

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

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Jocelyn Thorne had always been like this. Pampered by her father her whole life, she retained a carefree, almost childlike disposition despite her age. She was especially invested when it came to her son's marital status.

Back when Silas was in Seattle, she loved to fish for gossip, calling every other day to ask if there was any progress. But back then, Silas Thorne hadn't formally met Willow Horgan yet and had closed his heart off to love, leaving his mother with no opening to exploit.

Now that she had finally caught a scent of something, she wasn't about to let it go.

Listening to her chatter, Silas pinched the bridge of his nose in resignation. It wasn't that he didn't want things to progress, but some matters were simply out of his control.

Worried that Willow might overhear, he glanced up at her. Seeing that her attention was entirely focused on her phone and she wasn't paying him any mind, he quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mom, don't overthink this. It's not what you think."

"I get it," Jocelyn said, a sudden spark of inspiration hitting her. "You haven't won her over yet, right? Or maybe the girl isn't interested? Is someone else competing with you?"

"I understand all of that. After all, a stunning beauty like her is bound to have plenty of suitors. You just need to work a little harder. I'm rooting for you!"

Silas knew arguing with her was pointless; nothing would change her mind. He decided to cut to the chase. "If there's nothing else, I'm going to hang up. I have things to take care of."

"Yes, yes, go take care of it. You can't just leave a girl hanging," Jocelyn said, sounding even more invested than he was. "But before you hang up, I have one more question. What's that mystery beauty's last name?"

Silas had no idea what she was plotting, but he knew his mother's personality well. If she had a question, she would dig until she hit the bottom. It was better to just give her the answer upfront to save himself the endless harassment.

"Her last name is Horgan."

"Beautiful face, beautiful name. My son really does have great taste." Jocelyn sounded thrilled.

"I really need to hang up now." Silas glanced at Willow a short distance away; he didn't want to leave her alone for too long.

"Alright, go ahead. I believe in you, son. Good luck!"

Returning to Willow's side, Silas offered an unprompted explanation. "That was my mother on the phone just now."

Willow hadn't expected him to share that with her. From her interactions with him so far, Silas struck her as someone fiercely protective of his privacy. But since he had brought it up, saying nothing would seem incredibly rude.

So, she played along. "What did she have to say?"

"She told me to get a girlfriend as soon as possible. Said it was too lonely being out here all by myself."

Willow had expected some polite pleasantries about wishing him a 'Happy New Year.' She certainly hadn't anticipated him blurting that out. For a moment, she was completely at a loss for how to respond.

Willow wasn't one to pry into other people's private lives, especially when that person was her boss. She chose not to push the topic, simply giving a polite nod to acknowledge she'd heard him.

But Silas pressed the issue. "What do you think?"

"That really depends on you," Willow said diplomatically, confused as to why he was even asking for her opinion on this.

"Me," Silas murmured, falling silent for a moment. "I'm thirty-four this year."

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The moment the words left his mouth, a brief silence settled over them. Unsure of what he was getting at, Willow tentatively replied, "Then I suppose it's something worth considering."

To her surprise, Silas seemed incredibly sensitive to that. "Do you think I'm getting too old?"

"No, of course not." Willow felt entirely misunderstood. She was only agreeing with him! Besides, she honestly didn't see anything wrong with his age. Time hadn't left any harsh lines on his face; instead, it had granted him a profound sense of maturity and worldly experience. He was like a beautifully bound hardcover book—elegant on the outside and rich with depth and substance on the inside.

"You are the most sophisticated, charismatic, and principled man I've ever met."

Willow fired off three consecutive compliments. Hearing that, Silas felt his anxiety ease significantly. "You really mean that?"

"Of course," Willow assured him. "You know I never lie. I told you that on my first day of work."

"Hmm." Silas nodded, finally feeling somewhat satisfied. He vaguely recalled her saying something like that, though he had been too busy staring at her back then to really register the words.

"And compared to your husband?" he pushed further. He knew this wasn't the right time, nor did he have the right to ask, but it was as if a demon had possessed him. After hearing her praise him, he desperately wanted to know more.

"You're married to him. Aren't you worried he'll get mad if he hears you praising another man like this?"

"That's completely different." At the mention of Julian Sinclair, Willow's expression noticeably cooled. Given the current state of their relationship, Julian had no right to dictate who she complimented, let alone who she spent time with.

After all, he was the one who had already moved in with another woman, paraded his mistress around, and fathered a child with her.

It wasn't the first time Silas had keenly noticed her mood sour the second Julian was mentioned. Initially, he had assumed they were just having a lover's spat, but surely a couple couldn't fight every single day, right?

That led his mind down a different path. Was their marriage falling apart? Had the affection between them completely withered away?

Because if that were true, he might actually have a chance.

Silas made up his mind to ask, but before he could, Willow beat him to it. "Actually, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Go ahead." Silas temporarily pushed his own questions aside.

"Why did you decide to come to New York in the first place?" She had been holding onto this question for a while. Before, she hadn't dared to pry, but after working closely together and with the intimate veil of the night sky above them, she finally felt bold enough to ask.

"Would you believe me if I said it was strictly for business?"

