

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

Chapter 201

Silas had no intention of teaching her just so someone else could reap the benefits. What he nurtured, he kept.

He refused to let go of her fork, thoroughly mixing the food on her plate before sliding it back in front of her. "You can eat now."

Despite his permission, Willow didn't dive right in. She placed her silverware down and sat up straight. "I'll wait for you."

Looking at her well-behaved posture, Silas felt a wave of affection wash over him. He couldn't bear to keep her waiting. "Fair enough."

This time, he mixed his own food with significantly less care, rushing through the motions so she wouldn't have to wait.

"Go ahead," he said once he was done.

Like an eager student following instructions, Willow immediately took a polite bite.

"How is it?" he asked.

Maybe it was entirely psychological, or maybe he genuinely had a better technique, but her lunch tasted inexplicably better today.

"It's really good," she said.

It was just a simple lunch special. Silas knew she was likely just flattering him, but he couldn't help the surge of satisfaction.

"There's something else I want to run by you," he said.

"Of course. Whatever it is, I'll do my best."

"Oh, you can definitely do this." Silas actually didn't have much of an appetite. He preferred watching her eat. He set his fork down, resting his full attention on her. "Could you drop the formalities with me? At least in private?"

Willow looked up, a little surprised. "Why? It's standard protocol to address executives formally."

Why? Because he wanted to close the distance between them. He wanted to be an exception in her world.

"I'm not a fan of it," he admitted. "It makes me sound ancient. I'm only ten years older than you."

He added the last part quietly, a hint of vulnerability creeping into his tone.

Willow didn't catch the underlying insecurity. "But there are plenty of employees older than you who still use your formal title. Doesn't that make you feel old too?"

Silas hadn't anticipated that logic. He paused, struggling to find a smooth comeback before settling on a simple truth. "They are them, and you are you. It's different."

"Oh." Willow wasn't entirely sure how she was different, but she understood his point. They had to follow the rules; she didn't.

She didn't mind the change, but she needed to set a boundary. "I can drop the formalities when it's just us, but can we keep things professional at the office?"

She had no desire to invite office gossip. She needed to maintain her credibility and professionalism at Merit Biotech.

Silas considered it and found her request perfectly reasonable. "Deal."

Willow smiled brightly. "Thank you, Mr. Thor—"

She caught his pointed look and quickly corrected herself. "Thank you, Silas."

At that, Silas arched a brow, accepting the correction.

As they ate and chatted, they remained completely oblivious to the attention they were drawing. They were simply too striking together. The visual of them sitting at a table was turning heads across the dining hall.

Someone recognized Silas and nudged their coworker. "Hey, isn't that Mr. Thorne?"

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The coworker scoffed, not even bothering to look up. "Yeah, right. A guy at his level definitely has a private dining room. He wouldn't be caught dead in the general cafeteria."

"I'm serious, look! And the woman with him looks super familiar. I think that's the new VP, Director Horgan."

The coworker finally glanced over and nearly choked on their food. "Holy crap, it is him!" They swallowed hard. "But what the hell is he doing down here?"

The first employee chewed slowly, a frown creasing their forehead. "Whenever management does something out of the ordinary, there's an agenda. He's definitely here for a reason."

"Should we go say hi?" the coworker suggested. "We never get face time with the CEO. This could be a golden networking opportunity."

Suddenly, the first employee looked horrified. "You go if you want. I'm staying right here."

"Why? You're usually the first one to suck up to the brass."

"Are you crazy? You have to read the room. Haven't you heard the rumors about him? They say he's ruthless. The man runs this company with an iron fist, and every single person who reports to him has been ripped to shreds."

"No way. He doesn't look like a tyrant."

"That's how they get you. All these billionaires are a little unhinged." The employee paused, gesturing subtly. "Just watch. He's been sitting there for ten minutes and hasn't cracked a single smile."

The coworker studied Silas from afar. "You're right. I can feel the tension from here. I feel so bad for the woman sitting across from him. She must be terrified."

At that moment, Silas had finished eating and was entirely focused on watching Willow. He found her eating habits endearing. She wasn't picky, balancing every bite, and chewed methodically with her cheeks slightly puffed out.

She was adorable.

"No rush. Take your time," Silas murmured.

He felt a warmth spreading through his chest, but because of his naturally sharp features and commanding presence, even his gentlest expression looked somewhat intimidating to an outsider.

Though she told herself not to rush, Willow didn't want to keep him waiting. She took a larger bite and accidentally swallowed a stray chili flake. Instantly, her eyes watered, and a burning sensation coated her throat.

Seeing her tear up, Silas immediately reached for the water pitcher and slid a napkin across the table. He started to lean over to pat her back, but Willow waved him off.

"I'm fine, just need some water," she gasped.

The onlookers caught the entire exchange and felt utterly vindicated in their assumptions.

"See? I told you he was a monster! He literally made her cry! You can't defend that."

"Wow. He doesn't even spare a gorgeous woman like Director Horgan, and he chose to ruin her lunch hour to do it. Terrifying."

"We need to pack up and get out of here before he notices us and decides to ruin our day, too."

