace yourself," Brenda warned, her tone filled with genuine pity. "Upper management just handed down a mandate. No one is allowed to touch this case."

"Why?" Jade was completely baffled. "It's a straightforward divorce. There are no ethical conflicts, and it doesn't pose any legal liabilities for the firm. Why would management care?"

"I don't have all the details, the notice just came down," Brenda said, lowering her voice and leaning over her desk. "But I'll give it to you straight. The board issued an ultimatum: whoever takes this case is fired. They were ready to terminate you today. I had to fight tooth and nail just to keep you on the payroll. You need to drop this immediately."

Jade didn't doubt her mentor's words for a second; Brenda had always been totally transparent with her. But it made absolutely zero sense for a corporate law firm to intervene in a low-profile divorce. There was no money, fame, or leverage involved. It was a complete waste of their resources.

"Brenda, do you have any idea why the firm is so desperate to drop this?"

Brenda shook her head grimly. "Word is, it's not just our firm. The warning went out across the entire industry. No one in the city is allowed to touch this case. Think about it. Did your friend cross a massive player?"

She continued, "I wouldn't lie to you, Jade. You have to prioritize your career right now. Drop the case, put it on hold, and figure it out later when the dust settles."

Jade fully grasped the severity of the situation. But Willow's fight was her fight. She was never going to throw her to the wolves.

"I appreciate everything you've done for me, Brenda. I really do. But she isn't just a client to me. Her battle is my battle."

Brenda sighed, rubbing her temples. "I understand where you're coming from, and I'm not going to force your hand right now. Sleep on it. Give me your final answer tomorrow."

By the time Jade left the office, it was well past the end of the workday. She packed up her things and headed straight to Willow's apartment for a homemade dinner.

Outside, snow was gently falling against the windows, while the warm steam from their meal filled the cozy room. Inevitably, the conversation shifted to the divorce petition. "Has Julian caused any trouble for you?" Willow asked quietly.

Jade froze. She had already pieced the entire puzzle together. In all of New York, the only person with enough power and petty vindictiveness to blacklist a client across the entire legal sector was Julian Sinclair.

But she couldn't tell Willow that. She knew Willow perfectly—if she found out Julian was threatening her career, she would demand Jade drop the case instantly. And if Jade dropped it, how was Willow supposed to fight this alone?

So, she deflected casually. "Why do you ask? Did you hear something?"

Willow shook her head. "No, not yet. But I'm worried."

"Don't stress about it," Jade reassured her. "I don't have any ties to him. He can't touch me."

But Willow's anxiety didn't fade. "You don't know him, Jade. He is completely ruthless and deeply vindictive. Between what happened at the lobby and now this lawsuit, I am terrified he's going to retaliate against you. If anything happens, you have to promise you'll tell me."

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"I promise, you'll be the first to know," Jade lied smoothly, eager to change the subject. She gestured to the steaming food. "Now eat up before the food gets cold."

The next morning, the second Jade walked into the office, Brenda called her in. "Have you made your decision?"

Jade's answer hadn't changed. "My decision stands, Brenda. No matter the consequences, I am not dropping this case."

Brenda let out a long sigh. She didn't look surprised. "I knew you were going to say that. But I had to hear it from you. I just worry about your future. With the board's mandate this explicit, if this goes any further, I won't have the power to save you."

"Thank you, Brenda. Truly," Jade said, her gratitude genuine. "I know exactly what this means, but you know how stubborn I am. I have to do this. And you don't need to worry about me. I won't regret it. Even if I get blacklisted from this firm, I have my license and my skills. I'll land on my feet."

Brenda looked heartbroken. "I know you will. But I brought you into this industry. Watching you finally come into your own, only to see your career derailed like this... it hurts."

"Even if we don't work in the same building, we'll still see each other," Jade comforted her. "You'll always be my mentor, and I'll always be your student."

Brenda smiled faintly. "Alright. I respect your choice."

To protect her protégé one last time, Brenda had broken protocol the night before, reaching out to her contacts in upper management. She had confirmed the devastating truth. The shadow orchestrating the entire blockade was none other than the legendary Sinclair Group.

She didn't know how Jade's friend had managed to cross them, but she offered a final warning. "If you're really going to fight for this case, you need to look into Sinclair Group."

She kept it brief, but Jade instantly understood. "Thank you, Brenda." Her suspicions were completely validated. Julian was pulling the strings from the shadows.

When Brenda relayed Jade's final decision to the board, the verdict came down immediately: termination. However, thanks to Brenda's relentless negotiation, it was quietly downgraded to a voluntary resignation, ensuring the scandal wouldn't permanently stain Jade's resume.

Jade accepted the terms without a fuss. She understood that crossing a corporate red line meant immediate exile. There was no room for negotiation.

But she didn't regret a single thing. Even if she had to fight this war entirely on her own, she was going to get justice for Willow.

