

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

Chapter 216

"Because of your competence."

Hugo had initially noticed her resume because of her connection to Willow, but after a cursory background check, it was obvious she was a highly skilled and experienced attorney. For her age bracket in New York, she was absolutely top-tier.

She just had a run of bad luck and offended the wrong corporate players—things that, to him, were effortlessly easy to resolve.

Hearing his reasoning, Jade nodded. She was incredibly confident in her own abilities and felt his justification was entirely fair.

With that, the initial panic melted away, leaving behind a solid sense of reassurance. At the very least, he recognized her professional value.

She suddenly recalled her conversation with Willow yesterday, where she had been so envious of Willow's situation. Well, she didn't need to be jealous anymore. Her boss wasn't just handsome; he was the man she had secretly crushed on for years. Looking at it this way, getting fired from her last job was a total blessing in disguise.

That was just how Jade operated—her emotions flared hot and settled quickly. Now that she realized she had the ultimate home-field advantage, she decided to take the initiative.

"We used to have each other on WeChat, remember?" she prompted, mostly just to see if he recalled the detail.

"Of course," Hugo replied. She was a memorable woman; he wasn't the type to forget.

Jade beamed. She already had his social media, but now she wanted his direct phone number. Strictly as a first step, of course.

"Would it be alright if I got your personal number? I imagine I'll need to reach you directly for work going forward."

It wasn't the first time someone had asked Hugo for his number, but it was the first time he actually hesitated.

Usually, he would shut it down immediately with a polite refusal. But today, for some reason, looking at Jade standing in front of him, the rejection died in his throat.

Even in her hyper-professional, severe power suit, there was an unmistakable raw authenticity in her eyes—vibrant, fearless, and entirely open. She felt like a rush of hot, crisp summer wind, making the very air around her crackle with life.

"Sure." Despite his slight hesitation, he decided to follow his instinct.

After getting his number, Jade quickly saved it. She didn't linger in his office, though. It was just an introductory meeting on her first day; staying too long would look unprofessional.

The first day was light on actual casework, mostly consisting of familiarizing herself with the firm's operations and specific corporate clients. Before she knew it, it was time to clock out.

The moment she walked through her front door, the first thing Jade did was corner Willow to talk about Hugo Harrington. She had texted Willow about it earlier in the day, but they hadn't had the time to dive into the details. Now, she was ready to unleash.

Willow had been surprised initially, but after thinking it over, it made perfect sense. Given the circumstances, any firm willing to hire Jade after the Sinclair blacklist would have to have serious backing. And from what she remembered of Julian's inner circle, Hugo came from serious old money.

But Willow was more concerned about her friend's well-being. "How was your first day? Are you adjusting okay? Are your coworkers and the boss easy to get along with?"

"It's all great. In our line of work, as long as your foundation is solid, everything else is manageable." Jade felt zero pressure on the career front. She was much more focused on a different angle. "What's your read on Hugo? Does he have any specific quirks? Things he likes? Things he hates? I'm going to be working closely with him, so having the inside scoop would definitely give me an edge."

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Jade definitely had ulterior motives for asking, but it wasn't the right time to spill everything to Willow. So, she used work as her cover story, deciding to confess the truth when the time was right.

Willow thought about it for a moment. "He's a genuinely good guy. Completely different from the rest of that circle. He's grounded, low-key, and treats people well. He doesn't have that arrogant billionaire heir complex at all."

But she didn't know him deeply, either. Aside from that one ski trip in the past, they hadn't actually interacted much. "As for his likes and dislikes, I really couldn't say. But since you're working at his firm, you'll figure it out soon enough."

"True," Jade nodded. Afraid Willow might catch on to her hidden agenda, she didn't dare press the issue further. "Let's eat first."

Over dinner, Jade gave Willow an update on the divorce proceedings. All the documents had been submitted, and the lawsuit was officially filed. Now, they just had to wait for the court to schedule a hearing.

Willow told her to prioritize her new job; the lawsuit could wait in the background.

Meanwhile, Julian Sinclair had also received the official summons from the court, but he completely ignored it. In fact, it didn't even register as a threat. So what if a case was filed? There would be a defense period, mandatory mediation, and even if a verdict was reached, he could just appeal it endlessly. He didn't care. Let her throw a tantrum—he had countless ways to string this out.

More importantly, he simply didn't have the mental bandwidth to deal with it right now. Ever since he instructed Vivienne Sinclair to keep him cc'd on all the Merit Biotech project updates, he had been drowning in daily crises. One day the data was corrupted, the next an experiment failed. He hadn't had a moment of peace.

Furthermore, after Vivienne 'accidentally' slipped up about Toby's origins, Julian had quietly ordered a private investigation. Fortunately, the results came back clean—the paternity test confirmed Toby was his biological son. Only then did the heavy weight in his chest finally dissipate. Given his naturally paranoid and suspicious nature, the doubt would have suffocated him otherwise.

What Julian didn't know was that Vivienne had anticipated his paranoia and manipulated the medical contacts long before his investigators even arrived.

Right now, Vivienne was listening to the report over the phone, gritting her teeth so hard her jaw ached. He had never trusted her. Not even for a second.

"It's a good thing you're smart and anticipated his move. Otherwise, with this surprise audit, everything would have been exposed..."

"Enough," Vivienne snapped, completely out of patience with the lackey rambling on the other end. "You handled it well. But stay vigilant. I shouldn't have to teach you how to cover your tracks."

With that, she violently hung up the phone. A tidal wave of frustration and terror crashed over her, snapping her last shred of self-control. She swept her arm across her desk, sending all the files and folders crashing to the floor.

Willow Horgan! This was all her fault!

If it wasn't for her, Julian would still be passionately in love with Vivienne. She wouldn't have to live in constant terror of Toby's true parentage being discovered, nor would she have had to take such a massive, terrifying risk to test the waters, which almost resulted in Julian uncovering the truth.

Vivienne's chest heaved with toxic rage. Since Willow was putting her through hell, she was going to make damn sure Willow suffered too. And not just Willow—everyone associated with her would pay the price for her pathetic choices.

There were only a couple of days left before the Christmas and New Year break. Normally, corporate offices were already winding down, coasting through the final wrap-ups of the year.

The West Coast office in Seattle was no exception, and Vivienne knew this perfectly well. Which was exactly why this was the perfect time to strike.