Within minutes, the tables surrounding Silas and Willow were completely empty. Everyone practically sprinted away, shooting fearful glances at Silas as if expecting him to start firing people on the spot.

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Silas eventually noticed the mass exodus. "Why did everyone leave in such a hurry? And why were they staring at me like that?"

Willow wanted to point out that they were probably terrified of him. After all, he was the famously strict CEO. It was perfectly normal for the staff to be intimidated. As for the staring—they were probably checking to see if he was angry.

But instead, she said, "They think you're handsome."

"Oh?" Silas tapped his fingers against the table, his gaze turning intense. "Do you think I'm handsome?"

Willow blinked. How did the conversation suddenly shift to her opinion?

But there was no denying the truth. "Yes," she nodded.

A surge of genuine pleasure filled Silas. He leaned slightly forward, resting his forearms on the table. "Am I your type?"

He had wanted to ask if he was her specific type, but fearing he might scare her off, he phrased it as a broader question about women's preferences.

"Definitely. The women in the office talk about you all the time. You're easily the most attractive man in the building," she answered honestly. It wasn't just the company; it would be hard to find a man anywhere who could rival him. Between his striking features and his powerful aura, he was an absolute masterpiece.

"What about compared to Julian Sinclair?"

The words slipped out before Silas could stop them. He immediately regretted the question, but part of him desperately wanted to know her answer.

Willow didn't respond right away. It wasn't that the choice was difficult; it was that they were entirely incomparable.

Julian might have been conventionally attractive, but when factoring in character and presence, he wasn't even in the same league.

Seeing her hesitate, Silas decided not to push. He was terrified that her answer would crush him.

He quickly backpedaled. "Just a joke. Don't overthink it."

"Right." Willow assumed he was just messing around. After all, a man of his status had absolutely no reason to compare himself to someone like Julian.

After lunch, Willow headed back to the 25th Floor, while Silas returned to the executive suite.

Arthur Vance was waiting for him with a stack of urgent documents and an afternoon itinerary to review.

But Silas was entirely uninvested in business. Once Arthur finished his rundown, Silas simply murmured, "Got it. Leave them on the desk."

Assuming his boss had other matters to attend to, Arthur set the files down and turned to leave.

"Wait," Silas called out. "How do you think I look?"

Arthur froze, completely blindsided. The CEO's physical appearance had never been a topic of discussion. It wasn't that Silas lacked appeal—it was that his overwhelming confidence and authority made such trivialities irrelevant.

Why the sudden insecurity?

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"Did something happen? Did I mess up a project?" Arthur asked cautiously.

"This has nothing to do with you," Silas replied, a hint of impatience in his voice. "Just answer the question. Am I attractive or not?"

"Yes, absolutely," Arthur said quickly.

Silas let out a quiet breath. He knew Arthur wouldn't lie to him.

"Am I the type of man women actually like nowadays?" he pressed.

Arthur's eyes widened. If he wouldn't get fired for it, he would have shaken his boss by the shoulders. How could Silas be so oblivious to the admiring stares and whispers that followed him everywhere he went?

"Without a doubt."

Silas fell silent for a moment before delivering the final question. "And compared to Julian Sinclair?"

Arthur didn't even blink. "You win by a landslide, boss."

"Good. You can go."

Once the door clicked shut, Silas walked over to the mirror and studied his reflection. He had never placed much value on his looks before, but today, he was incredibly grateful for his genetics. He was also thankful for his rigorous workout routine—at least the ten-year age gap wouldn't be too glaring.

Meanwhile, over at the Sinclair Group, Vivienne Sinclair was too furious to eat lunch. The moment she returned to her office after parting ways with Julian, she called Clarence Vance.

"Are you completely incompetent?" she hissed. "How do you mess up a name? You told me the lead was Ms. Vaughn, but it's Willow Horgan! Do you have any idea how much damage you've caused me?"

Clarence gritted his teeth, annoyed. What damage? The project was still moving forward. If anything, the real issue was Vivienne's sloppy proposal and faulty data.

But he kept his tone polite. "It was an oversight on my part. I was completely swamped trying to push the Sinclair Group through the vendor audit. Mistakes happen when you're stretched that thin."

Vivienne snapped. "Are you implying I'm incapable of doing my own job? I suggest you remember your place. If I could handle everything myself, what would be the point of keeping you around?"

Thinking of his paycheck, Clarence swallowed his pride. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm just looking out for the project. Please don't be upset. I promise you have my full attention from now on."

"You better mean it," Vivienne warned coldly. "Willow Horgan is bad news. We have history, and she will do everything in her power to force me out of this deal. You keep a close eye on her and report every single move to me."

Shortly after she hung up, her assistant informed her that Julian wanted to see her. Vivienne dreaded the summons. She knew exactly what was coming.

Before heading to his office, she ducked into the restroom. She wiped off her lipstick, smudged her eye makeup, and deliberately messed up her hair to look as fragile and exhausted as possible.

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When she stepped into the office, Julian was standing by the window, smoking. He didn't put the cigarette out, merely gesturing toward the sofa for her to sit.

Vivienne's stomach churned with anxiety. She squeezed out a few strategic tears, looking like a total wreck.

The moment Julian turned around, she beat him to the punch. "Julian, I was so careless. I messed up today. Go ahead and yell at me."

