

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

Chapter 166

Julian didn't elaborate. He just gave a terse "Yeah."

After breakfast, they headed to the office together. In the car, Vivienne's phone rang. It was Clarence Vance.

She knew instantly it was bad news. It was always bad news with him, likely something about the Merit project. Not wanting to deal with a crisis in front of Julian, she hit decline. But Clarence, oblivious to the social cues, called right back.

"Aren't you going to answer?" Julian glanced at the screen. "If he's calling back, it must be urgent."

She forced a smile, feeling cornered. "I will."

She swiped to answer, plastering on a sugary tone. "Mr. Vance, what can I do for you this early?"

On the other end of the line, Clarence nearly dropped his phone. He wasn't used to Vivienne being polite; she usually barked orders and insulted his intelligence.

He sensed he had caught her at a bad time, but he had no choice. The moment he walked into his office, Willow had forwarded an email shredding the Sinclair Group's latest proposal. She demanded immediate revisions, or the project timeline would be compromised.

Clarence didn't dare delay. He relayed the message to Vivienne, carefully softening the blow. He didn't mention Willow, only the required edits.

Even with his careful phrasing, the word "revisions" triggered Vivienne. Her polite facade cracked. "Excuse me? Revisions again? How many times is this? Is she ever going to be satisfied?"

Catching Julian's sharp look, she forced her voice back down to a strained professional pitch. "I understand. Send over the notes. I'll handle it when I get in."

She hung up. Before she could spin a lie, Julian spoke. "The Merit project?"

Realizing he had already guessed, she didn't bother hiding it. "Yes."

But she completely warped the narrative to play the victim. "That new VP at Merit is impossible. She lacks basic competence but loves to micromanage. The proposal is flawless, but she's constantly moving the goalposts, forcing us to revise it over and over just on a power trip. I've managed dozens of projects, and I've never dealt with someone so unprofessional."

Julian didn't know the specifics of the project, so he took her word for it. Besides, this wasn't the first time he had heard complaints about Merit's elusive VP.

"Set up a meeting with her. I'll talk to her myself."

In their world, a "meeting" wasn't just a friendly chat; it was a power play. Vivienne knew exactly what he meant. But she had tried setting up meetings through Clarence multiple times and had been shut down. She had lost her appetite for rejection.

"It's fine, I'll just make the edits. I'll give her exactly what she wants until she runs out of complaints."

"Set it up," Julian insisted.

"But I've asked for a meeting multiple times, and she always declines," Vivienne whined, her spoiled temper flaring. She was used to being pampered. She tolerated swallowing her pride with Julian because he offered a lifetime of luxury and status. But she refused to grovel to anyone else.

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Seeing her frustration, Julian didn't push. "Fine, leave it to me. I'll get in touch with her." He was genuinely curious to see what kind of woman this impossible VP was.

"Really?" Vivienne was more than happy to dump the problem in his lap.

"Really," Julian assured her. "I said I'd handle it, and I will."

"You're the best, Julian," Vivienne cooed, throwing her arms around him.

Julian stiffened. He didn't know when it had happened, but recently, he found himself pulling away from her touch. He awkwardly patted her shoulder. "Alright, we're almost at the office. Sit up."

Back at the Sinclair Group, as soon as Clarence got off the phone with Vivienne, he called Willow to confirm the message had been delivered.

He had been working with Willow long enough to understand her uncompromising standards. He hated being the messenger, but ignoring her directives would only end in disaster.

When the call came through, Willow was deep in project files. She simply replied, "Got it," and hung up.

Her demand for revisions wasn't a petty vendetta. The Sinclair Group's timeline was fundamentally flawed. Willow was fiercely objective, keeping a strict wall between her professional duties and personal life. If she wanted to ruin them, she never would have let them win the bid in the first place.

But she was human, and she couldn't deny a tiny flicker of satisfaction. Typically, a VP wouldn't scrutinize these proposals, leaving the grunt work to subordinates. But since Vivienne was so eager to flaunt her leadership on this project, Willow decided she owed it to her to give the paperwork her utmost, suffocating attention.

With that handled, Willow moved on to her other tasks.

She was deeply engrossed in her work, only pausing for a quick bite to eat. Before she knew it, the sky outside had turned pitch black.

The forecast had predicted snow, and when she glanced out the window, thick, swirling flakes were already dusting the city streets in a layer of white.

Knowing the rush hour traffic would be a nightmare, she stayed at her desk, knocking out more work. By eight o'clock, the snow began to let up. She packed her bag and headed out.

To her surprise, the moment she stepped out of the building and headed toward the subway, a sleek car pulled up beside her. The window rolled down, revealing Silas Thorne.

"Where are you heading?" Silas asked, putting the car in park.

Willow stopped. Over the past few weeks, she had grown more comfortable around him, though a layer of professional deference remained. "I'm walking to the subway."

"Get in. I'll drive you."

"That's okay, I can walk." She assumed he was just offering a lift to the station. "It's only a few blocks."

Silas chuckled softly. "Who said anything about the subway? I'm taking you home."

That was definitely too much.

"No, really, I don't want to inconvenience you. It's snowing hard, you should get home."

"The snow is exactly why I'm driving you," Silas countered smoothly.

His polite insistence left her cornered. Considering he was her boss and had stepped in to help her on multiple occasions, arguing felt ungrateful. She opened the door and slid into the passenger seat.

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Even after buckling in, Willow tried one last time. "Just dropping me at the subway is perfectly fine."

Silas ignored the request. He already knew her address and simply steered the car into traffic. By the time Willow realized they were passing the station, it was too late to protest.

She wasn't about to cause a scene and demand he pull over. Rejecting a gesture from a CEO of his standing bordered on rude.

The car was enveloped in a quiet tension. After a few blocks, Willow felt compelled to fill the silence. "What a coincidence, running into you after work twice."

Coincidence? Silas didn't think so. The elevator encounter wasn't an accident, and neither was this.

He had been monitoring her schedule all day, sending Arthur to the twenty-fifth floor for trivial updates. When she finally left her office, he was waiting in the lobby, timing his exit perfectly to follow her out.