Willow shook her head. "New York isn't exactly Merit Biotech's main hub. Plus, for this level of operations, you could have just sent a seasoned executive. It didn't require someone of your status to oversee it personally."

Hearing this, Silas let out a sudden chuckle. In the quiet of the night, his voice was exceptionally deep and magnetic. "I knew I couldn't fool you."

"You don't have to lie. If you don't want to talk about it, you can just tell me," Willow said earnestly. She hadn't actually expected an honest answer; it was just a question born of the atmosphere.

"I did it for someone," Silas confessed, dropping the teasing tone. His voice took on a bitter edge. "Even though she's probably forgotten all about me by now."

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Willow never expected that to be the reason. He did it all for a woman.

No wonder rumors always claimed he was entirely immune to female charm and stayed far away from romance. It wasn't that he had any issues; it was simply that his heart was already occupied by someone else.

It seemed you really couldn't trust the rumor mill.

Willow couldn't quite put her finger on how she felt at that moment. She was definitely surprised to stumble upon her boss's deepest secret. But that surprise was quickly eclipsed by an inexplicable wave of disappointment.

It was a sensation she had never experienced before, so she brushed it off, attributing the strange hollow feeling in her chest to the sheer shock of the revelation.

After all, it was a pretty explosive piece of gossip.

After dropping the bombshell, Silas kept a close eye on her reaction. But perhaps due to the dim lighting or something else, her emotional response seemed incredibly muted. Did that mean she truly felt nothing for him?

Feeling a twinge of dissatisfaction, he pressed on. "I just don't know how much longer I have to wait, especially at my age."

Willow gathered her composure and offered an encouraging smile. "You probably won't have to wait much longer. You moved all the way to New York just for her. I'm sure things will work out for you soon."

The more supportive she acted, the more Silas wanted to test her limits. "Oh, right, I forgot to mention. She's married. She has a husband. Knowing that, do you still think I have a chance?"

"What?" Willow was genuinely stunned. She could excuse everything else as his private business, but this was completely beyond her comprehension. Why would a man with his extraordinary background willingly chase a married woman? And why on earth was he telling her this?

Risking her boss's wrath, Willow spoke her mind. "I feel like... that's probably not the best idea. Shouldn't you at least wait until she's divorced?"

Silas stared at her in silence for a long moment. Just as Willow braced herself, assuming she had crossed a line and he was about to blow up at her, he replied with absolute solemnity. "I agree. That's why I've been waiting. I'm waiting for her to get a divorce."

Oh, thank God. Willow breathed a massive sigh of relief. Thank goodness he wasn't a total psycho. "Don't worry," she comforted him. "I'm sure that day will come."

Silas fixed her with a profound, unreadable gaze. "Do you really believe that?"

Willow squirmed under his intense stare. "I guess so. I mean, I'm not the one involved, so it's just a wild guess."

"Alright." Silas decided to let her off the hook, asking instead, "You'll keep this a secret for me, won't you?"

"Of course!" Willow promised immediately. Besides, even if she did tell anyone, who would believe her? The esteemed CEO of Merit Biotech was in love with a married woman? And patiently waiting for her to divorce?

Yeah, it was best to just keep her mouth shut and pretend she had never heard a thing.

Following that little interlude, the two of them lapsed into silence. What they didn't know was that Julian had already returned.

He had gone for a drive to clear his head, timing his return so he could ring in the New Year with Willow. But he had hit traffic on the way back and arrived slightly behind schedule.

What he absolutely hadn't anticipated was that someone else had beaten him to her side. He had seen the fireworks lighting up the sky, after all.

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Willow, Happy New Year. Stay happy.

Remembering the glowing words he'd just seen spelled out in the sky, Julian couldn't hold back a bitter scoff.

It seemed she was still in high demand on the market. She hadn't even finalized the divorce yet, and men were already lining up to chase her. But this also proved his theory: the only reason she was treating him like dirt was because she had already found her next meal ticket. Otherwise, she would never have dared to act this way.

Too bad for her, she had severely miscalculated. Julian refused to believe she could get over him that quickly. Given how deeply she had loved him, there had to be some lingering affection left. Moreover, he absolutely refused to believe that anyone in New York could offer her a better life than he could.

But that was a problem for another day. Right now, he was stuck at the nurse's station, completely barred from entering her mother's room. He tried to explain that he had already been inside earlier, that he was Willow's husband and Martha Mercer's son-in-law, and that he had every right to go in.

No matter what he said, the staff merely repeated the same strict protocol: "We're very sorry, sir. Without the family's explicit consent, we cannot allow you inside."

The "family" in question was Willow. And Willow had blocked him on every conceivable platform. He had absolutely no way of reaching her. He couldn't exactly call Grandma Sinclair to force her hand again, could he? Considering the stunt Willow had pulled earlier, she clearly didn't give a damn about saving face for his grandmother anymore.

While Julian was stewing in frustration, Vivienne Sinclair was relentlessly blowing up his phone. He had ignored the first few calls, but finally snapped. The second he answered, he unleashed his fury on her. "Call, call, call—is that all you know how to do? I told you I'd be back in a little while! You can't even wait that long? Am I not allowed a single second to myself?"