Julian had been genuinely furious, but seeing her looking so ragged sapped the anger right out of him.

His tone softened, though the frustration lingered. "How do you get the Project Lead's name wrong? You told me it was Ms. Vaughn. How did it magically turn into Willow?"

"I feel so wronged about that too," Vivienne said, expertly shifting the blame. "You know how cunning Willow is. If she wanted to keep her identity a secret, no one would have known. Look at the Global Bio-Innovation Summit—you went looking for her and got completely played."

Julian's expression shifted. She had a point. Willow had made a fool out of him at the summit.

Seizing the opening, Vivienne pressed on. "I bet she did it on purpose. She gave us a hard time before, hid her identity, and then made a grand entrance today just to humiliate us."

The more she talked, the more annoyed Julian became. Something about her logic didn't sit right with him, even if he couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was.

He abruptly changed the subject. "What about the questions she raised during the meeting? How did you fail to verify such critical data?"

"I did check it! I've been pouring my heart and soul into this proposal all week. But I can't compete if someone is actively sabotaging me." She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "You know Leo Yardley and his team are on this project. You know their history with Willow. What if they're working together from the inside to ruin me?"

In the past, Julian would have bought her narrative without a second thought. But lately, her excuses felt incredibly hollow.

"I doubt it," he said flatly. "If that were true, they wouldn't have let the Sinclair Group win the bid in the first place."

"Maybe they just wanted to lead us on so they could play with us."

"She doesn't have the motive for that, nor does she have the power. Merit Biotech isn't her personal playground."

Even though his logic was sound, Vivienne was stung by his immediate defense of Willow. He spoke as if he genuinely believed Willow was above such petty tactics.

Refusing to back down, she tried again. "But—"

"Enough," Julian interrupted sharply. "The matter is closed. Don't bring it up again."

Vivienne snapped her mouth shut. She could live with this outcome. He hadn't punished her, which meant he still cared.

She was just starting to relax when his next words sent a chill down her spine.

"From now on, I want to be copied on every single email and meeting invitation regarding this project."

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Panic clawed at Vivienne's chest.

Being forced to copy him on everything was a direct insult to her competence, but that wasn't what terrified her. What terrified her was that this arrangement would force Julian and Willow back into each other's orbits.

She had fought tooth and nail to eradicate Willow from their lives. Victory had been practically in her grasp. Now, everything was resetting, and the new, empowered version of Willow was a threat Vivienne couldn't afford.

She scrambled for an excuse. "You're already so swamped with work. You don't have time to sift through endless emails. I can just give you private briefings when issues arise."

Julian was unyielding. "I'll make the time."

"But I'm the lead on this," she argued. "If you suddenly step in, the team will think I'm incompetent. I'll lose all my authority."

"You're just copying me on the correspondence. You're still running the show," he replied coolly. "This is standard procedure for high-stakes projects. No one is going to question your authority."

He realized his past leniency with her had directly caused today's disaster.

"But I don't want to do it this way!" Seeing her control slipping, Vivienne dropped the gentle act and resorted to her usual tantrums. "Tell me the truth, Julian. Are you regretting everything now that you've seen the new Willow? Do you just want an excuse to talk to her?"

"Vivienne!" Julian barked, his voice echoing in the office. "Watch what you say."

The sudden explosion made Vivienne flinch, and she burst into genuine, loud sobs.

Seeing her tremble, Julian rubbed his temples, feeling a pang of guilt. He knew part of his anger stemmed from the fact that she had hit the nail on the head.

Seeing Willow transform into a confident, stunning executive had sparked something in him. He couldn't deny that he was intrigued.

But right now, it was nothing more than passing curiosity. He knew his priorities, and he didn't need Vivienne turning this into a massive conspiracy.

"Come here," he ordered softly. He pulled her onto his lap and wiped her tears with a tissue. "You're being ridiculous. Do you really think so little of me? You're a mother now; stop acting like a child. Even if I wasn't thinking about you, I have to think about Toby. He's my flesh and blood. Everything I do is to secure his future."

Hearing Toby's name settled Vivienne's nerves slightly. As long as she had the boy, she had leverage. But Toby was also a ticking time bomb. If the truth ever came out, she would be completely ruined.

Leaning against his chest, she sniffled and pouted. "So you only care about me because of Toby? That's totally backward."

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Julian chuckled. "What's wrong with that? Toby is my son, and you're his mother. Caring for you because of him makes perfect sense."

"No, it doesn't. You should care about me first, and then Toby."

"Is there a difference?"

"Of course there is," she pushed, carefully testing the waters. "If you cared about me first, you'd love any child of mine. But if you only care about Toby, then if one day he wasn't yours, you'd drop us both in a heartbeat."

"That day will never come."

Julian's expression had already begun to darken, but tucked against his chest, Vivienne couldn't see it.

She kept pushing. "I'm just speaking hypothetically. If that day ever did come..."

"Vivienne," Julian interrupted, his voice dropping to a dangerous register. "You know how protective I am of Toby. Don't ever bring this up again. I don't want to hear jokes like this."