He didn't believe in coincidences; he believed in creating opportunities.

"Very coincidental," Silas agreed smoothly.

He glanced at her. The dim interior lights and passing streetlamps cast a soft glow over her delicate profile. The flutter of her eyelashes seemed to tug directly at his chest.

A car cut into their lane, forcing his eyes back to the road. He picked up the conversation. "Working late on a snowy night. Too much on your plate?"

"No." Her current workload was a breeze compared to her past grinds. "I just wanted to wait out the rush hour crowds."

"I see," Silas drew out the words, clearly turning something over in his mind.

Willow braced herself, expecting a sharp question about quarterly metrics or project flow. Instead, his next words completely threw her.

"Doesn't your family worry when you're out this late?" He paused, the tension in the car spiking. "From what I recall in your file, you're married."

During onboarding, Willow had been required to check a box for marital status. Even though she was in the middle of a brutal divorce with Julian, legally, she was still a wife.

She hadn't expected the CEO to bring it up, but she answered honestly. "Yes, I am."

"Oh." The warmth vanished from Silas's voice, replaced by a cool, flat edge.

Willow thought the uncomfortable topic was closed, but a moment later, he struck again. "What does he do?"

"Who?" The sudden pivot caught her off guard.

"We were just discussing your marriage. Who do you think I mean?" Silas was tightly controlling his frustration, which made the question sound almost abrasive. He absolutely refused to utter the words "your husband." He hated the reality of it, but his burning jealousy demanded answers.

He knew exactly who Julian was—the CEO of the Sinclair Group, Merit's business partner. But his possessive streak was flaring up like a wildfire.

Despite his utter contempt for Julian, Silas had greenlit the Sinclair partnership purely because of Willow. In Seattle, and now in New York, he gave her complete autonomy over her projects.

Willow finally caught up. He was asking about Julian. Just the thought of the man made her stomach turn. A deep frown marred her face. "He's a nobody. Not worth mentioning."

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She was talking about the CEO of the Sinclair Group, yet she dismissed him as a "nobody." To Silas, it felt like she was shutting him out, refusing to let him cross the boundary into her personal life. And that frown—was she annoyed by his prying? Did she think he was crossing a line?

The jealousy in Silas's chest bubbled over, sharp and intoxicating, like a bottle of fermented plum wine popping its cork.

He knew he should drop it, but he couldn't stop himself. "You're out this late, and he doesn't worry?"

Willow shook her head. "No. We stay out of each other's way."

"Staying out of each other's way" was a generous way to describe a toxic marriage ending in a courtroom bloodbath.

But Silas misinterpreted her tone. He thought she was defending the man, praising him for giving her space. It only made Silas feel petty in comparison, souring his mood further.

The car rolled into the bustling downtown district. Despite the snow, the streets were alive. People were snapping photos under the streetlights, and couples were laughing, clinging to each other in the cold.

Watching them, a sudden impulse seized Silas. Without hesitation, he turned to Willow. "Since that's the case, let's grab dinner before you head home."

"Dinner?" Willow blinked. At this hour? With the CEO?

"Is that a problem?"

"No, no problem." She was living with Jade, who couldn't care less when she got home. "It's just... it's quite late. Won't your family be waiting for you?"

"My family is in Seattle, they don't keep tabs on me." Hearing her ask about his personal life sent a sudden thrill through him. "And as for me, I'm single. There's no one waiting up to ask where I am. So, you don't need to worry."

Willow had heard the office gossip—that Silas Thorne was a notorious ice king with zero romantic history. Hearing him confirm it firsthand was slightly surreal. Honestly, she thought it was a tragedy.

He was devastatingly handsome, impossibly wealthy, and carried himself with effortless authority. It was a shame he had no interest in romance. With a face like his, women would throw themselves at him without him lifting a finger.

"So, dinner?" Silas prompted again.

Willow nodded. "Alright. But I'm buying."

Silas was already flipping his turn signal to pull into a high-end steakhouse he frequented. He raised an eyebrow. "Why are you paying?"

Usually, the subordinate didn't foot the bill when dining with the CEO.

But Willow didn't want him to think she was a freeloader. "Consider it a thank you for helping my friend's dad's company."

She was talking about the Yates family deal. Silas knew exactly what she meant, but he decided to play dumb. "Aren't you curious why I helped them?"

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Why?

"Wasn't it because of the Yates family's strong track record in maritime logistics?"

Silas offered a faint smile. "There are plenty of companies with strong track records. Merit's logistics division is already highly efficient. Truthfully, we didn't need to partner with anyone."

"Then was it to aggressively expand Merit's logistics footprint in New York?" Willow offered. "Since your primary operations are in Seattle and overseas."

Silas shook his head. "Merit's operations are incredibly stable. We don't need forced expansion. And even if we did, an inland city wouldn't be our first choice."

"Then why?" Willow was completely out of ideas. In her mind, an apex predator like Silas Thorne made every single move based on corporate dominance and profit margins.

Silas didn't push. His voice was a low, encouraging murmur. "Think a little harder."

"All your reasons point to corporate strategy. Maybe... try looking at it from a different angle."

"A different angle?" Willow blurted out, genuinely confused.

Silas couldn't help but laugh softly. Even without taking his eyes off the road, he could picture her expression—wide-eyed, blinking in total bewilderment.

A sudden wave of warmth rushed through him. He gently nudged her in the right direction. "Exactly. Try looking at it from a personal angle."

That sparked something. "Wait, did you already know Eugene?"

"No. Never met the man."

"Jade, then?"

Silas sighed, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Until you mentioned her, I had no idea Eugene Yates even had a daughter."

Willow realized how ridiculous that sounded. Even if Silas knew Jade, there was zero chance Jade wouldn't have gossiped to her about it.

She had run out of suspects. She was totally stumped.

But she refused to admit defeat; no executive wanted a dense VP working under them.

Seeing her struggle, Silas decided to end her misery. He realized she truly couldn't fathom the real reason. "There is one other person."

"Who?" Willow perked up.

"You."

Willow froze, the air leaving her lungs. "Mr. Thorne, please don't joke about something like that."