Vivienne had already been suspicious about his delayed return. Being yelled at like that only made her feel more wronged. She broke down in tears, complaining, "I don't know what you're dealing with out there, but tonight is New Year's Eve! You left in the middle of dinner! What could possibly be so urgent that it has to be handled right this second?"

"Toby kept asking when his daddy was coming home. He had a gift he wanted to give you personally, and he waited until he practically passed out from exhaustion. Julian, even if you don't care about me, shouldn't you care about Toby? He is your biological son!"

For years, Vivienne had painstakingly maintained the image of a gentle, kindhearted woman in front of him. This was the very first time she had ever lost her temper with him. Coming back to his senses, Julian realized he had gone too far.

He softened his voice. "I know. Go to sleep. I'm at the office right now. I'll head back as soon as I finish up this paperwork. It won't be long."

Vivienne didn't believe a word he said, but she had no other choice. "Julian, don't let me and Toby down. You're all we have. Please hurry. We're waiting for you at home."

Julian didn't respond to that. He simply ended the call.

Sometimes, he found being with Vivienne to be incredibly exhausting. He wasn't sure when it started, but she was no longer the docile, accommodating girl she used to be. She constantly used guilt, family, and duty to make endless demands of him. This was a far cry from what he had originally wanted from her.

Whenever he felt this suffocated, his mind would drift to Willow—especially the Willow from the early days of their marriage. While she had also been gentle and obedient, the vibe between the two women was entirely different.

Vivienne's actions always felt calculating, subtly steering him toward a specific outcome. But Willow had been genuinely devoted to him. She had expanded his business, managed his company, and never once uttered a single word of complaint. She revolved her entire personal life around him. Even when he unfairly criticized her, she wouldn't talk back. Her eyes had always been filled with nothing but pure love for him.

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That was why, even now, Julian couldn't fathom how she had transformed so drastically, becoming so unbearably cold toward him. Yet, in the same breath, he had to admit that this new, fiery Willow was undeniably more captivating than the woman she had been.

Julian lingered for a while longer, but when there was still no sign of Willow, he finally decided to leave.

To his surprise, just as he walked out of the hospital to head to his car, he spotted her.

And she wasn't alone. There was a man standing right beside her.

Under the cover of night, Julian couldn't make out the man's features, only catching a vague silhouette as they hurried down the hospital steps. It was merely a fleeting glance.

Yet, even from that brief glimpse, it was painfully obvious the man was someone of significant power and influence.

Julian narrowed his eyes. This had to be the guy who had set off the fireworks for her.

All of his earlier suspicions suddenly crystallized into reality. Julian's mood plummeted into the abyss, quickly replaced by a wave of arrogant disdain. He severely doubted that she could find anyone wealthier or more powerful than him.

Back in the ward, Willow suddenly realized she was still wearing Silas's coat and hurriedly shrugged it off. She offered to dry-clean it before returning it to him, but Silas waved her off, insisting he would take care of it himself.

There were still a few hours left before Martha Mercer's transplant procedure was scheduled to finish. Willow urged him to head back to his hotel to get some rest, assuring him she could handle the rest on her own. Silas refused to leave. The two of them stayed in the hospital room, keeping an unconventional vigil for the New Year until the transplant was finally over.

When the doctor came in to give the update and saw Silas sitting there, he looked simultaneously shocked and nervous. He knew the patient had some connection to Mr. Thorne, but he hadn't realized the tie was strong enough for the CEO to personally keep watch through the night.

"Relax. Just tell us the truth," Silas said, taking the lead.

The doctor let out a quiet breath of relief and gave his report. "The transplant was a complete success. The stem cells have been infused. However, she won't be able to leave the sterile environment just yet. We need to monitor the cell engraftment and check for any signs of infection, which typically takes between twenty-one to twenty-eight days. But

given the patient's current vitals, there shouldn't be any major complications. You can rest easy."

Hearing those words, the massive weight that had been crushing Willow's chest finally vanished. She eagerly thanked the doctor. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

The doctor didn't dare take all the credit. "You're too kind. It's just my job. If you really want to thank someone, you should thank Mr. Thorne. He moved a lot of mountains behind the scenes for this."

"Of course." Willow turned, preparing to express her immense gratitude to Silas, but he stopped her before she could even get the words out.

"You don't need to say anything to me. Do you want to go see your mother?"

Willow nodded frantically, then looked at the doctor. "Is that allowed?"

"Of course," the doctor replied instantly. If the big boss was giving the green light, who was he to say no? But he quickly added a caveat. "Because the patient's immune system is incredibly weak right now, you can only look at her through the glass of the isolation chamber. You can't go inside."

Martha lay in the hospital bed. Aside from her pale complexion and an overarching frailty, everything else looked perfectly normal.

It was undoubtedly a sign of victory, yet for some reason, Willow suddenly burst into tears without warning.

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She cried silently, her shoulders barely moving. With her eyes cast down, her long eyelashes fluttered softly as crystal-clear tears continuously slipped down her cheeks, the tip of her nose turning a delicate shade of pink.

Silas could guess why the tears were falling. After surviving such an agonizing ordeal, the emotional dam keeping her afloat had finally broken. No matter how strong she tried to be, she was still just a young woman in her twenties carrying the weight of the world.