A cold sweat broke out on Vivienne's back. She had completely forgotten that Julian's obsession with his heir was absolute. Masking her terror, she forced a lighthearted laugh.

"I know, I know. Toby is my dearest son too. I won't joke about it anymore."

Mollified, Julian helped her stand. "Go grab the files for the Merit Biotech project."

"Are you really going to read them?" she asked, clinging to a last shred of hope.

"What do you think?" he countered sternly.

"Fine. I'll be right back."

After Vivienne left, Julian returned to the window to smoke. For some reason, her words about Toby Sinclair kept echoing in his mind. He knew his own situation well; having this child was a blessing from heaven, so he valued Toby immensely and wouldn't allow a single mistake. That was why her words had bothered him. But then he reconsidered—Vivienne was always scatterbrained and illogical. She probably hadn't even thought before she spoke. Besides, the timing of her pregnancy matched perfectly, and he had even done a paternity test with Toby. Thinking this, Julian's worries vanished.

As she left his office, Vivienne's heart raced. Knowing Julian's paranoid nature, her slip-up had definitely planted a seed of discomfort.

Retreating to a secluded corner of the building, she dialed an international number she hadn't called in a long time.

A man answered in English, sounding pleasantly surprised. "Honey! Long time no see. Did you miss me?"

Vivienne had no time for his flirting. "Marcus, that secret you helped me bury back then—is it completely airtight? Is there any way it could be traced?"

Marcus dropped the playful tone instantly. "It's foolproof. Why? Has something happened?"

"Things are getting complicated," she whispered frantically. "Just be on high alert. Someone might start digging into it soon."

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Even after the call, Vivienne was still seething. Needing a punching bag, she pulled up the performance reviews for Leo Yardley and his team and aggressively slashed their scores to the absolute minimum. Only then did she feel a twisted sense of satisfaction.

The afternoon flew by. After signing off on her final reports, Willow packed up right at five o'clock. She was meeting Jade Yates for dinner and was thrilled to actually leave on time for once.

The holidays were fast approaching, and the city streets were adorned with warm, glowing lights and festive decorations. The chilly breeze sent the shadows dancing, creating an atmosphere that instantly lifted her spirits.

During her years in Seattle, Willow had never once returned home for the holidays. She had spent every winter buried in spreadsheets and conference calls. Standing beneath the dazzling city lights, the sheer weight of what she had missed finally hit her.

She took out her phone, snapping a few photos along the walk as if trying to reclaim the lost years.

When she arrived at the restaurant, Jade was already seated with a table full of food—every single dish was one of Willow's absolute favorites.

Willow sat down and immediately picked up her fork. "How did you know I was craving all of this?"

"Please, I know you better than you know yourself," Jade laughed, serving her a generous portion of meat and pouring her a drink. "If I didn't have your food preferences memorized by now, I'd be a terrible best friend."

Hearing that made Willow feel a twinge of guilt. She realized she didn't know nearly as much about Jade's preferences. Deciding actions spoke louder than words, she kept quiet and focused on devouring her meal.

Since she had been too self-conscious to eat much during her lunch with Silas, she was absolutely starving now, and her table manners were taking a hit.

Jade tapped the table. "Hey, slow down. You're a stunning woman now, can you eat with a little more grace? People are staring."

Willow waved her off. "I'm just here with you. Who cares?"

Jade smirked. "Oh? So you only care about your image when you're with someone special? Like your Mr. Thorne?"

Ever since Jade learned how Silas had stepped in to help Willow, she took every opportunity to tease her about him. Willow had built up a decent tolerance to it, usually just blushing and moving on.

But this time, the tease hit way too close to home. Willow choked on her drink, coughing violently into her napkin.

"No way. Did I actually hit the mark?"

Willow vigorously wiped her mouth, refusing to make eye contact.

"Oh my god, I did!" Jade gasped, sensing blood in the water. "When did you guys eat? Where? Who paid? Was it a date?"

Willow let out an exasperated sigh. "You're completely out of your mind. We are strictly boss and employee. Stop imagining things."

"But you did eat together," Jade declared triumphantly. "When?"

"Today. At lunch," Willow mumbled.

"What did you have? Was it a fancy spot?"

"It was just a quick meal in the company cafeteria."

"And why were you eating together?"

"Our meetings ended at the same time, so we just walked down together." Willow deliberately omitted the part where Julian tried to corner her and Silas intervened.

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"Is that so?" Jade arched a brow, a knowing smirk playing on her lips. She wasn't buying a word of it. "And he just happened to sit with you, completely ignoring the rest of the staff?"

Willow avoided her gaze. "Like I said, we just bumped into each other."

"Who paid the bill?" Jade demanded, unwilling to let a single detail slip by.

"I did," Willow replied. It was true—Silas's exclusive black card hadn't worked at the basic cafeteria scanners.

"Really?" Jade's suspicions deflated slightly. If a guy was genuinely pursuing a woman, there was no way he would let her cover the check.

"I told you, it's nothing," Willow said, taking the opportunity to lecture her friend. "I'm at Merit Biotech to work. I don't have the time or energy for office romances. Besides, if you're going to ship me with someone, pick a realistic target. Look at who he is. Men like him don't fall for women like me."