They knew each other, sure, but they weren't close. What right did she have to influence the global strategy of a multi-billion-dollar titan?

"What makes you think I'm joking?" Silas's smile faded, his profile turning deadly serious in the shadows. "This isn't the first time I've done something like this."

Willow whipped her head around, searching his face for a smirk, a tell that he was messing with her. But his expression was unreadable, intent, and utterly serious.

Her mind raced backward, connecting the dots. He had helped her so many times. When she thought Arthur was the CEO, it was actually Silas who had saved her mother. Then there was the autonomy at work, driving her home, and now, bailing out Jade's family...

He was right. It wasn't the first time.

But why?

"Why would you do all that for me?"

The car slid smoothly to a stop in front of the restaurant. Silas shifted into park, turned in his seat, and locked his predatory gaze onto hers. "Why do you think?"

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A face so handsome it belonged in a museum was suddenly inches from hers. Caught entirely off guard, Willow Horgan felt a hot flush rush to her cheeks. She silently thanked the darkness of the car interior, grateful he couldn't see how thoroughly he had flustered her.

She quickly averted her gaze and shifted awkwardly in her seat. "I really couldn't say. We haven't known each other for very long, and in the past, most of my communication was strictly through your executive assistant, Mr. Vance."

"Haven't known each other long?" Silas Thorne chuckled softly. "Then why do I feel such a strong sense of familiarity when I look at you? I can't shake the feeling that we've met somewhere before."

"When I was stationed at the West Coast office in Seattle, I occasionally went to Merit Biotech to report on work," Willow explained. "Perhaps you happened to see me there by chance."

But she had been much heavier back then, struggling with her weight. Honestly, she would rather he hadn't seen that version of her.

Silas shook his head slowly. "No, it wasn't then." He knew exactly how many times she had visited the headquarters and everything she had done there.

"It must have been earlier than that."

"Then I really have no idea. We must not have crossed paths," Willow replied, genuinely drawing a blank. If it wasn't during her years in Seattle, the only other significant period of her life was an experience she refused to dwell on.

Because she actively avoided thinking about that particular chapter of her past, she certainly wasn't going to bring it up in front of him now.

Sensing her unspoken boundaries, Silas didn't press the issue. "If you don't remember, let's leave it at that," he said smoothly, though it was clear to him she truly had no recollection.

"We've arrived. Let's head inside."

He gestured out the window, and Willow immediately pushed the car door open and stepped out into the night.

The crisp evening breeze helped cool the lingering heat in her cheeks. Silas hadn't pressured her, and every question he asked had been perfectly polite, yet she couldn't help but feel a nervous, fluttering tension around him.

It seemed that simply existing in the same space as him was enough to set her entirely on edge.

Silas had a standing reservation at the restaurant. The moment they stepped through the doors, the staff guided them straight to a private dining suite. The interior was impossibly elegant, adorned with warm ambient lighting, rich Persian rugs, and a vintage gramophone playing soft jazz, making it feel like they had stepped into a romantic old-world film.

What was even more breathtaking was the view—the expansive windows offered a sweeping, panoramic overlook of the dazzling New York City skyline.

In the past, Willow had dedicated nearly all her time and energy to her career, leaving no room for high-end dining experiences like this. But at her core, she was still a young woman in her twenties, and being surrounded by such staggering beauty left her feeling enchanted.

"This is my first time at a place like this. Would it be alright if I took a few pictures?" she asked him, her eyes sparkling.

Silas glanced at her, remaining momentarily silent.

Assuming the establishment had a strict no-photography policy, Willow didn't push it. "If it's against the rules, don't worry about it."

She started to tuck her phone back into her purse, but his deep voice stopped her. "Of course you can. Take as many as you like. If the lighting here isn't to your taste, I can have them prepare a different suite."

"No, this is absolutely perfect," Willow said with a bright smile, moving closer to the glass to find the best angle.

Watching her intent focus, Silas felt a swell of affection mingled with a sharp pang of confusion. When she mentioned it was her first time at a place like this, it had caught him completely off guard.

As far as he was concerned, courting and marrying a woman meant laying the finest things the world had to offer at her feet. An exclusive dinner was the bare minimum.

Yet she was saying she had never experienced this before?

Was it simply not their scene? Or was her marriage to that man far more hollow and neglected than he had ever imagined?

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Silas was lost in his brooding thoughts while Willow finished snapping her pictures. He remained standing by the window, a slight frown on his face.

"Mr. Thorne?"

Her soft voice pulled him back to reality. "Did you get everything you wanted?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Would you like me to take a few photos of you?"

Willow wasn't particularly enthusiastic about the idea. She was never one to take pictures of herself, preferring to capture the scenery just for the memories. "No, thank you. Getting the skyline was enough for me."

Silas could see her reluctance, but he had his own hidden agenda. "You just said it was your first time here," he coaxed gently. "It's only natural to want a picture to commemorate the evening."

"I think I'll pass. It's too much of a hassle," she replied, genuinely wanting to avoid both the camera and the prospect of burdening him with the task.

"It's no trouble at all." Silas closed the distance between them smoothly, stepping into her space before she could even process the movement. "Should we use my phone, or yours?"

Boxed in by his smooth insistence, Willow found it impossible to argue further. She obediently handed him her device. "We can use mine."

He took it from her hand and raised the lens in her direction.

Unprepared for the sudden spotlight, a wave of awkwardness washed over her. "How should I stand? Is here okay? Do I need to fix my dress?"

During the years she had struggled with her weight, Julian had leveled far too many cruel remarks at her appearance. Even though she now had stunning curves, the damage to her self-esteem ran deep. It was a reflex baked into her bones to overanalyze and correct her posture the moment a camera pointed her way.

"Don't change a thing. You look perfect," Silas murmured, his voice softening as he noticed her sudden rigidity.

He meant every word. She was incredibly photogenic, effortlessly beautiful from any angle. Through the screen, the ambient lighting cast a faint, ethereal halo over her head, highlighting the delicate contours of her face and bathing her features in a luminous glow.