His heart ached for her, but he didn't dare cross the line. He gently reached out and gave her hair a reassuring pat. "Don't worry. It's going to be okay. The hardest part is over."

The doctor had tactfully slipped out of the room the moment she started crying, but Willow still felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her. This was the second time she had completely lost her composure in front of him today.

"I'm sorry. I must look like a mess."

How could Silas ever think that? He was too busy wanting to pull her into his arms. "I would never think that. You don't have to hide anything around me."

If he were to name the emotion tearing through him at that very second, it would be sheer regret, trailing right behind the heartache. Regret that he had arrived in her life too late. Regret that he hadn't been there to stand beside her, leaving her to face the storm all alone. But that was okay. From now on, she would never have to be alone again.

Willow didn't read too much into his words, assuming it was simply the kind reassurance of a compassionate boss. Given that he had just confessed to having someone he deeply loved, she was even less likely to interpret it as anything romantic.

They stayed in the hospital room a little longer. By the time they finally left, the sky was already beginning to lighten with the dawn. Silas drove Willow home. Just as he was about to turn his car around to head back, he received a video call from his grandmother. Thinking nothing of it, he answered.

He initially assumed it was an emergency, his expression tight with concern. But the very first sentence out of her mouth made him freeze in absolute mortification.

"Cy, your mother tells me you finally got a girlfriend! And that she's absolutely gorgeous! When are you bringing her home to meet your dear old grandmother?"

'Cy' was Silas's childhood nickname, a closely guarded secret known only to his immediate family. He had repeatedly demanded they stop using it, arguing that he was a grown man now, but it was an exercise in futility. Over time, Silas had just given up trying to fight it.

Furthermore, based on Beatrice's ecstatic tone, it was blatantly obvious that Jocelyn had poured gasoline on the fire with heavily embellished stories.

"Grandma, it's not what you think."

"I know, I know. You haven't officially won her over yet," Beatrice interrupted before he could even finish his sentence. "But with what you bring to the table, it's only a matter of time. You have no idea how thrilled I was to hear the news! I honestly thought you weren't interested in women. I was fully prepared for you to stay a bachelor for the rest of your life! You have no idea what a wonderful surprise this is. You truly are my favorite grandson!"

"By the way, when's the wedding? Where are we hosting it? New York or Seattle? Do you two have plans for kids? I mean, I think the more the merrier, but I suppose that's entirely up to the two of you."

Listening to her rapid-fire barrage, Silas felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness. He knew they desperately wanted him to settle down, but he hadn't expected them to take it this far. He hadn't even secured a first date, and they were already planning the wedding venues and naming his unborn children.

"Grandma," he sighed heavily. "It's really not what you think. Don't listen to the nonsense my mom is spouting."

"How is it nonsense?" Beatrice challenged. "Do you not like the girl?"

Silas couldn't argue with that.

"Do you not want to marry her?"

Silas paused, once again finding himself utterly defenseless against the question.

"Do you not want to cherish her, take care of her, and spend the rest of your life with her?"

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This time, Silas was rendered completely speechless.

"So, tell your grandmother the truth. What is actually stopping you from going after her?"

Silas wasn't about to disclose the fact that Willow was still legally married, so he pivoted to the other detail that had been gnawing at his insecurities. "I'm ten years older than she is."

The moment the words left his mouth, Beatrice fell silent on the other end of the video call. Her previously joyous expression morphed into one of slight melancholy. "Ten years is quite a gap. In her eyes, you're practically an older man. And considering how young and beautiful she is, she undoubtedly has countless younger men vying for her attention."

It was one thing for Silas to admit it to himself, but hearing someone else voice those exact fears irritated him to no end. "So what? Whatever they can give her, I can give her too. And what they can't give her, I can provide just as easily."

Sensing his souring mood, Beatrice quickly changed her tune. "I didn't mean to call you old—even though you are older than her. But there are plenty of ways to bridge that gap."

"With money?" Silas wasn't opposed to the idea, but he would never resort to it. Not only did she not need his money, but even if she did, he would give it freely without expecting anything in return. He would never use his wealth to leash her to him.

"Of course not. With sincerity."

"Sincerity?" Silas repeated the word. He firmly believed his intentions toward Willow were entirely pure and devoted.

"Exactly. But you have to actually show it," Beatrice advised earnestly. "Back in the day, your grandfather was quite a bit older than me too. At first, I had zero interest in him, but he just wouldn't quit. He'd wait for me downstairs one day, pick me up from work the next, and surprise me with flowers the day after that. Having the CEO of a massive corporation dedicate so much of his time and effort to me every single day... over time, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't moved. Before I knew it, we were together."

"Look at your parents. Your mother was one of the most famous beauties in Seattle. She had a line of suitors wrapping around the block, but she chose your father. Do you know why? Because he was the most devoted and thoughtful out of all of them. Take her obsession with those specific bird's nest pastries, for example. She had incredibly particular tastes and would only eat the ones from a single traditional bakery. But the old master baker retired shortly after, and the shop closed down. Your father couldn't find a single place in the city that replicated the flavor. So, in desperation, he tracked down the retired baker and practically begged the man to teach him. He spent an entire month in the kitchen until he finally managed to bake them exactly to your mother's standards."