Jade hated hearing that. "What's wrong with women like you? You're gorgeous, sweet, and brilliant at your job. Stop selling yourself short. Your past doesn't define your worth. You need to recognize your value and start playing to your strengths."

Willow had heard this pep talk at least a dozen times, but it wasn't about low self-esteem. She knew she had grown, but Silas Thorne was simply in a completely different stratosphere. He was untouchable.

"I know, I know. Just eat your food before it gets cold," Willow deflected.

But Jade wasn't ready to let it go. "I'm telling you, he's definitely interested. At the absolute minimum, he likes having you around. Otherwise, why would a guy in his position choose to eat with you out of hundreds of employees?"

Willow had to admit that made a sliver of sense. But 'not disliking' someone was a far cry from romantic interest. Even if he didn't hate her company, a relationship between them was functionally impossible.

Deciding to humor her friend, Willow smiled. "I really couldn't tell you. Why don't you go ask him yourself if you ever get the chance?"

"Oh, don't test me. I absolutely will," Jade declared boldly. "When I have some free time, I'm going to track him down and interrogate him. I'll find out if you two are really just 'strictly professional.'"

"Go for it. If you manage that, the next dinner is on me."

"I'll hold you to that."

Right as they were laughing, a sudden commotion rippled through the front of the restaurant. There were excited gasps and hushed whispers spreading like wildfire.

Usually, neither Willow nor Jade cared about public spectacles, but the noise was getting louder, the energy practically crackling in the air as it moved toward their table.

Finally, they both looked up.

Willow's heart nearly stopped.

It couldn't be. What kind of insane coincidence was this? The exact man they had just been gossiping about was currently striding right toward them.

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Silas had come straight from the office. He hadn't exactly tracked Willow down, but he had noted the general direction she walked after work and found himself wandering the same streets. When he spotted a nice restaurant, he stepped inside on a whim.

Finding her sitting there felt like pure fate.

He was just as surprised as she was, but his surprise quickly gave way to quiet thrill.

They locked eyes, neither saying a word, which was driving Jade absolutely crazy. The man standing before them was, without a doubt, the most devastatingly handsome guy she had ever seen in her entire life.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, radiating an aura of untouchable wealth in his dark, bespoke suit. His jawline was sharp enough to cut glass, his brow strong, and his deep, predatory gaze carried a natural, overwhelming authority.

Jade knew for a fact she didn't know any god-tier billionaires, and since the moment he walked in, his eyes had been laser-focused on Willow.

She subtly tugged at Willow's sleeve and whispered loudly, "Wow. You get ambushed by a guy this hot, and you still try to tell me no one is interested in you?"

Though she tried to be stealthy, Jade's naturally loud voice carried effortlessly to where Silas stood.

Willow wanted the floor to swallow her whole. "Jade, please stop," she hissed.

Misinterpreting Willow's embarrassment for shyness, Jade bypassed her friend entirely and addressed Silas directly. "Hey, handsome. Are you here for my friend? Looking for her number? Just a heads-up, she's highly sought after. If you're going to make a move, you need to step up your game, or else—"

"Jade, seriously, stop!" Willow practically shouted, her face burning with humiliation. She turned to her friend. "This is my boss. The CEO of Merit Biotech, Silas Thorne."

Willow turned back to Silas, mortified. "Mr. Thorne, I am so sorry."

Silas gave a relaxed nod, looking entirely unfazed and slightly amused by the outburst.

Jade, however, looked like she had just been struck by lightning. She was stunned—not because of her embarrassing speech, but because this man was Silas Thorne.

She had heard the rumors about his legendary looks, but she had always assumed it was exaggerated. In her line of work at the law firm, she knew that money and power automatically added five points to any wealthy man's attractiveness. She had fully expected him to be an average guy dressed in expensive clothes.

She had not expected him to look like a runway model who could effortlessly destroy lives. The "billionaire halo" wasn't doing him any favors; his sheer physical presence was doing all the work.

After a long, breathless moment, Jade pulled Willow aside and whispered frantically, "Why the hell didn't you tell me your boss was this hot?"

Willow looked confused. "I did. I told you the very first day I came back."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you meant *this* hot!" Jade hissed.

Willow couldn't argue with that. She stole a quiet glance at Silas, only to find his deep gaze already fixed on her. She quickly looked away, her pulse racing.

"Yeah," Willow murmured softly. "He really is."

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"So, you get to have meetings, work, and grab meals with a face like that every single day?" Jade Yates couldn't help but marvel.

Willow Horgan was a bit sensitive to the word 'meals.' "It's not every day. Just once, yesterday afternoon."

But Jade wasn't listening anymore. Her mind was already busy scripting over a hundred different office romance scenarios for the two of them. "Having a boss like that is an absolute blessing. I am never complaining about your overtime ever again. Also, hurry up and finalize that divorce. Get it done. Well, even if the paperwork takes a while, you need to make your move. If you miss out on him, you will regret it for the rest of your life."

Willow figured her friend was just rambling nonsense again and brushed it off with a noncommittal hum. She took the initiative to introduce them. "Mr. Thorne, this is my friend, Jade Yates."

"Jade, this is the CEO of Merit Biotech, Silas Thorne."