While she tentatively shifted her pose, Silas discreetly opened the messaging app on her phone. With practiced efficiency, he forwarded the best shots to his own account and swiftly deleted the chat history before returning to the camera screen.

"Is that good?" Willow asked.

"We got it." He stepped forward, handing the device back. "Take a look. If you don't like them, we can try again."

"I'm sure they're fine," she said quickly, not even looking at the screen yet. The fact that a man of his status had humored her at all was enough; she had already decided to accept whatever blurry results he had captured. But when she finally glanced down at the gallery, her breath hitched in genuine surprise.

She hadn't expected him to be such a skilled photographer.

Was the radiant woman in the frame really her?

Standing against the backdrop of the city lights, bathed in the amber glow of the room and the silver moonlight, she looked completely at peace. The faint smile on her lips made her appear incredibly elegant and serene.

And it wasn't just one picture. She swiped through the gallery to find seven or eight flawless shots. Though her poses shifted slightly in each, every single frame captured a breathtaking, cinematic mood.

She tried to recall if she had even smiled for the camera. It felt like a blur, meaning any expression of joy had been fleeting. He had perfectly timed every candid shot.

Feeling foolish for her initial hesitation, she looked up at him. "I had no idea you were such an incredible photographer."

"You're just naturally photogenic," Silas replied smoothly.

Willow offered a soft smile, taking the compliment as standard politeness and thinking nothing more of it.

Right on cue, the appetizers arrived, prompting them both to return to their seats.

Willow quickly noticed that the man delivering their plates wasn't a standard server. Dressed in an immaculate white coat, he was clearly the executive chef.

The moment he approached, he greeted Silas warmly. Silas even stood up to return the greeting, making it obvious the two men were well acquainted.

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Silas briefly introduced them, and the chef offered Willow a polite greeting before diving into an animated conversation with Silas. Since they spoke entirely in rapid French, Willow couldn't understand a word. She did, however, notice the chef casting several pointed glances in her direction. Maintaining her manners, she offered a polite smile each time their eyes met.

The conversation eventually wound down, and as the chef turned to leave, he wished her a pleasant meal in English—only to shoot her one final, lingering look that left her utterly bewildered.

Their starter was a beautifully plated spread of cured salmon and foie gras. Silas took the lead in explaining the dish. "Thomas is a master in the kitchen. He's taken home gold at several international culinary competitions. See what you think."

"Thank you." Willow took a delicate bite. The flavors were incredibly bright and rich, melting perfectly on her tongue. "This is absolutely incredible."

Yet, despite the exquisite food, her curiosity about the chef's strange behavior was gnawing at her.

After a few more bites, she couldn't hold back any longer. "When you were speaking with the chef just now... did I come up in conversation?"

A slow smirk tugged at the corner of Silas's mouth. "What gave you that idea?"

"He kept looking over at me," she replied honestly.

Her deadpan sincerity caught Silas off guard, drawing a low chuckle from him. "And why do you think he was looking at you?" he teased.

"I have no idea." Willow shook her head, genuinely perplexed. "Do I have something on my face?"

Silas was simultaneously amused and baffled. "Why on earth would that be your first assumption?"

To her, it was the only logical explanation. She had seen the appraising look in the chef's eyes, and short of a smudge on her cheek, she couldn't fathom what else would warrant such scrutiny.

"Never mind. I must have misread the situation," she backtracked.

Silas had initially intended to push her a little, hoping to break through the thick wall of insecurity she carried around. It wasn't the first time he had noticed how harshly she underestimated herself.

But seeing her immediately retreat into her shell, he found he didn't have the heart to tease her any further.

"He said you were stunning," Silas said plainly, deciding on absolute honesty.

In truth, Thomas had said much more than that. He had praised her elegance and complimented Silas's impeccable taste, entirely convinced that Willow was the newest woman in Silas's life.

Even though Silas had repeatedly clarified that they were not dating, Thomas hadn't bought a word of it. The chef had gleefully laid out his evidence: Silas always dined alone, projecting the warmth of a glacier. Yet tonight, the formidable CEO of Merit was playing photographer and catering to his guest's every need. If she wasn't someone extraordinarily special, there was no way Silas Thorne would be acting like this.

As for the staring, Silas had caught that, too. He had practically ordered Thomas to rein it in before he spooked her, but the chef had been too fascinated by the woman who had managed to thaw his infamously icy friend.

To push Silas's buttons, Thomas had even brazenly declared that if Silas wasn't going to make a move, he would gladly step in and ask her out himself, warning Silas to stay out of his way.

Backed into a corner by the chef's relentless prodding, Silas had been forced to drop the ultimate buzzkill: he informed Thomas that she was currently married. Only then did the chef finally retreat, looking utterly disappointed.

Naturally, Silas kept all those colorful details to himself.

Willow was completely blindsided by the compliment. Flustered and unsure of how to navigate the sudden shift in atmosphere, she opted for silence, ducking her head to focus intently on her meal.

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Silas let the quiet stretch between them, simply watching her with a faint, knowing smile playing on his lips.

The main courses arrived shortly after—rosemary-infused filet mignon. Their steaks were cooked to different temperatures, with Silas preferring his much rarer. Willow had just picked up her silverware when Silas's deep voice stopped her. "Hold on a moment."

"Is something wrong?" Willow asked, looking up with her knife and fork paused in mid-air.

Instead of answering, Silas simply reached across the table and pulled her plate toward him. With effortless precision, he began slicing her steak.

His movements were fluid and impeccably elegant. Every stroke of the blade was deliberate, creating perfectly even, bite-sized pieces while keeping the integrity of the meat flawlessly intact. He didn't look like a man cutting a steak; he looked like an artisan refining a masterpiece. Willow found herself utterly mesmerized.

But it wasn't just the sheer grace of his actions that had her captivated. It was the realization that no one had ever done this for her before—least of all a titan of industry like Silas Thorne.

She struggled to figure him out. To the rest of the world, he projected an aura of absolute frost and ruthless indifference. Yet, in these quiet moments, his actions were strikingly tender and attentive, standing in stark contrast to his fearsome reputation.