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When Leo Yardley picked up the phone, he froze, convinced he had misheard. He clarified, syllable by syllable, "Are you saying you want the entire project team to work through the entire Christmas and New Year break?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Vivienne replied, her voice dripping with arrogant authority. "Because of your team's incompetence, the experimental data isn't ready. Of course you have to work overtime to fix it. If the entire project schedule gets derailed, are you going to personally cover the financial losses?"

Leo had already explained the timeline to her multiple times. He knew she was just flexing her power to be malicious, but he forced himself to explain it again. "It's not that the experiment failed. The comparative baseline data hasn't finished processing yet. We are running a control study. If the baseline group isn't complete, pulling data from a single variable group is scientifically meaningless."

"Missing data is not an excuse. Figure it out. Run more parallel batches. Do I really have to spoon-feed you basic concepts?"

Hearing that, Leo felt a spike of pure anger shoot to his head. "Do you even know how biological trials work? You can't just snap your fingers and magically spawn results. It requires scientific rigor. The cultures take time to incubate! It's not as simple as you think. Everything we are doing is strictly adhering to the mandated protocols."

Vivienne was ruthless. "I don't care. I want the data. If the data isn't there, that's your problem, and you will work the holidays to fix it."

Leo bit back a curse. There was no point arguing logic with a corporate tyrant who didn't even understand the basic mechanics of a lab. But since the directive came from the top, he couldn't just ignore it entirely.

He tried to negotiate. "People have plans for the holidays. Several members of the team are from out of state and haven't seen their families in a year; they already booked flights home. How about this: I will stay back and cover the lab alone. The rest of the team gets their time off."

He was making a massive concession, hoping she would just take the win and drop it. But Vivienne was merciless. "Absolutely not. Did you forget I am the Project Lead? What I say goes. You do not have the authority to negotiate with me."

"Fine." Realizing he was backed into a corner, Leo shifted tactics to protect his team's rights. "What about the holiday pay? By law, we are entitled to overtime compensation."

Vivienne scoffed. She had engineered this entirely to torture them—did he seriously think she was going to pay them for it? She had done her homework on Seattle's labor loopholes, which was exactly why she felt so emboldened to exploit them.

"There is no extra pay. I might authorize some comp time later on, but that depends on the project's progress. If things are delayed, don't even think about it."

At that moment, Leo finally realized she was just deliberately screwing with them. The fury he had been suppressing boiled over. He had actually tried to reason with her in good faith.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" he demanded.

"And what if I am?" Vivienne wasn't remotely intimidated. In fact, she thrived on it. Hearing an enemy sound frustrated, cornered, and utterly powerless gave her a profound sense of dominance.

"Aren't you worried Mr. Sinclair will have a problem with this once he finds out?"

"Have a problem with me?" Vivienne sneered. "I am the Lead on this project. I make the calls. And trust me, he will listen to whatever I say."

Leo had heard the office whispers about her inappropriate relationship with Julian Sinclair, but he hadn't experienced her toxicity firsthand until today. Just as the rumors suggested, their dynamic was definitely not strictly professional.

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Leo gritted his teeth, deciding to throw down his final trump card. "If you push us like this, aren't you afraid we'll just walk out and resign en masse?"

Vivienne had actually considered that possibility. But after analyzing the team dynamics, she concluded they wouldn't dare. They were middle-aged professionals with mortgages and families to feed. Finding another position that matched Sinclair Group's salary and benefits would be near impossible. That leverage was exactly why she felt untouchable.

"Go ahead and try. See if I care," Vivienne taunted. "But I highly suggest you think long and hard before you do. Calculate if you can actually survive the fallout. Don't let a momentary tantrum ruin your life."

"Oh, and by the way, I know you're furious. I'm sure you've cursed me out eight hundred times in your head by now. But let's be real—this isn't my fault. You only have yourself to blame for blindly following the wrong boss and picking the wrong side."

Picking the wrong side. Leo knew exactly what she meant. The only reason she was targeting them was because they had been loyal to Willow Horgan.

But the time they spent working under Willow was the best era of their careers. They had been treated as equals, shared the workload, and focused purely on the science without any corporate ego trips. It had absolutely nothing to do with the sleazy, profit-driven 'corporate politics' Vivienne was obsessed with.

His voice turned dangerously cold. "It's not over yet. Isn't it a bit early to be taking a victory lap?"

"What, are you still defending her?" Vivienne dropped all pretense, going straight for the throat. "Since you're so loyal, let me tell you a little secret, just to cure you of your delusions. Do you even know where Willow Horgan is right now? She went to Merit Biotech. She's sitting comfortably as a VP, climbing the corporate ladder and thriving. She

has completely forgotten you exist. You're out here ruining your career defending her honor, and she couldn't care less about you."

"What did you say? She went to Merit?" Leo's first reaction was pure shock, instantly followed by overwhelming joy. Ever since Willow was forced out of Sinclair Group, the team had been worried sick about her future. Knowing she had landed on her feet at an absolute powerhouse of a company was a massive relief.

As for why she hadn't contacted them? She obviously had her reasons. Leo was absolutely certain of that. He wasn't about to doubt his mentor just because a venomous snake like Vivienne was whispering poison in his ear.

"Of course. I saw it with my own eyes. It's an undisputed fact," Vivienne stated, misinterpreting his silence as betrayal and rushing to fan the flames. "So you see, hard work means nothing. What matters is playing corporate politics and backing the right horse. People like you? You're just collateral damage."

Leo didn't even want to waste breath on her anymore. Finding out Willow was thriving had completely turned his day around. "Are we done here? If that's all, I'm hanging up."

Vivienne actually didn't have anything else to say. The sole purpose of the call was to torture them and vent her own rage. Now that she had achieved her goal, and successfully planted the seeds of betrayal (or so she thought), she spoke with haughty satisfaction. "You better think carefully about what I just said. If you figure it out and decide you want to switch sides, I might be open to it, assuming you're willing to..."

Before she could finish her sentence, the line went dead. Leo had hung up on her. But instead of being angry, Vivienne smiled. His explosive reaction meant her psychological warfare was working. Willow would be entirely isolated.

In reality, Leo had only hung up because he had better things to do.

The second the line dropped, he immediately dialed Willow's number.