The moment Jade's resignation was finalized, the news was reported straight back to Julian.

Julian scoffed at the update. He hadn't expected someone to willingly throw their life away for such a lost cause. But if she wanted to play the martyr, he was more than happy to oblige.

The law firm executive on the phone quickly scrambled to reassure him. "The matter is handled. Our firm has no further ties to her."

"Excellent work," Julian replied with a dark smirk.

He hung up and turned to his assistant. "Put the word out. Let's see if any law firm in New York dares to hire her now."

He paused, his eyes gleaming with malice. "And dig into her family background."

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Jade's resignation was processed with brutal efficiency. Instead of the standard month-long transition period, she was given exactly three days to clear out her desk.

By the end of the third day, Jade was officially unemployed. She didn't breathe a word of it to Willow. Keeping up appearances, she maintained her usual routine, leaving the apartment early and returning late. The only difference was that her 'office' was now a quiet corner table at a local coffee shop.

There, she tirelessly prepped Willow's litigation files while scouring job boards for any opening that would take her.

One afternoon, while deep into a legal brief, her phone suddenly lit up with a call from Eugene Yates—her father. Jade's immediate reaction was pure dread. She barely spoke to her family once a year. Getting a sudden call from them meant nothing but trouble, and she had no energy to deal with it.

She hit decline and quickly sent a text: "Busy. Text me if it's important."

A second later, the phone started ringing again, more aggressively this time. He wasn't going to stop until she answered. Reluctantly, Jade picked up.

Before she could even say hello, Eugene's voice boomed through the speaker, thick with fury. "Where are you?"

Triggered by his hostile tone, Jade's own temper flared. "I'm at work! Where else would I be at this hour?"

This was exactly how it always was between them. Instant, explosive hostility. Any attempt at a normal conversation was impossible. When she was younger, she was just terrified of his strict, overbearing demands, but they could at least manage basic communication.

The real fracture happened when she joined the workforce. She flat-out refused to take over Yates Enterprise. Despite Eugene's relentless threats and bribery, she chose to become a lawyer. Since that day, their relationship had been completely frozen.

So the fact that he was calling her now was deeply alarming.

Eugene already knew she was jobless, which made her blatant lie infuriate him even more. "How long were you planning on lying to us? You resigned from that firm! What 'work' are you pretending to do right now?"

"How did you find out about that?" Jade was genuinely shocked. She hadn't told a single soul, planning to secure a new job and pretend the gap in her resume never happened.

"Never mind how I found out! Just tell me if it's true!" Eugene's voice was deafening.

Not wanting to drag the screaming match out, Jade gave in. "Fine. Since you already know, yes. I resigned."

"Why?!" Eugene roared. "You fought tooth and nail to be a lawyer, completely ignoring our advice! And now you throw away your career over some petty nonsense? Do you have zero discipline? Zero perseverance? How am I supposed to trust you with the family business if you act like this?"

"Then don't! I never asked for it anyway!"

"What did you just say? Say that again!"

The argument spiraled instantly. They traded vicious blows, completely abandoning the actual issue just to scream at each other, falling right back into their endless, toxic cycle.

Exhausted, Jade moved to hang up the phone, but Eugene suddenly commanded her to come home immediately to discuss a critical issue.

Jade adamantly refused, demanding he just say it over the phone.

Eventually, her mother, Lydia, took the phone to de-escalate the situation. As Lydia spoke, the horrifying truth finally clicked into place. Now Jade understood exactly why Eugene had called.

Julian hadn't just gotten her fired. He had gone straight to her parents.

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Since getting Jade fired hadn't broken her resolve, Julian had decided to use her parents as his ultimate leverage. He threatened their corporate accounts directly, making it crystal clear: if Jade didn't drop Willow's case, he would personally ensure Yates Enterprise was utterly destroyed and wiped out of New York.

Lydia was practically weeping into the receiver. "Jade, please, just come home. We don't understand the full details of what you're involved in, but you have to be reasonable. Your future and the family's legacy are on the line. Come back, we'll figure out a way to apologize to Mr. Sinclair, and you can drop this case. Let it go."

Listening to her mother cry, Jade fully realized the weight of Willow's warning. Julian truly had absolutely zero boundaries.

But she wasn't going to cave. "Mom, I'm so sorry he dragged you into this. But I cannot drop this case."

"Jade!" Eugene bellowed in the background. "Are you really this selfish? This company is the blood, sweat, and tears of generations! Are you completely disregarding our legacy? Your grandparents' legacy? Are you going to let this entire empire be destroyed on my watch?"

"I'm sorry," Jade repeated, her voice steady but cold. "I'll find a way to fix this, but I am not abandoning this lawsuit."

With that, she hung up the phone. On the other end, Eugene was so furious he nearly threw his phone against the wall. But having navigated the cutthroat corporate world for decades, he wasn't entirely out of options.