Furthermore, she couldn't help but note that for a man rumored to keep all women at a glacial distance, his smooth, polished chivalry suggested he was far from inexperienced.

Finishing the task in seconds, Silas slid the plate back in front of her. "There you go."

Caught staring, Willow met his gaze and felt that familiar nervous flutter return. "Thank you."

"Try it."

Following his instruction, she took a bite. The perfectly seared crust locked in the savory juices, the meat practically melting in her mouth with a complex, lingering finish. "It's amazing."

"Good." Silas finally withdrew his intense gaze and began cutting his own meal. However, his method for his own plate was entirely devoid of the meticulous care he had shown hers—a detail Willow, still reeling from the gesture, entirely failed to notice.

She desperately wanted to ask if a long string of past girlfriends was the reason behind his seamless attentiveness. Deciding that was far too intrusive, she opted for a safer question. "Mr. Thorne, are you always this much of a gentleman?"

Gentleman? Silas's lips curved into a dark, self-deprecating smirk. That was definitely the first time anyone had ever accused him of that. It was a pity he was nothing of the sort.

"It depends on the person," he replied smoothly.

"You mean depending on whether it's a man or a woman?"

"Depending on whether it's someone I favor, or someone I despise."

He held her gaze steadily as he continued, "Besides, it's just cutting a steak. I wouldn't call that being a gentleman. Isn't that the bare minimum a man should do when dining with a woman?"

Provided, of course, that the man was fiercely interested in the woman sitting across from him.

"Is it?" Willow genuinely didn't know. She rarely shared meals with men, and she had certainly never been treated with such effortless chivalry. She had no frame of reference to judge if Silas was right.

Hearing the honest confusion in her voice, Silas latched onto the implication like a predator. "Why?" he asked casually, though his eyes sharpened. "Did he never do this for you?"

Given the context of their previous conversations, it didn't take a genius for Willow to realize he was referring to Julian.

She had zero desire to drag her disastrous marriage into this elegant dinner, but she also refused to lie. "We don't live together," she explained diplomatically. "And we rarely share meals."

At those words, a dangerous, triumphant gleam flared in Silas's eyes. If she was telling the truth, did that mean her marriage was truly as fractured and hollow as he suspected?

In his worldview, marriage meant claiming the same space, waking up to each other every morning, and anchoring your lives together through shared meals and passing seasons. That was the entire point of the commitment.

Otherwise, what was the damn point of tying yourselves together?

He could understand the distance when she had been stationed on the West Coast, separated by sheer geography. But now that she was back in New York permanently? Their living arrangement made absolutely no sense to him.

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Still, it was a reality Silas was more than thrilled to accept. If they lived separate lives and eventually finalized a divorce, it would clear the path for him to finally stake his claim.

But he kept his predatory hopes in check. He was painfully aware of how deep her feelings for Julian ran, an attachment she had harbored for years.

After delivering her answer, Willow smoothly shifted the conversation away from her marital woes. Silas didn't push the issue, but Willow could distinctly feel a shift in the atmosphere—his mood had noticeably brightened.

Through the rest of their meal, every time they raised their glasses, and even when he addressed the staff, a faint, undeniable smile lingered on his lips.

When they finally finished, Willow discreetly tried to flag down a server to cover the bill, only to be informed that as a VIP, Silas's meals were automatically charged to his private account.

She looked at him with genuine disappointment. "That wasn't the plan. I promised dinner was on me tonight. It was supposed to be my way of thanking you for everything you've done for my mother, my career, and my friend's family."

Silas didn't bother denying his involvement in any of those matters, silently accepting her gratitude. When she finished, he leaned back in his chair and arched a brow. "Do you really want to thank me?"

"Of course I do," Willow nodded with absolute sincerity.

"Then how about this? You promised to show me around the city, and I happen to be entirely free this weekend. If you have the time, would you care to join me?"

"I'm free," she replied without a second of hesitation.

"You're agreeing that quickly without even asking where we're going?"

"I was so focused on finding a way to repay you that I didn't overthink it," Willow admitted smoothly. "Besides, given your standing, I highly doubt you'd take me anywhere subpar."

"You trust me that much?" Silas teased, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Flustered by the intensity of his gaze, Willow quickly looked away, pretending to be utterly fascinated by her empty water glass. Sensing his excellent mood, she decided to play along. "I have absolute faith in your impeccable taste."

Silas threw his head back and laughed—a rich, unrestrained sound that echoed warmly in the quiet suite.

Willow froze, entirely captivated. She had never expected a man who wore such an impenetrable mask of ice to look so devastatingly handsome when he genuinely let go.

It was nothing like the loud, boisterous laughter of ordinary men. His laugh was a deep, resonant rumble—lazy and effortlessly aristocratic. It felt like stepping into a beam of warm afternoon sunlight. Paired with his naturally intimidating aura, the contrast was absolutely breathtaking.

Humans were visual creatures, and Willow was no exception. In that moment, she was profoundly grateful they had shared this dinner. Otherwise, she might have gone her whole life without realizing just how lethal the "Cold King's" smile truly was.

"You should smile more often," she murmured softly.

"Why? Do you find me too intimidating?"

Willow nodded. Even if she didn't say it, he had to know the kind of terrifying reputation he commanded in the corporate world. To lie to him now would be an insult to his intelligence.

Still, she opted for a slightly more diplomatic approach. "Sometimes, yes."

"When?" Silas pressed, leaning in closer.

She wanted to say literally all the time, but instead offered, "During meetings."

Silas narrowed his eyes slightly. "Toward you?" He had gone out of his way to soften his edges around her. Had he still accidentally frightened her?

"Oh, no, not at all." Willow shook her head quickly. "I just mean... I've seen how strict you are with everyone else."

In that case, he didn't give a damn. Silas couldn't care less how terrifying the rest of the world found him.

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After dinner, they didn't linger at the restaurant. Silas personally drove her back to her apartment before heading out into the night.

Upon entering her apartment, Willow was surprised to find Jade lounging in the living room. "Why aren't you working in the study?"