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Willow was currently at the hospital. Even though it was nearly the holidays and her workload had lightened, Martha Mercer was scheduled for her transplant soon, so Willow's days were still incredibly hectic.

Thankfully, Martha was in great spirits and her vitals were strong, keeping Willow's anxiety at bay.

Seeing Leo's name pop up on her screen, she instantly dropped what she was doing and answered. "What's wrong?"

Leo never beat around the bush with her. "Chief, I just heard from Vivienne Sinclair that you're working at Merit now?"

"Yeah, I am." Willow had originally planned to tell him once the dust settled, mostly because she had a much larger strategy in play. But since he asked directly, she wasn't going to hide it.

However, she caught the nuance—he heard it from Vivienne?

Nothing good ever came out of Vivienne's mouth. Taking a wild guess, Willow could easily imagine the kind of toxic manipulation she had tried to pull on Leo.

If it had been anyone else, she wouldn't bother explaining. But this was Leo.

"I'll explain everything properly when I have the time. But whatever Vivienne told you, do not believe a single word."

Before she even finished, Leo cut in firmly. "Chief, don't worry. There's no way I'd ever believe a word she says. I knew exactly what kind of person she was from day one. And our trust isn't fragile enough to be broken by a few cheap lies. I only called to tell you how incredibly happy I am for you. With your experience and talent, you deserved something vastly better anyway."

By the end of his sentence, Leo's voice was thick with emotion. Willow heard it immediately. A wave of guilt washed over her; she had been so consumed by the chaos lately that she hadn't checked in on her old team. "How have you been? Is everyone doing okay? The holidays are coming up, you should all finally get some rest."

"Don't worry about us, we'll manage," Leo deflected. Afraid Willow would hear the stress in his voice, he quickly conjured an excuse. "Chief, I have to run to a meeting. The project timeline is completely chaotic right now. We'll catch up later."

"Alright, go handle your work." Willow agreed, but the excuse immediately raised red flags.

Right before the holidays, companies almost never pushed aggressive deadlines. The standard protocol was to wrap up loose ends and hit the ground running after the break. For them to be scrambling this late in the year was entirely abnormal. Something was definitely going on.

But Leo was famously stubborn. If he didn't want to talk about it, prying wouldn't work. Still, it made Willow realize that she needed to accelerate her own plans.

Before she could dwell on it, her phone buzzed with a call from the nurses' station. They informed her that someone was at the reception desk to see Martha Mercer, asking if she wanted to authorize the visitor.

Willow asked for a name, but the nurse said the man refused to give one, only claiming that Willow would recognize him immediately.

Willow frowned in confusion. Martha didn't have a wide social circle to begin with, and since she got sick, even fewer people visited. Aside from Willow and Jade, almost no one came by. This sudden mystery guest gave her a sinking feeling.

Sure enough, when Willow reached the nurses' station, she saw Julian Sinclair standing there. Next to him was a massive stack of premium wellness hampers and expensive gifts.

Willow didn't even spare the gifts a glance. She marched straight up to him, her voice freezing over. "What are you doing here?"

Julian remained expressionless. He wasn't provoked by her sheer hostility; he just stood there, his gaze fixed intensely on her.

Perhaps because she was at the hospital, her outfit was entirely understated. She wore a soft cream knit cardigan over light gray linen trousers. Her dark hair was loosely gathered in a low chignon, with a few delicate strands framing her face. She radiated an effortless, quiet elegance that commanded the space around her.

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He suddenly realized how little attention he had paid to her in the past. Otherwise, how had he never noticed how stunning she looked in that color?

When he didn't speak for a long moment, Willow frowned. "Whatever your reason for being here, you aren't welcome. Leave."

"I'm already here. Do you really think I'm just going to walk away?" Julian Sinclair's lips curled into a faint, mocking smile. "We're still legally married, which makes your mother my mother-in-law. What's wrong with a man checking in on his sick mother-in-law?"

"Don't make me sick," Willow snapped, completely out of patience for his twisted logic. "You know exactly where we stand right now."

When her mother first fell ill, Willow had gone to him, begging for help. The cruel words he had said, the cold way he had looked at her—it was all permanently burned into her memory. Now that everything was finally on track, he had the nerve to show up and play the devoted husband? Who exactly was this performance for?

"Get out. Don't make me cause a scene in the middle of a hospital."

With that, Willow turned to walk away. But the moment she moved, a heavy grip clamped down on her wrist. She whipped around, fiercely yanking her arm free. "If you don't leave right now, I'm calling security."

"You think that scares me?" Julian's smile didn't waver. "How do you think I found you in the first place?"

Willow glared at him. How did he find them? Through his usual underhanded methods, no doubt. She might not be able to control his every move, but she sure as hell could control whether he got anywhere near Martha Mercer today.

Her mother was at a critical stage leading up to the transplant. There was no way Willow was going to let his toxic presence upset her.

"I said you're not going in. Even if I have to get the cops involved, you are not stepping foot in that room."

She braced herself, fully expecting Julian to erupt into a screaming match. Instead, his reaction was chillingly calm. "Fine. I don't need to go in. You can take these things to her yourself."

Disgust washed over her. "Take them back. Nobody wants anything from you."

Julian acted as if he hadn't heard a word. Completely unfazed, he continued, "Grandma asked me to remind you that we're spending New Year's at the estate. Be there on time."

"I'm not going," Willow flatly refused. Not only did the holiday coincide perfectly with Martha's transplant schedule, but even if she had absolutely nothing going on, she still wouldn't go.

In the past, out of respect and love for Genevieve Sinclair, Willow had kept her mouth shut about the reality of their marriage. She had foolishly hoped Julian would realize when enough was enough and just sign the divorce papers. Instead, he had turned her silence into a weapon, using Genevieve to blackmail her over and over again.

But Willow was done playing his games. If the truth was bound to come out anyway, it was better to just rip the band-aid off. At least it would be far less exhausting.

"Grandma personally requested it this time," Julian threatened, his tone dropping. "Are you really going to ignore her? Don't forget, in the Sinclair family, she is the only one who never treated you like garbage."

Willow fiercely rejected his emotional manipulation. "When it comes to ignoring your grandmother, you hold the absolute monopoly. If you had listened to her even once, we wouldn't be standing here right now. Mark my words, Julian. This entire mess is your doing. If she spends her twilight years heartbroken, the blame rests entirely on you."

Julian stared at her, utterly speechless, unable to find a single word in his defense.