Silas raised an eyebrow. That actually happened? He had never heard that story before.

He wholeheartedly agreed with his grandmother's logic. Pursuing someone required absolute dedication, and he was more than willing to lay his beating heart at Willow's feet. The problem was, he needed the opportunity to actually do it.

Willow was married. She had a husband. Before he made a single move, he had to consider the precariousness of her situation. He had to prioritize her feelings, her boundaries, and most importantly, whether his actions would drag her reputation through the mud.

Furthermore, he still didn't have a definitive read on the true nature of her marriage. All the signs pointing to their relationship being on the rocks were based purely on his own

deductions. The only confirmed fact was the one he hated the most: she had been deeply in love with Julian Sinclair for years and had finally achieved her dream of marrying him.

"Cy, did you hear a single word I just said? Pursuing a woman requires heart. Don't let your ego or your title as CEO get in the way of putting in the effort," Beatrice scolded affectionately.

"I know." Even if she hadn't said it, Silas already knew that. "Grandma, I have to go. I'm driving."

"Alright, drive safe. I'll be waiting for the good news!"

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After hanging up, his grandmother's words continued to echo in his mind.

While much of her advice couldn't be directly applied to his current predicament, it wasn't entirely useless.

Since he couldn't be certain about the exact state of her marriage, there were definitely grand gestures he couldn't risk making. But there were plenty of smaller, subtle moves that wouldn't cause her any unnecessary distress.

Like, for instance, flowers.

The very next morning, the moment Willow stepped into the hospital ward, she was greeted by a sea of delicate pink and white petals, accompanied by a subtle, refreshing fragrance. Upon closer inspection, she realized the room was overflowing with light pink carnations. The blooms were elegant and pristine, lacking any overpowering perfume. They radiated a gentle, soothing energy that instantly put her anxious mind at ease.

Jade Yates had accompanied her today. Having finished her mandatory family obligations for New Year's Day, she had rushed over to keep Willow company. Taking in the sight, she let out an impressed whistle. "The service at this hospital is insane. They even provide floral arrangements for the patients? And this many? That's quite the budget."

"I highly doubt the hospital arranged this." Jade might not have known, but Willow was well aware that while Harbor Mercy Hospital's service was top-tier, it didn't extend to completely decking out a room in fresh blooms. And just as Jade had pointed out, filling a room with this many premium flowers was no small expense.

Just then, a nurse walked in to record her mother's vitals, and Willow seized the opportunity to ask about the floral invasion.

The staff had grown quite fond of Willow during her mother's stay, mostly because of her polite and gracious demeanor, so the nurse was more than happy to spill the details.

From the nurse's giddy recounting, Willow and Jade learned that Silas Thorne had orchestrated the entire thing. And he hadn't just decorated their room. He had flooded the entire floor. Every single medical professional who had played a part in caring for Willow's mother had received flowers. And not just a single stem—every person had been gifted a massive, extravagant bouquet.

The nurse enthusiastically pulled up the photos on her phone to show them. Jade was instantly green with envy. The sheer scale of it rivaled the grandest romantic confessions she'd ever seen. Hell, most men didn't even put this much effort into an actual proposal. Silas hadn't just brought a gift; he had showered the entire floor in petals.

The second the nurse left, Jade whirled on Willow. "Why is he suddenly sending flowers?"

Willow shook her head, just as perplexed. "Maybe billionaires just do whatever they want on a whim."

"Didn't you hear what the nurse just said? He made sure everyone who took care of your mother got a bouquet," Jade stressed, zeroing in on the crucial detail.

Had this happened in the past, Willow might have allowed herself a brief, delusional fantasy about his intentions. But after his confession the other night, she had thoroughly crushed any stray hopes.

"Maybe he's just in a really good mood? Or maybe he just felt sorry for us. Spending the holidays dealing with a life-or-death surgery is pretty depressing, after all."

Jade was not having it. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Is it possible that he's into you, and this is his way of showing it?"

"Absolutely not." Willow instantly shut down the theory.

"Why? How can you be so sure? What if he is?"

"There is no 'what if'."

"But why?" Jade was genuinely baffled. "You're young, gorgeous, and you two work together every day. It's completely natural for a guy to fall for you."

Willow let out a long sigh. She hadn't wanted to bring this up, but it was the only way to get Jade to drop it. "Because he already has someone he's deeply in love with."

Jade froze, her jaw practically hitting the floor. It took her several seconds to recover. "How do you know that?"

"He told me himself." Silas had told her a lot more than just that, of course, but Willow had sworn to keep his secrets, so she kept the juicier details to herself.

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"Are you absolutely positive you didn't mishear him?" Jade asked, sounding devastated. "If he told you that to your face, then yeah, I guess that ship has sailed."

Based on her vast knowledge of the male psyche, if a man was interested in a woman, he would do everything in his power to hide his past feelings, not openly confess his undying love for someone else to her.

"I didn't mishear." Even though Willow had felt a sharp pang of sorrow at the time—and even now, the suffocating wave of disappointment still lingered—she was certain of what she had heard.