"I was waiting for you," Jade chirped, hitting save on her laptop and looking up with a bright grin.

"Waiting for me?" Willow shut the front door behind her, slipping off her shoes. "I thought I texted you that I'd be working late."

"You did, but you've never worked this late before." Jade hopped off the couch to take Willow's handbag. "Did you grab dinner yet? We've got some dumplings in the freezer I could boil for you."

"No need, I already ate," Willow replied smoothly.

Instantly, Jade's gossip radar locked onto her target. "Working later than usual, and you grabbed dinner on the way back? Oh, you've definitely got a situation going on."

"What kind of 'situation' could I possibly have?" Willow laughed softly. "I just bumped into a coworker on my way out, and we grabbed a bite together."

"What did you eat? Which coworker? Male or female? Since when do you have work friends you go to dinner with?" Jade fired off the questions in rapid succession.

Willow was a terrible liar on her best days, and Jade was far too sharp to let a flimsy excuse slide. Realizing she was backed into a corner, Willow sighed in defeat. "Alright, fine. I grabbed dinner with management."

"Management?" Jade repeated the word skeptically before her eyes widened in a sudden, dramatic realization. She practically shrieked, "Don't tell me you mean Silas Thorne!"

Wincing as the shrill volume assaulted her ears, Willow was shocked Jade had nailed it on the first try. "Yes," she admitted vaguely.

While Willow remained utterly calm, Jade looked ready to hyperventilate. "Are you seriously telling me you just had a casual post-work dinner with Silas Thorne? He's the CEO of Merit! Do you know how many billionaires and politicians try to kiss up to him just for a handshake? Word on the street is he never accepts private invitations, and you just strolled out of the office and grabbed dinner with him?"

Willow wanted to clarify that it hadn't exactly been a "casual" dinner—it was easily the most opulent meal she had ever eaten in her entire life. But knowing Jade's penchant for wildly exaggerating everything, she wisely kept that detail to herself.

"He happened to be working late as well. We ran into each other on the way out, so we just went together," Willow explained defensively.

"Okay, so what did you eat?" Jade pressed.

"Just some Western place we passed on the street."

"A Western place?" Jade's voice ticked up another octave. "Who paid?"

"I fully intended to pay. You know how much he's helped me out lately—with my mom's medical care, my job, and stepping in to help your dad's business. I wanted to show my gratitude. But when I asked for the check, it turned out he was a VIP there, and it had already been charged to his private account."

Out of all that, Jade only registered one critical piece of information: Silas Thorne had gone out of his way to help Willow time and time again.

And that virtually confirmed Jade's long-standing suspicion. Silas had only thrown a lifeline to the Yates family business because of his connection to Willow. She had asked her father about it previously, but Eugene was too proud, convinced his own business acumen had landed them a deal with Merit. Now, the truth was blindingly obvious.

But one massive question still remained. "Willow, why do you think a guy like that is going out of his way to help you?"

Willow shook her head. She had outright asked Silas that exact question during dinner, and he had only offered a cryptic answer about her seeming familiar. It made zero sense to her.

"I honestly couldn't tell you. If I had to guess, he probably just values my professional competence. Aside from my work at Merit, I don't exactly bring anything else to the table."

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"Wrong. You bring a hell of a lot more to the table than just spreadsheets," Jade shot back immediately.

"Like what?" Willow poured herself a glass of water at the kitchen island, taking a sip with an expression of pure, oblivious innocence.

Jade groaned, frustrated by her best friend's total lack of ego. "Your looks, you idiot! When are you going to realize that you are drop-dead gorgeous? You literally just have to stand in a room to have everyone staring at you."

A sudden, thrilling thought struck Jade, and she gasped. "Wait... do you think he actually has a thing for you?"

The shock of the suggestion caused Willow to choke, nearly spitting her water across the counter. "Jade! Are you out of your mind? Why on earth would a man like that be interested in me?"

"Why not?" Jade demanded. "You're stunning, you have an amazing personality, and you're a powerhouse at your job. Anyone would be lucky to fall for you. Why is it so crazy to think he's one of them?"

"Because Silas Thorne operates in a completely different stratosphere," Willow countered reasonably. "Do you honestly think a billionaire lacks women with those exact same traits?"

Jade paused, forced to concede the point. "Okay, that's fair. Guys in his tax bracket definitely aren't suffering from a shortage of beautiful women."

"Exactly," Willow murmured. For some inexplicable reason, acknowledging that fact left a strange, heavy lump in her throat. Eager to kill the conversation entirely, she added, "Besides, I already made it very clear to him that I'm married."

"Why would you volunteer that kind of information?" Jade threw her hands up in exasperation.

"Even if I hadn't said anything, it's not a secret. My marital status is on all my HR onboarding files."

Jade slumped back onto the couch, her grand romantic fantasies crumbling. "Well, that's a massive bummer. I actually thought there was a spark there. But look, moving forward, you need to stop telling people you're married. You're dragging that degenerate Julian into court for a divorce anyway, so you'll officially be single soon. Dropping the 'M' word is just going to kill your dating life before it even starts."

"Let it die, then," Willow replied, entirely unbothered. The truth was, she had zero interest in dating. Even though she rarely brought Julian up anymore, the emotional wreckage of their marriage had taken a brutal toll on her.

You could physically leave a man, you could sever the legal ties, and you could even actively block out the memories. But the psychological scarring was something entirely out of her control.

Julian's emotional abuse had planted a toxic seed in her mind. It made her second-guess everyone's intentions, but worse, it made her deeply doubt her own worth. She had spent years internalizing the belief that she wasn't good enough, that she was fundamentally unlovable. That deeply ingrained insecurity was the heaviest baggage she carried.

"Bite your tongue! Do not let that absolute bastard ruin your entire future," Jade ordered fiercely. "Julian Sinclair is the absolute bottom of the barrel. Anyone you date after him will be an astronomical upgrade."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. But right now, I'm more worried about you," Willow said gently. "You've spent so much time cleaning up my messes that your own career took a massive hit."

"Oh, please, I'm doing fantastic," Jade brushed it off with a casual wave. "I'm single, I have no dependents, and my life is blissfully drama-free."