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If he really thought about it, her words hit a little too close to home. But Julian would never admit it. What was done was done, and he never wasted time regretting the past.

"I've delivered the message. What you do next is up to you. Just make sure you can handle the consequences."

It was the same exhausting line. Willow was so tired of hearing it. For years, she had walked on eggshells around him, terrified of making a single misstep, terrified of setting him off. And what good did it do? He had never once shown her mercy. So why bother? At least now, she could finally breathe on her own terms.

Whatever. Let him do his worst.

This time, her only answer was turning her back on him and walking away.

She didn't know exactly when Julian left, but he never tried to force his way into the room. He did, however, leave his gifts at the nurse's station.

When a nurse called to ask what to do with the expensive bags, Willow didn't even blink. "Throw them in the trash." Just looking at them made her stomach turn.

Not long after, her phone rang. It was Genevieve Sinclair. Willow had been planning to call her anyway, so she answered immediately. "Grandma."

"Willow, dear," Genevieve's voice came through, thick with anxiety. "I just heard from that foolish boy, Julian. He says you aren't coming over for the holidays this year?"

"Yes." A pang of guilt hit Willow, but she gritted her teeth and pushed through. "I have other plans. I won't be able to make it."

Genevieve seemed to sense the underlying truth. A heavy sigh echoed through the receiver. "You're such a good girl. I truly can't bear to let you go. Is there really no chance for you and Julian to try one last time?"

"Grandma, I'm so sorry." Willow kept her tone gentle but undeniably firm. She was done hiding. "I've filed for divorce. The legal proceedings are already underway."

A sudden, harsh fit of coughing erupted from the other end of the line. When Genevieve finally caught her breath, her voice was raspy with sorrow. "He failed you. It's his loss, my dear. He didn't deserve you."

At this point, Willow had no interest in dissecting who was right and who was wrong. "Take care of your health, Grandma."

"But I'll miss you so much," Genevieve whispered.

"No matter what happens between him and me, you will always be my grandmother," Willow soothed her. "When things settle down, I can still come visit you."

"Truly?"

"Of course."

Genevieve's mood brightened slightly. "I heard your mother fell ill. The temperatures are dropping fast right now, so please, make sure you're taking care of yourself too."

It was obvious Julian hadn't told his grandmother the severity of Martha's condition. Willow decided to keep it that way, not wanting to cause the older woman any unnecessary stress. "I will. You make sure to stay warm, too."

"Which hospital are you at? I'd love to come see you both."

"There's no need. It's freezing out, and you shouldn't be out in this weather. Your health comes first."

"Alright, then. Once I'm feeling a bit stronger, I'll come visit."

They chatted for a few more minutes. Though Genevieve was clearly heartbroken, she respected Willow's boundaries and didn't push the issue.

Willow felt a profound sense of relief. At least the truth was finally out in the open. The suffocating weight she had been carrying for months finally lifted off her chest.

She thought that was the end of it. She never expected that on the day of Martha's stem cell transplant, Julian would show up again. And this time, he wasn't alone. Genevieve was with him.

Because of Genevieve's presence, Willow couldn't be too harsh. She completely ignored Julian, focusing entirely on the elderly woman. "Grandma, what are you doing here?"

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Leaning heavily on her cane, Genevieve looked at Willow with immense heartache. "You foolish child, how could you keep something so major from me? If I hadn't forced it out of Julian, were you just going to leave me in the dark forever?"

Willow quickly helped her to a nearby chair. "Please, don't worry. My mother is doing very well. The doctors say everything is under control."

"Where is she? Can I see her?"

Willow shook her head. "She's in the sterile isolation ward. The transplant is scheduled for today, so we have to wait until she's cleared to come out."

"Your poor mother. And poor you." Genevieve reached out, wrapping her wrinkled hands around Willow's. "Whenever I think about you shouldering all this terror on your own, my heart just breaks. I can barely breathe."

With that, she shot a vicious, reprimanding glare at Julian, who stood silently nearby.

Willow saw the look. She knew Genevieve was trying to defend her, to offer some semblance of justice. But honestly? It was entirely unnecessary. She hadn't received support when she desperately needed it; she certainly didn't need it now.

"It's all fine now," Willow said softly. No matter how agonizing those dark nights had been, she had survived them. "My mom is in good spirits, and the doctors are very confident."

"Thank goodness. Then I'll wait right here. I won't leave until the transplant is completely finished." But a hospital corridor was no place for an ailing elderly woman. After only a few minutes, Genevieve began coughing again.

Willow gently rubbed her back. "You need to go home, Grandma. The procedure takes all day. Sitting out here in the cold will only make you sick."

Genevieve desperately wanted to stay, but her frail body simply wouldn't allow it. "Then I'll have Julian stay here with you."

"No." Willow's rejection was instant and cold.

"You can't be alone. Not for something this massive. Even if he just sits quietly, you need someone by your side to anchor you."

She wasn't wrong. But if that someone had to be Julian Sinclair, Willow would rather face a hurricane alone.

Mindful of Genevieve, she kept her words simple but absolute. "I don't need him."

Seeing the iron in Willow's eyes, Genevieve didn't push. Instead, she shifted the topic. "Zachary and Susannah are here too. Do you want to see them?"

Before Willow could even react, Genevieve hastily added, "Don't worry, they aren't here to start any trouble. They heard your mother was unwell and simply wanted to pay their respects."

At the mention of her father-in-law and mother-in-law, Willow's brow furrowed in deep revulsion. "There's no need."

She hadn't wanted to see those people when she was trying to save her marriage. She definitely didn't want to see them now.

"Alright. It's your choice. I won't force you." Genevieve patted her hand. "You have every right to refuse them. But with your mother in the hospital, it was their basic duty to show up. I didn't know before, but now that I do, I couldn't let them ignore it."

"I understand. I'm not upset with you." Willow knew that's how a normal, loving family should operate. It just didn't apply to the toxic mess that was the Sinclairs.

Having settled everything, Genevieve prepared to leave. Right before she stepped away, she pressed a bank card into Willow's hand. Before Willow could even process it, Genevieve ordered her nurse to whisk her away down the hall.

Willow couldn't chase after her, not when she had to stay near the surgical ward. Besides, Julian was still looming right there. She could just hand the card back to him.