"Well, if that's the case, then whatever," Jade lamented. "I just think it's such a tragedy. He's such an unbelievable catch, and you two look so damn good together. What a waste."

"It is what it is." Willow thought Jade was projecting far too much onto the situation. Silas had drawn a very clear line by stating he had someone in his heart. Everything else was just their own wishful thinking.

"Fine." Jade was incredibly bummed, but she knew you couldn't force these things.

Thanks to that revelation, the flowers had entirely lost their romantic luster in Jade's eyes. Willow, on the other hand, remained relatively unfazed. Since she had never dared to harbor any hope in the first place, she wasn't shattered by the lack of a fairy tale.

They hung out in the room for a while longer. Once Martha woke up, they video-called her through the glass. Seeing that she was in good spirits and showing no signs of rejection, Willow and Jade finally let out a collective sigh of relief.

After a bit more time passed, Jade decided to head out. It was still the holidays, and although she wasn't particularly close with her immediate family, she still had to make an appearance at various social gatherings and networking events.

The second she stepped out of the room, she practically collided with Silas walking down the hall. The sheer force of his devastating good looks nearly knocked her off her feet.

He was wearing a stark black, tailored overcoat that draped perfectly over his broad shoulders, the sharp lines carving out a fiercely intimidating silhouette. With every step, the hem flared slightly, exuding an aura of absolute dominance. He wore matte black leather gloves, flawless and without a single crease. His long, powerful fingers were casually tucked into his pockets, radiating an unapproachable, icy aristocratic vibe.

But then, remembering what Willow had just told her, Jade could only sigh in mourning. Such a magnificent specimen of a man, and her best friend couldn't even have him. What an absolute tragedy.

She was so consumed by grief for her friend's love life that, as she brushed past Silas, she accidentally muttered her thoughts out loud. "What a damn waste."

After exchanging brief nods, Silas walked into the room. His very first question for Willow was, "Your friend just said 'what a waste.' What did she mean by that?"

Willow knew exactly what Jade meant, but she could hardly explain the truth to Silas. Thinking quickly, she grasped at straws. "Oh, she was talking about the flowers. She was saying how beautiful they are, and that it's a shame they're going to wilt in a few days."

"It's not a shame at all," Silas replied smoothly. "That is their sole purpose. As long as they bring joy to the person looking at them, they've fulfilled their destiny."

He had agonized over the floral selection for a long time. Terrified of overwhelming her, he had ultimately settled on the safest possible option: carnations. That way, even if she felt uncomfortable, he could easily pass them off as a harmless 'get well soon' gift for her mother.

"So, do you like them?"

Willow nodded. "I love them. They're perfect for a hospital room."

"Actually, I..."

Silas opened his mouth, fully intending to explain his real motive, but a sharp knock at the door cut him off. A nurse stepped inside, looking apologetic, and informed Willow that a Mr. Sinclair was outside demanding to see her.

Hearing that name, Willow's brow instantly furrowed into a tight knot. Beside her, Silas's expression instantly froze into a glacial scowl.

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Willow knew exactly why the nurse had come to find her.

She had explicitly instructed the staff that if Julian ever showed his face, they were to deny him entry immediately. And they had faithfully executed that order in the past. If the nurse was coming to her directly now, it meant the situation had escalated beyond their control.

Knowing Julian's shameless, tyrannical nature, he was likely throwing around threats, bribes, and intimidation to bulldoze his way in.

If it had been the old days, Willow wouldn't have hesitated to march out there and go toe-to-toe with him. She had nothing to fear from him anymore. If he caused a scene, she'd simply call the cops. But today, with Silas standing right there in the room, she desperately wanted to avoid a confrontation.

Whether she was willing to admit it to herself or not, deep down, she fiercely wanted to maintain a flawless image in Silas's eyes. She wanted to shield him from the chaotic, toxic, and utterly degrading wreckage of her marriage.

She turned to Silas, offering an apologetic smile. "I'm so sorry, I need to step out and handle this." As she spoke, she finally took in his impeccable attire. He looked incredibly handsome, but he also looked like he was dressed for an outing. Adding a quick caveat, she said, "If you have plans, please don't feel like you have to wait for me. It's totally fine."

In truth, ever since the nurse had dropped that name, Silas had been waiting. Waiting not just for her response, but for her choice.

Even though he had forced himself to lower his expectations and repeatedly warned his fragile ego not to hope for too much, watching her willingly walk out the door to deal with another man—leaving him behind to wait—still struck him with an undeniable wave of agonizing disappointment.

Silas had specifically dressed to the nines today because he had planned to sweep her away. Flowers, a romantic dinner, maybe a movie—he had meticulously mapped out the perfect date.

But to his crushing dismay, she hadn't even noticed the effort he'd put into his appearance.

"Do you really have to go? I just got here," he asked, unable to stop the words from slipping out.

Willow met his gaze, completely missing the swirling vortex of longing in his eyes. She felt terrible; ditching him the second he arrived was horribly rude. But she knew the kind of monster she was dealing with. If she didn't face Julian now, God only knew what kind of chaos he'd unleash on the hospital. If she handled it quickly, maybe she could salvage the afternoon and come right back.