Jade had always been an eternal optimist, but Willow still carried a heavy load of guilt. She knew exactly why Jade had been forced out of her previous job. Reaching into her purse, Willow pulled out a bank card she had prepared earlier. "Here. Take this."

Jade took one look at the plastic and saw right through her. "What's this? Are you trying to become my sugar momma?" she teased, making no move to take it.

Willow cracked a smile. "I'd love to, but unfortunately, I don't have that kind of capital yet. I know you're out of work right now, and you're footing the bills for both of us here. It's not a lot, but use it to cover expenses for now. Once I build up a better nest egg, I'll pay you back properly."

"Put that away before I get offended," Jade laughed, firmly pushing Willow's hand back. "I told you when you moved in that you were staying rent-free, and we shook on it." She paused, a dramatic, suspenseful smirk spreading across her face. "Besides, your charity is no longer required. I'm about to be officially employed."

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"Really?" Willow's face lit up with genuine joy. "That's incredible! When did this happen? Why didn't you say anything?"

"Just today, right before you got home. They called with the verbal offer," Jade beamed. While she didn't have the official paperwork in hand just yet, a verbal offer was a lock. She couldn't wait to share the good news and lift Willow's spirits.

"Which firm is it? Is it a big corporate office? Do they have a strong presence here in New York?" Willow asked eagerly.

It was actually a newly established practice called Sterling & Faircrest Law Group. The operation was small, and Jade had never even heard of them before applying, but it was literally the only firm in the city willing to extend her an offer.

Based on the brutal reality of her recent job hunt, she knew this was her one and only shot. It hadn't been an issue of competence—she had crushed multiple interviews and received stellar feedback. But the second she submitted her documentation for the final background checks, she would be completely ghosted.

Initially, she couldn't figure out why she was suddenly radioactive. It wasn't until a sympathetic hiring manager finally took pity on her and gave her a subtle heads-up that she understood. Someone extremely powerful in the industry was actively blacklisting her behind the scenes.

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was pulling the strings. It was just another one of Julian's twisted power plays, a sick attempt to cut off Jade's livelihood to force Willow back under his control. Refusing to give that bastard the satisfaction of ruining Willow's peace of mind, Jade had sworn never to breathe a word of the blacklist to her friend.

Because of that silent embargo, Jade was clinging to this single opportunity, ignoring the massive red flags. The firm was a startup—it might go under in a month. Or worse, the partners might eventually discover they were defying the formidable Sinclair Group and fire her on the spot to save their own skin. But Jade didn't care.

She was a relentless opportunist. The door was cracked open, and she was going to kick it down and charge ahead. She'd deal with the fallout later. A path was a path, and she was more than ready for a change of scenery.

"It's a solid setup, a boutique law firm," she told Willow brightly. "I'll give you all the boring details later. I just wanted to tell you tonight so you'd stop feeling guilty about my career. See? I've got the skills and the resume. I bounce back fast."

"I never doubted you for a second," Willow smiled warmly, a huge weight lifting off her chest. "Once things settle down, we definitely need to go out and celebrate properly."

"Absolutely. The drinks are on me—once the official offer letter hits my inbox, of course."

Two days later, Jade's inbox pinged with the official employment contract. True to their word, the two women hit the town that Friday night, booking a table at a lively spot to toast to Jade's triumphant return to the workforce.

That same Friday night, Julian Sinclair was holding court in a private VIP lounge at an exclusive club, knocking back drinks with Seth Sterling and the rest of their wealthy circle.

Their conversations were notoriously shallow, perpetually circling the same tired topics of women, sports cars, and lavish parties. In the past, Julian would have seamlessly dominated the banter, but lately, a dark, heavy distraction had settled over him. His mind was elsewhere, and the excessive bragging bored him to death.

Midway through his third glass of whiskey, his phone vibrated on the table. Seeing Caleb Vance's name flashing on the screen, Julian immediately swiped to answer. "Speak."

Caleb knew better than to interrupt Julian's personal time without a damn good reason, but his boss had left strict standing orders: if there was movement on two specific fronts, he was to be notified the exact second it happened.

"First," Caleb started cautiously, "Jade Yates has secured employment. She's scheduled to onboard shortly. We made the industry-wide blacklist explicitly clear, but someone completely bypassed it to bring her on. We haven't identified the exact backer yet. It's a newly incorporated firm heavily shielded by a maze of LLCs and elite legal protection. Cracking their corporate veil is going to take us some time."

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"Second, I reached out to the Vice President overseeing Merit's project with a formal invitation under your name. They outright rejected the meeting. They didn't even leave room for negotiation."

"Is that so?" Julian sneered, his grip tightening around his whiskey glass.

How amusing. In his entire privileged life, no woman—or executive, for that matter—had ever possessed the sheer audacity to shut him out so thoroughly. While reining in his rebellious wife was a priority, Julian was a ruthless businessman first. Subjugating Willow could wait; forcing Merit's elusive VP to the table was critical to the Sinclair Group's immediate dominance.

He barked his orders into the phone. "Put the Yates problem on the back burner for now. Focus entirely on the second issue. I want a minute-by-minute breakdown of that VP's upcoming schedule."

If they refused to play nice through the proper corporate channels, he would corner them and force their hand in public.

"Understood. I'll get the itinerary immediately," Caleb confirmed before the line went dead.

Julian tossed his phone back onto the table. Seth Sterling scoffed, swirling his drink. "You're a relentless workaholic, Sinclair. It's Friday night, and you're still taking calls from your lackeys?"

Julian ignored the jab. Leaning back against the leather sofa, he casually mentioned the heavily protected startup that had dared to hire Jade. The entire table was well aware of his strategy to financially starve the Yates family to force Willow into submission, so they immediately understood the friction.

However, at the far end of the booth, Hugo Harrington's brow furrowed in a tight frown.

Hugo had been the unseen architect behind Jade's new job, deliberately moving against Julian's tyrannical edict. At first, he had felt a lingering twinge of guilt for betraying a man in his own circle. But hearing Julian speak so callously about destroying people's lives extinguished any remaining remorse. If anything, Hugo deeply regretted not stepping in to sabotage Julian sooner.