As soon as Genevieve was gone, a suffocating silence slammed into the corridor. Without the older woman acting as a buffer, the sheer animosity between Willow and Julian thickened the air, sparking with volatile tension.

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"You can leave now," Willow said, not even looking at him.

"I promised Grandma I'd stay," Julian replied, his voice an impassive drawl.

"She's gone. You can drop the devoted husband act."

"How do you know it's an act? Maybe I actually want to be here with you."

A wave of sheer nausea rolled through her at his words. But all her mental energy was fiercely locked on the sterile ward where Martha was fighting for her life. She didn't have a single drop of strength left to entertain his twisted mind games. She simply shut him out. He was nothing but a ghost.

She slammed the bank card onto the table between them. "Take this when you go. And feel free to show yourself out."

Without sparing him another glance, Willow turned her back and immersed herself in reading the surgical pamphlets.

Meanwhile, down in the parking garage, Genevieve slid into the plush leather seat of her town car and sharply ordered the driver to leave.

Sitting in the back, Zachary and Susannah Sinclair were absolutely livid. Susannah had been furious from the moment she was dragged away from her high-stakes Texas Hold'em game. It was freezing outside, and her mother-in-law had forced her to come to a depressing hospital just to check on Willow's mother? To Susannah, this entire errand was beneath her.

And now, to be turned away without even making an appearance? She was seething.

"Why are we leaving?" Susannah snapped. "Weren't we supposed to see her mother? We haven't even gone upstairs yet!"

"You have the audacity to ask?" Genevieve unleashed the fury she had been holding back the entire ride. "If you hadn't treated Willow so abominably for years, do you think she would have hidden something this massive from us? You want to know why she won't let you up there? Because the second she heard your names, she looked repulsed and flat-out refused."

Susannah looked genuinely baffled, as if she couldn't comprehend the words. In her eyes, Willow was nothing more than a meek, submissive pushover. "Are you saying she knew we were here, refused to come down to greet us, and barred us from seeing her mother?"

"Do I need to spell it out for you?" Genevieve's face was carved from ice.

"Who the hell does she think she is?" Susannah's voice shrilled with injured pride. "The fact that we even showed up was doing her a massive favor! And she dares to put on airs? Does she have any idea who she's dealing with?"

"I think you're the one who has no idea what you're doing!" Genevieve roared, her cane striking the floorboard. "Look at yourself! Do you have even a shred of decency? From the day Willow joined the Sinclair family, you despised her. You bullied her relentlessly behind closed doors. Fine, put the petty grievances aside. But today? You are Julian's mother. You are her mother-in-law. Her own mother is fighting for her life! This isn't about family drama anymore. This is about basic human empathy—something you clearly lack."

Since marrying into the Sinclair dynasty, Susannah had faced her share of quiet snubs, but she had never been viciously dressed down like this.

Spoiled and arrogant, she completely lost her temper. "Why are you so obsessed with protecting her? She's nothing but a barren hen! She's been married to Julian for years and hasn't even produced a single heir! What use is she? Vivienne is infinitely better. At least Vivienne..."

"Shut your mouth!" Genevieve cut her off with a lethal glare. "Don't think I don't know exactly what schemes you're plotting. Over the years, I've turned a blind eye to the filthy little games you've played behind my back because the damage was already done. But this? This will never happen."

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Genevieve was practically shaking with rage, plunging into a violent coughing fit. Zachary immediately reached out to rub her back, but she shoved him away with surprising force.

"I know exactly what all of you are plotting," Genevieve snarled, her breath rattling. "But you'd better kill that fantasy right now. Willow was the woman my late husband chose. I will acknowledge no one else. No matter how perfect you think Toby is, he is illegitimate. And from what I've seen, that boy is already spoiled rotten by your vile influence."

"How can you say that?" Susannah gasped. "Toby is your great-grandson! He has Sinclair blood running through his veins."

"Don't you dare try to manipulate me with bloodlines! I said I acknowledge no one but Willow." Genevieve's eyes locked onto them, cold and uncompromising. "I don't expect either of you to help fix this marriage, but you had better not try any of your underhanded tricks. If I find out you've done anything to bully Willow again, I will ruin you."

Genevieve had reigned over the Sinclair empire with an iron fist for decades. When she spoke, the ground shook.

Zachary instantly shifted into damage control. "Of course not, Mother. Whatever you say goes. Susannah was just feeling a little emotional. It's freezing out, and getting turned away at the door... you have to understand her frustration."

Genevieve scoffed in disgust. "She deserved it."

As the car glided into the New York traffic, Genevieve closed her eyes, utterly exhausted. The memory of her late husband's dying words echoed in her mind. The Sinclair empire was vast and perilous. Strategy and wealth were crucial, but in the end, everything came down to having the right people at the helm.

She knew Julian was brilliant, a force of nature in the boardroom. But he was young, and his arrogance blinded him to the things that truly mattered. He desperately needed a woman who was grounded, intelligent, resilient, and capable of anchoring him.

Willow was the absolute perfect choice. It shattered Genevieve's heart to see the marriage disintegrating like this.

Back in the hospital, Willow and Julian remained locked in a suffocating silence for two agonizing hours.

Willow realized something profound: if she actively chose to treat him like a piece of furniture—ignoring his presence, refusing to look at him, deaf to his breathing—it really wasn't that hard.

Julian, on the other hand, looked like he was slowly losing his mind.

Patience had never been one of his virtues. Sitting completely still in a sterile room for two hours while being treated like a ghost was pushing him past his breaking point. So when his phone finally vibrated with a call from Vivienne Sinclair, he let out a barely suppressed breath of relief.

He took the call, hung up, and turned to Willow. "I have something to handle. I have to go."

Willow kept her eyes glued to her phone, her face a perfect mask of indifference. Inwardly, she was practically screaming at him to get the hell out.

"I'll be back when I'm done."

She didn't even blink, silently praying she would never have to look at his face again.

Once he was finally gone, the crushing weight in the room evaporated. Willow checked in with Dr. Zane to ensure everything was progressing smoothly, and then settled into the agonizing wait.

She talked on the phone with Jade Yates for a bit. Since it was New Year's Eve, Jade was obligated to be at her family's dinner, but her fierce moral support through the speakerphone was exactly what Willow needed.

As night fell over the city, the sky beyond the hospital windows suddenly erupted in color. Brilliant bursts of gold, crimson, and violet fireworks shattered the darkness, raining sparkling light over the skyline.