He turned to Lydia. "Call her friend. The Willow girl. This entire mess started because of her. If our daughter won't listen to reason, I'll go straight to the source."

When Willow answered the unfamiliar number, she was completely confused by Lydia's frantic pleas. But it didn't take long for the devastating truth to sink in. Her best friend had sacrificed her entire career and was now risking her family's livelihood, all to protect her.

Willow felt utterly sick to her stomach. She apologized profusely to Lydia, swearing she would take full responsibility and handle the situation. She didn't even need to ask who was orchestrating this. There was only one person capable of such calculated cruelty: Julian.

After hanging up, she immediately went into her phone settings, unblocked Julian's number, and dialed it.

He picked up almost instantly, his voice dripping with insufferable arrogance. "Well, well. If I remember correctly, you had me blocked."

Willow completely ignored the bait, cutting straight to the chase. "Why are you going after Jade and her father's company?"

"Am I going after them?" Julian replied casually, sounding entirely too amused. "They're the ones who insisted on getting involved in my business."

"What is it going to take for you to leave them alone?"

"Are you begging me?"

Willow ground her teeth, refusing to engage with his twisted ego. She was entirely results-driven right now and just wanted this nightmare to end. "Name your terms."

"Straight to the point," Julian chuckled lightly. "My demands are quite extensive. Too much for a quick phone call. We'll have to meet in person."

"I don't have time."

"You don't have time?" Julian mocked. "Please. You're unemployed. Time is the one thing you have plenty of. Stop playing hard to get."

Willow didn't bother defending herself. Speaking to him for another second felt physically nauseating. "Time and place."

"Saturday. I'll text you the address."

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Willow dreaded the idea of wasting her weekend meeting with him, knowing his mere presence would ruin her entire day. But since today was Friday, meeting him tomorrow meant she could put an end to this nightmare sooner rather than later. She swallowed her disgust and accepted it.

The next morning, Julian's text arrived bright and early. Since she had immediately blocked him on the messaging app again, he was forced to send it via SMS.

Seeing the location, Willow muttered "Psycho" under her breath. Who in their right mind schedules a hostile negotiation at Amora Bistro, the most exclusive, romantic couples' restaurant in New York?

But she didn't waste her breath arguing. She just wanted to get there, handle the situation, and leave.

Meanwhile, Julian was completely unfazed by her icy demeanor. If anything, he found it highly entertaining. In his eyes, all her current defiance was just a bit of spice to keep things interesting. Eventually, she would come crawling back to him.

Standing in front of his mirror, he carefully adjusted his tailored suit and styled his hair, casually humming a light tune.

Watching him from the bed, Vivienne felt a deep sense of unease. "Are you going somewhere?" she asked.

"Yeah. Meeting a client," Julian replied smoothly, not even glancing her way as he adjusted his cufflinks.

"Which client? Can I come with you?" Vivienne pressed cautiously.

"You don't know them. Better if you stay here."

Vivienne didn't give up. "That's okay, I can just introduce myself. Besides, I'm heading up major projects for Sinclair Group now, so I'll probably cross paths with them eventually."

Julian finally looked at her. His face was blank, but his tone left no room for argument. "No. You aren't needed for this project right now."

"Okay, well... come home early," Vivienne yielded, not daring to push him further.

"Sure," Julian replied dismissively. He leaned down, gave her a brief peck on the forehead, and tossed a black credit card onto the nightstand. "Go shopping with your friends."

Vivienne forced a smile and took the card, but her stomach churned. She knew this exact tactic. Whenever Julian wanted to get rid of her for the day, he distracted her with money.

"Alright, go on ahead. Don't forget to come back early."

But the second the door clicked shut behind him, Vivienne didn't call her friends to go shopping. Instead, she quietly dialed a private investigator and ordered them to tail him.

Across town, Willow arrived at the restaurant exactly on the dot. She treated this encounter like an excruciating business meeting, and her punctuality was strictly a matter of professional courtesy.

When she walked in, Julian was already seated at a prime table.

Willow didn't bother with a greeting or any small talk. She pulled out her chair, sat down, and cut straight to the point. "Tell me. What are your demands?"

Julian completely ignored her question. He smoothly slid an embossed menu across the table. "Take a look. What are you in the mood for?"

Willow didn't touch it. She found his entire act utterly pathetic.

Back when she was deeply in love with him, she had fantasized endlessly about just sharing a single meal together. Even if it wasn't a formal date, just sitting across from

each other was a luxury she didn't dare ask for. She had begged him countless times, tried every excuse imaginable, and he had cruelly rejected her every single time.

And now, he was willingly sitting across from her, offering to buy her lunch.

Willow refused to play along with his twisted game. She stared at him with unfiltered contempt. "Drop the act. Stop pretending we're actually friends and just tell me what you want."

She fully expected him to lose his temper at the blatant disrespect. Instead, Julian simply leaned back, a faint, unapologetic smile on his face.

"Why? Aren't we intimate?"