"It's an honor, Mr. Thorne," Jade said, instantly offering her hand. "Willow mentions you all the time. I didn't expect you to be so gorgeous in person."

Silas took her hand with a gentlemanly grip. "Is that so? And what exactly does she say about me?"

Both Willow and Jade froze. It had just been a polite greeting; neither expected him to actually press for details.

Recovering quickly, Jade continued with a playful, half-serious tone. "Only good things, of course. She says you're incredibly handsome, highly capable, and brilliantly sharp. At Merit, you're the person she admires the most."

"Really?" Silas chuckled, shooting a glance at Willow, who immediately ducked her head. "That's the first time I'm hearing any of this."

Jade was absolutely captivated by his smile. She let out a light laugh. "She's just too shy to tell you to your face."

"Jade..." Willow was utterly mortified, discreetly tugging at her friend's sleeve.

Jade finally reined it in, turning her attention back to Silas. "Are you here alone? Would you like to join us for dinner?"

Silas definitely wanted to join them, but noticing the conflicted look in Willow's eyes, he didn't give a direct answer. Instead, he looked right at her. "Willie, what do you think?"

Willie...

It was the first time he had ever called her that. Willow felt a strange flutter in her chest. It was just a simple nickname, but hearing it in his deep, resonant voice made it sound incredibly intimate.

Still, having dinner together right now was a stretch. She hadn't eaten much at lunch and definitely didn't want to go hungry tonight out of sheer awkwardness.

"Maybe some other time. Next time, perhaps?"

"Alright," Silas agreed easily. "You two enjoy your meal. I won't intrude."

Before Silas left, Jade seized the opportunity to formally thank him. Even though he had helped her father strictly because of Willow, her family had been the ultimate beneficiaries.

Silas was gracious and elegant, waving it off as a trivial matter and telling her not to give it a second thought.

After he walked away, Willow picked up her fork to continue eating, only to hear Jade mimicking his deep voice, calling her "Willie."

Goosebumps erupted all over Willow's arms. She never realized that the exact same name could sound so drastically different depending on who was speaking. "Stop calling me that."

But Jade was having far too much fun to stop. "Willie, Willie, I'm going to call you Willie from now on. How did I never realize your name could sound so cute?"

Willow kept her cool. "It's always been an option. You just lacked the imagination."

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"Does anyone else at the company call you that?"

Willow shook her head.

"Does he call anyone else by cute little nicknames?"

Willow thought about it. She really hadn't heard him do it, but... "I have no idea what he calls other people. Besides, I'm younger than him. Him calling me 'Willie' is perfectly normal."

"Then why wouldn't you let me call you that just now?"

"Do you want the honest truth?" Willow suppressed a smile.

"Obviously."

"I think he makes it sound better than you do."

"Willow Horgan!" Jade feigned outrage. "You absolute traitor! Choosing a pretty face over your best friend!"

Willow didn't flinch. "Are you really going to sit there and pretend you weren't doing the exact same thing?"

She had noticed everything. From the second Silas appeared, Jade's eyes had been practically glued to him.

Jade giggled, entirely unrepentant. "Fine, you caught me. But you really can't blame me! Silas Thorne is just too stunning. It's a tragedy there are barely any photos of him out there. If even one or two leaked, Julian Sinclair wouldn't even register as a blip in New York anymore."

At the mention of that name, Willow's expression tightened. Seeing her discomfort, Jade swiftly shifted gears. "I do have a question, though. Rumor has it he's icy, ruthless, and basically Hell's Reaper in a tailored suit. But after talking to him just now, he didn't seem cold at all?"

"Right? You felt it too?" Willow's eyes lit up, thrilled to finally have someone validate her perspective.

She had felt this way for a long time, but everyone else insisted he was terrifying. It had started to make her doubt her own judgment. Hearing Jade say it instantly put her at ease. She wasn't crazy after all.

"At least, that's the vibe I got just now."

"Exactly. I think he's nowhere near as intimidating as the rumors make him out to be."

Jade hummed in thought. A moment later, she looked up, staring intently at Willow. Unnerved, Willow shifted in her seat. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Is it possible," Jade speculated, "that he's only like that with you? And the only reason I didn't get the 'Hell's Reaper' treatment today is because I was sitting next to you?"

"What are you talking about? How do you always manage to twist things in that direction?" Willow laughed, shaking her head. "Can't he just be a decent person? You saw him—he was a complete gentleman."

"True," Jade conceded. "Compared to the ruthless tyrant I was expecting, he's a saint. Actually, his whole vibe fits a very specific trope that's hugely popular right now."

"What trope?" Willow asked casually.

Jade tapped her chin. "The ultimate 'Daddy' energy."

Willow frowned, completely lost. "What on earth is that?"

"It's the hottest trend online," Jade explained eagerly. "A mature, stable, experienced older man who radiates protective energy. He's gentle and endlessly indulgent, perfectly restrained and deeply devoted—but he can also be stern when he needs to be."

"I see..." Willow thought about it. The description actually fit Silas Thorne remarkably well. But she was still skeptical of Jade's wild internet theories. "Where do you even read this stuff?"