But that was her own wishful thinking, and she had no right to hostage his valuable time. "I'm really sorry, but I genuinely need to take care of this. If you have somewhere to be, please, go ahead without me."

"Alright. Go ahead." Silas wasn't going anywhere. He would plant himself in this room and wait until hell froze over if he had to.

Willow felt an odd shift in his demeanor, but she couldn't quite pinpoint what it was.

"Are you okay?"

Silas gave her silence in return.

Taking his silence as a sign that she had overstepped with her question, she decided not to push it. Throwing one last "I'm sorry" over her shoulder, she hurried out of the room.

Suddenly, Silas was left entirely alone in the sterile room. He paced the floor, practically crawling out of his skin. Every instinct screamed at him to follow her, to insert himself into the confrontation, but he knew he didn't have the right to claim that territory yet. He forced himself to breathe and maintain his composure.

Willow marched down the corridor at a blistering pace, the poor nurse practically jogging to keep up with her. Only one thought blazed in her mind: get out there, obliterate the scumbag, and make him leave.

When she reached the lobby, she instantly spotted Julian. It suddenly made total sense why the nurses had been forced to summon her. He wasn't alone; two hulking bodyguards flanked him like menacing gargoyles. He clearly had no intention of leaving until he got what he wanted.

Willow marched right up to him, her voice laced with pure venom. "What the hell are you doing here? Get out."

Perhaps because Silas was waiting for her and she was desperate to get back to him, her demeanor was sharper, colder, and far more lethal than it had ever been.

"Is that any way to speak to your legal husband?" Julian replied, his expression infuriatingly calm.

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"I won't be for much longer," Willow said, her voice dripping with ice.

"That's not up to you to decide."

"And you think it's up to you?"

Julian let out a dark, mocking laugh. "Do you really have to speak to me like this?"

Willow shot him a sideways glare. "How else should I speak to you? I'm already holding back."

If she hadn't been trying so hard to keep her temper in check, a string of curses would have already flown from her lips.

"Just leave. We have nothing left to say to each other. If we ever need to see each other again, it'll be in a courtroom."

She couldn't even be bothered to ask why he had come today. Having dismissed him, she turned to walk away.

But just as she took a step, Julian's voice cut through the air behind her. "What, in such a rush to get back? Is someone waiting for you at the hospital?"

Willow stopped dead in her tracks. Someone was indeed waiting for her, but it was absolutely nothing like the dirty implication in his tone. It was cheap, disrespectful, and totally uncalled for.

"What are you implying?" she demanded, spinning around to face him.

"Isn't it obvious?" Julian stood up, closing the distance between them. "Do I need to remind you about the fireworks on New Year's Eve?"

It clicked instantly. He had seen them. But she and Silas Thorne weren't in that kind of relationship, and she absolutely refused to let him drag Silas's name through the mud.

"You think everyone is as twisted as you?" She gave him a look of pure disgust. "Don't project your own filthy mindset onto other people."

Julian's predatory gaze darkened at her reaction. His eyes turned ice-cold, sharp and biting. "It's best if you two aren't. Because if I ever find out who he is, I won't let him off easily."

Even though she and Silas weren't together, his arrogant threat made her blood boil. "Who do you think you are to lecture me? Are you speaking as the man cohabiting with Vivienne? Or as the father of the child you two had out of wedlock?"

When it came to defending Silas, Willow didn't back down an inch. "I didn't want to make this ugly, Julian, but you forced my hand. Out of everyone in the world, you have the least right to judge me. To be completely honest, the biggest regret of my life is meeting you. If I could do it all over again, I would never have let you into my life."

Julian stared at her the entire time she spoke. His complexion was stormy, but he kept his mouth shut. It wasn't until her final sentence landed that he suddenly snapped.

"So, it's true? You and that man?" he roared.

Julian had never seen Willow like this. She had yelled at him before, sure, but she had always left some room for reconciliation. She had never been this blunt, this entirely ruthless.

What infuriated him most was her saying that meeting him was her biggest regret. That she would never choose him again?

That was a reality Julian absolutely refused to accept. It wasn't just a rejection of their marriage; it was a total rejection of him as a man.

In his mind, the only possible explanation was that she had fallen for another man.

Willow just looked at him like he was a lunatic, completely ignoring his outburst.

How could anything be real between her and Silas? The man already had someone he liked.

At best, it was a one-sided, entirely unrealistic crush on her end.

But she owed Julian exactly zero explanations. "Whether it's true or not, what does it have to do with you?"

“Willow!” Julian barked. “Do you even hear what you're saying?”

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He ground his teeth together, his jaw tight. Every breath he took seemed laced with a violent, reckless edge.

Willow genuinely couldn't understand why he was so furious. She was just stating the facts. They were getting a divorce; whatever she did was none of his business. Besides, compared to the hell he had put her through, her words were hardly crossing a line.

Psycho. She didn't even have the energy to curse him out loud anymore.

Julian kept his piercing gaze locked on her. When she didn't respond, he suddenly reached out and grabbed her arm. “Take back what you just said.”

“Why should I?” Willow snapped, trying to yank her arm free.

“Because I forbid it.” Julian glared down at her.