His initial motivation had been to alleviate the unbearable pressure Julian was putting on Willow. But the more Hugo thought about it, the more he realized that even without his sympathy for Willow, he couldn't have stood by and watched Julian gleefully crush a bright, fiercely loyal woman like Jade.

As Julian finished venting, Seth slammed his glass down. "If you're dealing with shadowy bureaucratic red tape in New York, why the hell aren't you asking Hugo? Nobody knows the backdoor political channels better than the Harringtons."

Seth was entirely correct. While the Sinclair and Sterling families commanded vast empires in the corporate and financial sectors, the Harrington family possessed generations of entrenched political clout. Hugo's lineage had been pulling the strings in the city's highest echelons for a century.

But to everyone's surprise, Hugo shut the idea down instantly. "I don't have the time to look into it."

"No time?" Seth raised an eyebrow, genuinely baffled. "Since when are you busy? Your family never forces you to clock into the office. What's got you so tied up? Did your mother finally force you into a string of high-society blind dates?"

Hugo's expression darkened, his voice dropping to a glacial chill at the crass joke. "I'm handling my own private investments. It has absolutely nothing to do with my family."

"What kind of investments?" Julian asked, his tone shifting into something more calculating. "Do you need me to throw some capital your way?"

"I just launched a new firm. The red tape is endless right now," Hugo replied smoothly, effectively declining Julian's offer of 'help.'

"Alright. Focus on getting your shop up and running then," Julian conceded.

In their ultra-wealthy circle, casually dropping millions to launch a new venture was as mundane as ordering a cup of coffee. None of the men gave Hugo's excuse a second thought, and the conversation swiftly pivoted back to Julian's ruthless corporate conquests.

Just as the night was winding down, Julian's phone buzzed with another call from Caleb. This time, he only caught the first sentence before he abruptly stood up, threw a stack of bills on the table, and stormed out of the VIP lounge without a word.

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Stepping into the hushed, velvet-lined hallway of the club, Julian pressed the phone to his ear. "What did you just say? Repeat it."

"I said I've managed to acquire her finalized itinerary," Caleb repeated, his voice tight with anxiety on the other end of the line. "Next Wednesday, they are scheduled to attend the Global Bio-Innovation Summit right here in New York." Caleb was walking on eggshells, terrified of triggering one of Julian's infamous, explosive rages over a misplaced word.

In truth, Caleb had already secured the official guest list and knew exactly who Merit's elusive VP was: Willow Horgan. But, utterly baffled by Julian's wildly volatile obsession with his estranged wife, Caleb lacked the nerve to drop that bomb over the phone. Playing it safe, he kept his language strictly professional and completely gender-neutral, just as Julian had.

"Verify the exact panel times and location," Julian commanded, his eyes gleaming with predatory anticipation. "And wipe my schedule completely clean for next Wednesday. I will be attending that summit."

"Understood, sir. Consider it done."

When Wednesday arrived, Julian slid into the back of his sleek, chauffeured sedan, heading straight for the Manhattan Convention Center.

Just before he left the estate, Vivienne Sinclair had intercepted him in the foyer, fishing for details about his sudden corporate outing. When Julian casually offered to let her tag along to the summit, she had aggressively declined. The very thought of facing that ruthless Merit executive who had humiliated her and shredded her project proposals made Vivienne's blood boil. There was no way she was willingly walking into the same room as that woman.

As a result, Julian and Caleb were the only passengers in the spacious backseat.

"Hand me the finalized guest list," Julian demanded. He wanted to scan the roster for useful industry contacts. More importantly, since he was mere hours away from finally confronting this phantom VP face-to-face, he figured it was time to learn their actual name.

Caleb instantly produced a sleek leather folder containing the attendee list, the panel schedules, and a set of cue cards. The summit organizers, thrilled that the formidable CEO of the Sinclair Group was gracing their event, had frantically carved out a prime speaking slot for him.

Caleb handed the entire portfolio over. "I've included the draft of your opening remarks, sir. Please review it. If the tone isn't to your liking, I can have the PR team revise it before you take the stage."

"Fine." Julian took the folder, quickly skimming through the speech. Satisfied, he flipped the page to the guest list. But just as his eyes drifted toward the top tier of executives, his personal cell phone rang sharply. Seeing the name of a major board member flashing on the screen, he tossed the open folder carelessly onto the empty seat beside him and answered the call.

By pure coincidence, as he braced his hand against the leather seat to shift his weight, his palm completely obscured the boldly printed name: Willow Horgan. Engrossed in the high-stakes phone call, he repeatedly glanced down at the seat, yet never once caught sight of the fatal revelation sitting inches from his fingertips.

The intense corporate debate dragged on for a full thirty minutes. By the time he finally disconnected the call, the sedan was already pulling up to the convention center's VIP entrance. Completely forgetting his initial intent to review the roster, Julian shoved the folder back into Caleb's hands and stepped out of the car.

Assuming his boss had already read the list during the drive, Caleb tucked the folder under his arm and hurried after him.

Though the summit had yet to officially kick off, the main halls were already swarming with industry leaders, journalists, and eager investors.

However, a man of Julian's staggering wealth and status was never expected to mingle with the general admission crowd. He was immediately escorted down a private corridor lined with exclusive executive lounges, fully stocked with premium refreshments and dedicated staff.

Naturally, this VIP treatment wasn't reserved for him alone. As he strode down the plush hallway, he passed several occupied suites. Normally, Julian wouldn't spare a glance at the personalized nameplates on the doors, but a glint of gold caught his eye. The placard read: Horgan. He didn't bother to read the first name. A derisive sneer curved his lips. It seems the world is entirely overrun with Horgans these days, he thought dismissively.

The moment he settled into the plush armchair of his private lounge, he snapped his fingers at Caleb. "Go find out if Merit's VP has arrived. If they're here, I'm cutting off their exit routes right now." Julian's eyes darkened with arrogant amusement. He refused to believe anyone could dare ignore him once he was standing right in front of them.