"The internet, obviously," Jade replied. "And according to the internet, men like that are absolutely obsessed with women exactly like you—gorgeous, quietly resilient, with a soft elegance that triggers their deepest protective instincts."

"Stop talking nonsense." Willow sighed, totally drained of the energy to argue. "I don't need anyone to protect me, and I'm certainly not some fragile little flower."

"Maybe not to you. But in his eyes? You might just be."

The two of them chatted and laughed, quickly finishing their meal. But when they got up to pay, the waitress informed them that their bill had already been settled. Not only that, but a private car had been arranged to take them home.

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As to who exactly had taken care of the bill, it went without saying.

For the entire ride back, Jade couldn't stop talking about it. Willow just let her vent her excitement; as long as Jade was happy, she didn't mind. However, she did have to offer one piece of vital advice. "You can gossip about this with me all you want, but once you walk into your new firm, keep it to yourself. You can't be talking like this in front of your new boss."

Tomorrow was Jade's first day at her new job. Tonight's dinner was actually a dual celebration—marking the wrap-up of Willow's massive project and toasting Jade's new career chapter at Sterling & Faircrest Law Group.

Information about the new firm was sparse online, so Jade didn't know much about it. But she easily pictured her new boss as some middle-aged guy with a beer belly—she had dealt with plenty of those in her career.

After all, not everyone had Willow's insane luck to end up with a boss that looked like a runway model.

"Don't worry. If my new boss is anywhere near that hot, I wouldn't waste time gossiping. I'd skip straight to taking action and chasing him down."

Shortly after the two women left, Silas received a call from the restaurant confirming that they had been safely escorted to the waiting car.

Silas thanked the manager and finally relaxed. He had needed to step away earlier due to a sudden work matter and couldn't wait for them to finish eating. Still worried about them, he had settled their check and arranged for a driver.

After waiting a bit longer, calculating the time it would take for them to arrive, he sent Willow a text: [Did you make it home?]

Willow had just walked through her door. She was genuinely surprised when his message popped up. He really was uncanny, timing it down to the exact minute.

[Yeah, just walked in. What about you? Are you home yet?]

She rarely showed this kind of casual concern for him. Even though it was the most ordinary question in the world, reading it made Silas smile. The exhaustion of a grueling workday instantly vanished.

[Not yet.]

He then deliberately snapped a photo of his glowing computer monitors and sent it to her.

Willow replied immediately: [Still working overtime? You're so busy. I'll let you get back to it then, I don't want to bother you.]

Reading that, Silas frowned. His entire goal had been to make her feel a little bad for him, to draw out her sympathy. It had massively backfired.

He quickly typed out another message: [You're not bothering me. Even work requires adequate rest breaks.]

That was true enough.

Willow didn't push the issue, but she did remember something else.

He had paid for her and Jade's dinner. Originally, she planned to pay him back at the office tomorrow, but since they were already texting, she figured she might as well transfer the money now.

[Mr. Thorne, could you let me know how much dinner was earlier? I'd like to transfer the money to you.]

Silas's immediate reaction was a deep frown. He had absolutely zero interest in talking about money with her, let alone accepting a transfer from her.

[There's no need. It's perfectly normal for a boss to buy dinner for his subordinate. It's not a big deal. Please don't worry about it.]

[You should still let me pay you back. My friend was there too, after all.]

Willow's logic was that since Jade didn't work for Merit Biotech, she wasn't his subordinate, making his generosity a bit inappropriate.

But to Silas, paying the bill was entirely necessary. First, she was Willow's best friend. Second, he had thoroughly enjoyed every single word that came out of Jade's mouth.

Thinking about that, he decided to ask: [Were the things your friend said earlier actually true?]

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[What things exactly?] Jade had talked so much tonight that Willow couldn't even keep track of it all.

[That you think I'm handsome, highly capable, and brilliantly sharp. And that at Merit, I'm the person you admire the most.] Silas typed out every single compliment Jade had spouted, word for word.

Seeing the message made Willow want to die of embarrassment. Honestly, there was nothing factually wrong with the compliments, but having them paraded right in front of him felt incredibly awkward. Men of his status were constantly surrounded by people flattering them. Willow was terrified he would lump her in with the corporate sycophants.

[My friend is just really outspoken and sometimes she speaks without thinking. If she accidentally offended you, please don't take it to heart.]

[Not at all.] Silas had found her friend's words exceptionally pleasing to the ear. He just needed to verify the authenticity of the source. [So, were the things she said true?]

Backed into a corner, Willow didn't know how else to spin it. She would rather him think she was a kiss-ass than a liar. Plus, this involved Jade's credibility.

[Yes, it's true.]

Seeing that simple confirmation, the restless tension in Silas's chest settled. A faint smile touched his lips. [You should have said so sooner. Also, you can say these things directly to me in the future. No need to use your friend as a messenger.]

The future? Just this one instance was enough social humiliation to last Willow a lifetime. She was never saying anything like that again, and she was going to make damn sure Jade kept her mouth shut too.

Terrified of distracting him from his work, Willow didn't dare drag the conversation out and once again suggested they say goodnight.

This time, Silas didn't object. He was in a spectacular mood. He wouldn't refuse a single request she made right now.