Willow walked to the window, holding up her phone to record it. Suddenly, a soft knock echoed from the door. Assuming Julian had returned to ruin her peace, her voice was frigid. "Why the hell are you back?"

She turned around. When she saw the tall figure standing in the doorway, the breath hitched in her throat.

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It was Silas Thorne.

He looked as though he had stepped straight off a flight. His tailored designer overcoat still sat perfectly on his broad shoulders, but there was a faint, sexy trace of exhaustion in

his eyes. His dark hair was slightly tousled by the winter wind, and his jawline was tight with the tension of a long journey. The predatory, ruthless aura he usually carried in the boardroom was entirely stripped away, replaced by something dangerously grounded. Something real.

Willow was stunned. Beneath her shock, a sudden, bright flare of joy sparked in her chest—an emotion she hadn't even realized she was starving for. On a night like this, at an hour like this, he had essentially fallen out of the sky. It completely shattered every expectation she had.

"What are you doing here?"

It was New Year's Eve. According to the Thorne family traditions, he was absolutely required to be at their estate for the holiday dinner. Silas hadn't been home to Seattle in months, so skipping this year was entirely out of the question. But he had also meticulously memorized that today was the day of Martha's transplant. So, he had ruthlessly rescheduled the massive family dinner to noon. The second he swallowed his last bite, he was on a jet straight back to New York.

Hearing the icy tone she had used just a second ago, he raised an eyebrow. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"I thought you were someone else," Willow admitted, desperately wanting to skip any topic involving Julian. She smoothly pivoted. "Isn't it New Year's Eve? Aren't you supposed to be in Seattle? How are you standing here right now?"

Silas didn't push. He knew perfectly well who she had been expecting, and hearing that name would only ruin his mood. He chose to let it go. That bastard wasn't here. Right now, her time belonged entirely to him.

"I already went back to Seattle." He shrugged off his heavy overcoat, tossing it aside, and handed her an elegant, beautifully wrapped box. "Open it."

The second Willow saw the gilded packaging, she recognized it instantly. It was from Carlyle's Confections. She peeled back the lid, and her breath caught. Inside lay an immaculate arrangement of artisan almond shortbreads, delicate butter cookies, and intricate cream pastries. It was everything she used to obsess over when she lived on the West Coast.

When she had hastily moved back to New York, she had scoured the city for a bakery that could replicate them, but nothing ever tasted right. Seeing that he had flown these thousands of miles just for her sent a rush of overwhelming warmth straight to her heart. "How did you know I love these?"

Her eyes lit up with sheer delight, sparkling like crushed diamonds. Her lips curved into a gorgeous, uncontrollable smile, and the heavy sorrow that had been haunting her features completely vanished.

Silas stared at her, utterly mesmerized for a dangerous second. "I just happened to walk past the bakery and grabbed some."

It was a blatant lie. There was no "happening to walk past." He had ordered Arthur Vance to do a deep dive into her favorite foods, stood in a massive holiday line himself, and carried the delicate box by hand onto his private jet just to ensure it arrived perfectly intact.

"Try one."

Willow picked up a delicate cream pastry and took a bite. The texture was flawlessly soft and slightly chewy, flooding her mouth with the rich, nostalgic sweetness of coconut and sweet cream.

She practically moaned, taking another rapid bite. "God, this is amazing."

Silas didn't say a word. He just stood there, watching her eat with a dark, intense gaze. Suddenly, he reached out with a crisp napkin and gently brushed the corner of her lips. Willow froze.

His touch was impossibly light, nothing but paper grazing her skin. There was zero actual physical contact between them. Yet, a violent jolt of electricity ripped straight through her spine. The corner of her mouth burned as if he had branded her, and that scorching heat rapidly spread down her neck, flushing her entire body with a sudden, suffocating awareness.

Silas acted completely oblivious to the sexual tension flooding the air, meticulously wiping away the crumb with agonizing slowness. "You had something on your face."

Snapping back to reality, Willow frantically grabbed the napkin from his fingers. "I—I can get it."

She practically spun around, using the excuse of wiping her mouth to desperately compose herself.

When she finally turned back to him, she forced her voice into a casual rhythm. "Do you want one?"

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"No," Silas shook his head, his gaze never leaving her. "I brought them for you. Eat as much as you want."

He glanced around the sterile hospital room, casually reaching out to straighten a water cup that had tipped sideways on the table. "How is your mother's transplant going?"

It was the exact same question Julian had asked. With Julian, every single syllable felt like dragging her nails over glass. But with Silas, the words just poured out of her.

"There are still five hours left. So far, all her vitals are perfectly stable. Dr. Zane said based on her current condition, it should be a complete success."

"Good. Dr. Zane is top-tier. If he says it's fine, it's fine."

Just the mention of the doctor reminded Willow of exactly how much she owed this man. If Silas hadn't pulled his massive strings, her mother would have never been transferred to this VIP ward in the first place. This entire life-saving procedure was happening because of him.

"Mr. Thorne... I really can't thank you enough for all of this." The words felt inadequate, but that simple "thank you" carried the weight of her entire world.

But Silas wasn't interested in her gratitude. His piercing gaze dropped to the heavy exhaustion shadowing her face, the faint red lines tracing the whites of her eyes. His chest tightened.

"You've been terrified these past few weeks, haven't you?" he murmured.

The sheer tenderness in his voice shattered her. It was as if the impenetrable armor she had been wearing for months had just been effortlessly stripped away, exposing the raw, bleeding fear underneath. A massive lump formed in her throat, choking her. She knew he was just being polite. Given their dynamic as boss and subordinate, she was supposed to smile, thank him for his concern, and say she was fine.

But she couldn't. For some reason, in front of him, she couldn't lie. She just stared down at her shoes, gripping the half-eaten pastry as silence swallowed the room.

Sensing the shift in the air, Silas stepped closer, his voice dropping into a low, intimate rasp. "Hey. What's wrong?"

Willow couldn't speak. She just shook her head, fighting a losing battle against the tears burning her eyes.

"Look at me," he commanded softly.

She refused, keeping her chin tucked.

A surge of instinct took over. Silas reached out, his large, warm fingers gently catching her chin and tilting her face up. The sight punched the air straight out of his lungs.

Her beautiful amber eyes were drowning. She was biting the inside of her cheek, desperately trying to maintain her composure, but the thick sheen of tears completely betrayed her. A single teardrop clung to her dark lashes before tracing a heartbreaking path down her cheek, making her look agonizingly fragile yet fiercely stubborn.

Silas let out a heavy breath. He slid his hand up, his fingers brushing through her soft hair, holding the back of her head as if she were something incredibly precious. "I know it's been hell," he murmured, his thumb catching a fallen tear. "But it's over now. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

That was the absolute worst thing he could have said. The second those words hit her, the dam broke. For months, she had been a fortress of ice, refusing to show a single crack to anyone, no matter how brutal the reality became. She had never expected to absolutely fall apart like this, with zero warning, just because a man had spoken to her with genuine kindness.

When she finally managed to rein it in, a furious blush scorched her cheeks. She hastily wiped her eyes, instantly mortified. "I'm so sorry. I completely lost it just now."

"Don't apologize." Silas hated that she felt she had to hide from him. He wanted all her messy, broken pieces. "Finish eating, and then get some sleep. I'll watch the monitors."

"Okay." The adrenaline crash hit her hard. The relentless tension that had been keeping her upright for weeks finally evaporated, leaving her utterly exhausted.

She curled up on the small hospital cot. Just knowing he was standing guard in the room allowed her to slip into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When she finally stirred, it was to a sudden, distant booming noise outside the window.

She blinked, disoriented. "What was that?"

"It's nothing," Silas said, stepping closer to hand her a glass of warm water. "It's almost midnight."

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Willow took a sip of the water, her groggy mind finally catching up. The booming outside was the city celebrating the countdown to the New Year. She never could have imagined that her first New Year back in New York would be spent in a hospital room, accompanied by Silas Thorne.

After sleeping, her mind felt incredibly sharp, the heavy exhaustion completely scrubbed from her bones. She sat up. "Mr. Thorne, I'm fully rested now. I'm totally fine. If you have places to be, please go. You really don't have to stay trapped in here with me."

It was New Year's Eve. Every family had plans. She had honestly assumed he was just stopping by to drop off the pastries as a polite gesture. The fact that he had stayed to comfort her, holding space for her emotional breakdown, was more than she could ever ask for.

"But I don't have anywhere to go," Silas said, his dark eyes looking devastatingly lonely.

Anywhere to go? What did that even mean?

Willow frowned in confusion. "It's a major holiday. Shouldn't you be celebrating with your family?"

"Logically, yes. But my entire family is back in Seattle. I'm completely alone here in New York." Silas dialed up the melancholy, his tone dripping with quiet isolation. "Even if I go back to my penthouse, it's just going to be a massive, empty, freezing room."

A sharp pang of sympathy hit her. When she had lived on the West Coast, the holidays had always been the hardest part. The brutal homesickness would claw at her, but her relentless work schedule made it impossible to fly back. She knew exactly how suffocating that kind of isolation felt.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject."

"You didn't." Silas stepped slightly closer, his voice dropping into a low, intimate hum. "It's just... spending the holidays utterly alone in a city that isn't yours is pretty miserable."

Willow thought for a second. "Well, if you don't mind the terrible atmosphere, we could stay up and ring in the New Year together. I mean, I'm all alone too."

"I'd love that. But... are you sure I'm not intruding?" Silas asked, playing the perfect gentleman.

"Of course not. We're in a hospital. It's not like I'm hosting a gala."

"What about your family?"

Willow froze for a split second. Besides Martha, she didn't have a family. Her biological father was a degenerate who spent his life chasing his next fix; she hadn't seen him in years. And the Sinclairs? They were never her family. They were her captors.

"Don't worry about them. It's just me."

"Perfect." Silas smoothly locked down the invitation before she could overthink it. "So, what are your usual New Year's Eve traditions?"

Willow racked her brain. When she was a little girl, she and her mom used to watch the massive countdown specials on TV, and the second the ball dropped in Times Square, she would immediately fall asleep on the couch. As she got older and her career consumed her life, the holiday essentially became just another excuse to catch up on emails. Honestly? She didn't have any fun traditions to share.

"Nothing exciting, really." Willow felt a blush creeping up her neck, terrified he would find her horribly boring. She quickly deflected. "What about you? What did you do when you were a kid in Seattle?"

"The usual," Silas leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "Lighting the holiday candles, opening presents at midnight, making wishes. My family goes all out. Though, I was a pretty brooding kid. I usually sat in the corner and judged everyone."

An image instantly flashed through Willow's mind—a tiny, impossibly handsome boy in a tailored little suit, glaring aggressively at a pile of wrapping paper with utter indifference. It was a hilarious contrast to a normal child, but applied to Silas Thorne, it was incredibly endearing.

"That sounds about right. Let me think of something we can do."

Before she could finish her sentence, a massive shockwave of brilliant colors exploded across the sky outside. Willow instantly turned toward the window, completely captivated by the blinding lights.

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Seeing her absolute fascination with the lights, a brilliant idea sparked in Silas's mind. "Wait right here."

He stepped out into the hallway, pulling out his phone. When he returned a few minutes later, the fireworks show had completely faded into smoke.

Willow sighed, a little disappointed that he had missed the grand finale. She immediately pulled up her phone, swiping through the blurry photos to show him.

Silas barely glanced at the screen. He locked eyes with her. "Do you want to see a real show?"

"Right now?" Willow hesitated, her gaze darting toward the surgical wing. "What about my mom?"

"She's fine. I just spoke with Dr. Zane; her vitals are perfect. And we don't even have to leave the hospital. We're going to the roof."

"Really?" If Martha was safe, she had zero reason to say no.

"Trust me."

Silas placed a hand on the small of her back, guiding her out the door. The entire path to the roof had been mysteriously cleared by hospital staff, a silent testament to the insane amount of power he yielded with a single phone call.

The second they stepped onto the rooftop, a brutal gust of winter wind slammed into them. Willow shuddered violently. A second later, heavy, expensive wool draped over her shoulders. The coat was drowning in his lingering body heat, carrying the dark, intoxicating scent of his sandalwood cologne.

Her face flushed scarlet. "Mr. Thorne, you really don't have to—"

"Keep it on. There's no one else out here. You don't have to pretend you aren't freezing." His voice was a low, commanding rumble against the biting wind, completely wrapping around her and making her feel terrifyingly safe. "Ready?"