After sending her goodbye text, Willow worried she sounded a bit too stiff, so she tacked on a cute animated cat waving goodbye.

As soon as she hit send, she regretted it, worried Silas would find it incredibly childish. Just as she was about to unsend it, his reply popped up. Not only did he use the exact same waving cat emoji, but he also added a simple "Goodnight."

In a flash, Willow smiled.

Staring at the adorable cat animation on her screen and imagining the icy, commanding man behind the phone sending it... the contrast was jarring. But somehow, in a bizarre way, it was also incredibly endearing.

The next morning, by the time Willow woke up, Jade was already dressed and ready to head out.

It was her first day at the new firm, and she had dressed to kill.

She wore a sharply tailored, dark charcoal power suit with zero unnecessary embellishments. The structured shoulders looked custom-made, giving her a sleek, commanding silhouette. Her long hair was pinned back immaculately, highlighting her smooth forehead and sharp jawline. Her makeup was understated but fierce, radiating a quiet, undeniable authority the second she made eye contact.

It was the first time Willow had ever seen her look this formidable. She was utterly floored. "Jade, you look so professional. I'm practically swooning."

"Obviously. Look who you're talking to." Jade was brimming with confidence. She might not have been practicing law for decades, but her experience and raw talent made her one of the best in her bracket. When she stood her ground, she exuded seasoned expertise.

And today being her first day, she fully intended to leave a flawless, authoritative impression on her new boss.

"I'm heading out. Take your time getting ready."

"Will do. Drive safe!"

Arriving at the address, Jade realized that while the firm might be new, the location and the building were top-tier. It sat right in the heart of New York's most prestigious commercial district, surrounded by globally renowned conglomerates. Clearly, the unseen backer of this firm had deep pockets.

Jade breathed a sigh of relief. Deep pockets meant guaranteed, on-time paychecks—one less thing to worry about. Simultaneously, it reinforced her mental image: her new boss was absolutely going to be a middle-aged guy with a beer belly.

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The entire onboarding process was remarkably smooth. The HR manager was clearly a seasoned professional; the paperwork and schedules were flawlessly prepared, saving Jade a significant amount of time.

Once the formalities were out of the way, there was just one final step: meeting the boss. The manager escorted her to the executive office, but since the boss wasn't at his desk, she asked Jade to wait for a moment while she went to find him.

Jade waited quietly, letting her eyes sweep the room. The decor was minimalist and the layout spacious. The furniture was sparse but clearly high-end, every detail impeccably restrained, radiating a cool, professional order.

It seemed her middle-aged boss had excellent taste.

About five minutes later, the sound of footsteps echoed from the corridor. Jade quickly turned around, and the moment she locked eyes with the man walking through the door, she froze.

Hugo Harrington?

What was he doing here?

Before Jade could even process the shock, the HR manager introduced them. "This is our CEO, Mr. Harrington."

Turning to Hugo, she added, "And this is our newest attorney, Jade Yates. Today is her first day."

The revelation hit Jade like a freight train. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined that the owner of this firm was Hugo Harrington. For a moment, she was completely struck dumb, unsure of how to even open her mouth.

Fortunately, Hugo didn't seem to notice the awkwardness. He dismissed the manager with a nod and extended his hand to Jade, introducing himself formally. "Hugo Harrington."

Jade shook his hand mechanically. "Jade Yates. The new attorney."

The man she had secretly carried a torch for all those years had just re-entered her life in the most unexpected way possible. Jade didn't know whether to celebrate or panic. She was entirely unprepared for this, her mind spinning in total disarray.

Simultaneously, a wave of regret washed over her regarding her outfit. It was too severe, too unyielding. If she had known he was the boss, she would have softened her look. Nobody wanted to come across as a ruthless shark in front of the man they had a crush on.

"I know who you are."

Hugo's quiet words snapped her back to reality.

"You do?" Jade's heart hammered against her ribs. Did he really? Had he actually noticed her during all those years when she was constantly finding excuses to just happen to be in his orbit?

Hope began to spark wildly in her chest, only to be instantly extinguished by his next sentence.

"You're Willow's friend. I remember you."

Oh. Right. It was because of Willow.

It made sense. In college, she was always attached to Willow's hip. Whenever they ran into Julian Sinclair, Hugo was usually standing right there next to him. It was perfectly normal that he remembered her face.

But wait—did that mean he only hired her as a favor to Willow?

Jade suddenly wondered if he knew about Willow and Julian's divorce.

Even though she desperately needed a job, if this offer had anything to do with Julian Sinclair's influence, she would walk out the door right now. She refused to be tied to that man in any capacity.

Since the door was open, Jade decided to clear the air immediately. "Do you mind if I ask why you hired me? Because if this has anything to do with Julian Sinclair, there's something you need to know. Willow is currently in the middle of filing for divorce from him. And I refuse to accept a job if it's some sort of favor tied to him."

Hugo hadn't expected her to be so blunt. She was entirely different from the calculating people he usually dealt with—there was a fierce, refreshing honesty about her. He met her gaze directly. "Julian is Julian, and I am I. My decision to hire you has absolutely nothing to do with him."

The unspoken implication was clear: he already knew about the divorce.

"Then why did you hire me?"