Willow knew he meant the fireworks. She nodded.

Silas lifted his phone, speaking a single, quiet word into the receiver.

Instantly, the entire skyline ignited.

A colossal blast of pure gold shot into the black sky, exploding into a glittering cascade that made the stars look dull. It was followed by an absolute barrage of color—crimson, electric blue, and deep violet—detonating in perfect, rhythmic synchronization. The sheer scale of it bathed the entire rooftop in a pulsating, neon glow. This wasn't some random city celebration. This was a private, multimillion-dollar pyrotechnic assault.

Willow watched in absolute awe, her phone recording every second, completely lost in the magic until the final sparks drifted down into the darkness.

Just as she lowered her phone, turning to Silas with a breathless smile, a massive secondary launch shook the concrete beneath their feet.

This time, it wasn't just colors.

Massive, burning letters exploded across the New York skyline: "Willow, Happy New Year. Be Happy."

Willow stopped breathing. She stared at her name burning across the heavens. For her entire life, she had been an afterthought. No one had ever gone to these kinds of insane lengths just to make her smile.

Her mind went completely blank. All she could hear was the deafening roar of the explosions and the violent, frantic hammering of her own heart against her ribs.

"Do you like it?" Silas had stepped up directly behind her. His deep, velvet voice brushed right against her ear. "In this new year, I want you to forget all the garbage that dragged you down. I just want you to be happy."

Her heart rate skyrocketed into dangerous territory. Terrified that if she stayed this close to him she would do something completely reckless, she took a hasty step back.

But her legs were trembling, and the rooftop was dark. Her heel caught on a thick electrical cable, and she pitched backward.

Before panic could even register, a massive hand shot out, clamping around her waist. With a sharp pull, she was hauled directly into a hard, muscular chest.

His heat swallowed her whole. His arm was a steel band locking her against him, his hand splayed wide across her back. "Careful," he murmured, his breath hot against her temple.

Willow was completely paralyzed. Every nerve ending in her body was screaming. It took her several agonizing seconds to finally regain control of her limbs and push gently out of his grip. She frantically tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Thank you."

The moment her soft curves and intoxicating vanilla scent left him, Silas felt a vicious stab of withdrawal. He casually rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, memorizing the ghost of her touch. Noticing her frantic, panicked breathing, he smoothly reassured her. "Relax. We're completely alone up here."

There was no need to panic. And more importantly, there was absolutely zero chance of that pathetic bastard husband of hers showing up to ruin the moment.

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Even though Silas told her to relax, the mere thought of her husband sent a dark, possessive spike of irritation straight through his chest.

It was New Year's Eve. Her mother was undergoing a massive, life-threatening surgery. And where was the guy? Instead of standing right beside her, holding her up through the nightmare, he had just vanished, leaving her to face the terror completely alone. Silas seriously wanted to track the bastard down and rearrange his face to see if he was even a real man.

Yet, despite being absolute garbage, Julian Sinclair still possessed the title of her husband. He held the legal right to touch her, to claim her, to stand by her side in the eyes of the world. It made Silas's blood boil. It was violently unfair.

"Where is he?" Silas demanded, dropping all pretense. "On a night like this, why the hell isn't he here with you?"

"Who?" Willow blinked, caught off guard by the sudden hostility.

"That Sinclair guy."

"Oh." Julian. Willow immediately understood, but she was entirely exhausted by the topic. She didn't want Silas's perfect night ruined by her nightmare of a marriage, so she grabbed the easiest excuse. "He had some business to handle. He's busy."

"Busy?" Silas scoffed, his eyes narrowing with disgust on her behalf. "No matter how demanding the job is, he can't spare a single day? Especially on New Year's Eve? If he's going to occupy the role of your husband, he needs to do his damn job. And if he's too incompetent to do it, he should admit he's worthless and get the hell out of your way."

Willow stared at him. She had never heard him speak like this. It was incredibly blunt, practically borderline aggressive, but coming from Silas Thorne, it carried a dangerously attractive, protective edge.

She chewed on her bottom lip, debating whether to just rip the band-aid off and tell him the truth about the divorce. There was no point in letting him waste his energy being furious at Julian.

She opened her mouth, but before the words could spill out, Silas's phone started buzzing violently in his pocket, shattering the intense moment.

Silas pulled it out. The screen flashed with an incoming video call from his mother, Jocelyn Thorne. She was undoubtedly calling to interrogate him about why he had fled the family estate.

He couldn't ignore it. He shot Willow an apologetic glance and stepped a few feet away to answer. The second the call connected, the camera panned across his surroundings. It was barely a fraction of a second, but Jocelyn's hawkish eyes locked onto the stunning woman standing in the background.

Jocelyn's face on the screen morphed from casual annoyance into absolute shock, and then into pure, unadulterated ecstasy. "Oh my god, Silas! Are you kidding me? You're pulling off something this massive and you didn't tell your mother?!"

Silas frowned, completely missing her implication. He was entirely used to his mother's dramatic outbursts and assumed she was talking about him skipping out on dessert. "I landed a few hours ago. Are Dad and my grandparents still awake?"

"Yes, yes, they're right here!" Jocelyn practically shoved the phone across the room. The entire Thorne family was suddenly crammed into the frame, all beaming and waving at him.

Silas gave a polite nod. Having fulfilled his familial duty, he moved to end the call, but Jocelyn practically screamed through the speaker.

"Don't you dare hang up! Who was that mystery beauty I just saw in the background?! It was only for a second, but I know a stunning beauty when I see one! I can't believe it. My son has been a completely emotionless robot his entire life, and the second he finally thaws out, he bags a gorgeous girl! I am so happy I could cry!"

Hearing her words, Silas finally realized why she had been screaming about a massive secret when he picked up.

He wanted to claim Willow. He desperately wanted to say that she was his. But the brutal reality was, he didn't have that right yet.

Before Silas could even attempt to shut the conversation down, Jocelyn went completely rogue. "I was just complaining to your father! Every year you stay for the entire holiday, but this time you inhale your dinner and literally run for the private jet! I thought it was a corporate merger, but you were flying across the country to chase a girl! Well, I don't blame you. With a girl that pretty, if you don't fight tooth and nail for her, someone else will snatch her right up! Tell me everything! How did you meet? Where is she from? How old is she?!"