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Who am I?” Julian let out a dark chuckle, taking a slow step toward her. “I am your legal husband. I am the man who holds your fate in his hands.”

“I said, take it back,” he demanded again.

Willow thought he had completely lost his mind. Worried that he might actually do something crazy, she decided not to provoke him further and just leveled him with a freezing glare.

When she stayed silent, Julian assumed she was intimidated. He pressed his advantage. “I don't care how far things have gone between you and him, but you need to cut it off. Now. If you drag this out, you won't be able to handle the consequences.”

There was absolutely nothing going on between Willow and Silas, so listening to his baseless threats just felt absurd.

But she couldn't be bothered to explain herself. She let out a frustrated sigh. “Are you done? If you're done, get the hell out.”

“You want me to leave?” Julian sneered. “Do you really think my time is so cheap that you can just summon me and dismiss me whenever you please?”

“Did I ask you to come here?” Willow fired back.

“I told you I'd be back when I left last time.”

“And who gave you permission?”

“I don't need anyone's permission.”

“So, what exactly is the point of you being here today?” Willow asked bluntly. If she couldn't get rid of him, she might as well get straight to the point.

“You're coming with me to the Sinclair Family Gala,” Julian said, dropping the games.

“Not a chance,” Willow refused without missing a beat.

It was a Sinclair tradition to host a massive family gathering at the start of every year. They called it a family gala, but in reality, it was just an arena for social posturing and fighting for dominance.

When Willow first married into the family, she had actually asked Julian if she could attend with him. He had brutally rejected her. Funny how the tables had turned. Now he was the one demanding she go.

“Think carefully before you answer,” Julian threatened. “You have two options. One, you come with me quietly. Two, I sit here and wait until you're too exhausted to fight me, and then you come with me.”

He truly managed to lower her expectations of him every single time. It seemed she really didn't have a choice today.

But there was one thing she was acutely aware of.

From his earlier rant, Willow realized he didn't actually know Silas was the man he was so jealous of. And she fully intended to keep it that way.

Since nothing was actually happening between them, if Julian found out and went after Silas, it would bring totally unwarranted chaos into the man's life.

Willow refused to let that happen. She wasn't going to drag Silas into this mess.

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But if she kept stalling and refused to leave, she couldn't guarantee Julian wouldn't eventually run into him.

After weighing her options, she decided to just go with him.

It would be a miserable experience for her, but at least it would keep Silas out of the crossfire.

Even though she agreed to go, Willow refused to ride in the same car as Julian. She hailed her own cab and trailed behind his vehicle.

Once settled in the back seat, Willow decided to give Silas a heads-up. Not entirely sure if he was still waiting, she called him. "Mr. Thorne, are you still at the hospital?"

"I'm here," Silas answered immediately.

He hadn't moved an inch. He had been pacing the room, consumed by anxiety. A dozen times he had almost opened the door to go out, but he forced himself to hold back, terrified of causing her any trouble.

She was surprised he had actually stayed, but considering the mess she was currently in, she quickly explained, "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. Something came up at the last minute, and I don't think I'll be able to make it back."

Silence fell over the line. After what felt like an eternity, his voice came through, tight and low. "Are you with him right now?"

Willow blinked, caught off guard. "Who?"

"That Sinclair man," Silas grumbled, clearly displeased.

Willow hesitated for a second, but decided there was no point in lying to him. "Yeah. It's a sudden obligation."

"What obligation?" Silas pressed.

Though she didn't quite understand why he was interrogating her, she answered honestly. "I have to attend their family gala."

"Why do you have to go to their family gala?" Silas demanded instantly. "And who throws a gala first thing in the morning anyway? Can't you just go tonight?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized he had crossed a line. It was her life. She could do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted.

But he couldn't stop himself.

The mere thought of her spending the day with that man made an ugly, suffocating wave of jealousy crash over him. It was maddening.

Even if, legally speaking, they were still husband and wife.

Willow didn't quite grasp why he was suddenly in such a terrible mood, but she apologized anyway. "I'm really sorry. It was thrown on me out of nowhere. I just found out myself."

"Can you just... not go?" Silas finally asked, his voice losing some of its edge.

"I'm already in the cab," Willow said softly, assuming he was just irritated about being stood up. After all, he had gone out of his way to visit her mother. "How about this? I'll come by tomorrow and apologize properly. Will that work?"

Silas's mood instantly lifted a fraction. "Are you sure there won't be another gala tomorrow?"

"Positive," Willow said firmly.

At this point, Silas didn't really have a choice, and he didn't have the heart to make things harder for her. "Go then."

Willow hung up, feeling a heavy weight in her chest. Naturally, she channeled all her frustration directly at Julian. If it weren't for him, she wouldn't have pissed Silas off.

They soon arrived at the destination. The gala wasn't being held at the main Sinclair Estate this year, but rather at Amberwood Manor, a luxurious private compound nestled in the hills.

From the moment she stepped out of the cab, Willow gave Julian nothing but pure attitude.

She ignored his words, refused to look at him, and blatantly walked in the opposite direction.

If he insisted on dragging her here, she was more than happy to play the role of the little rebel. Let the games begin.

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Vivienne was already there when Willow arrived, feeding the koi fish by the pond with Toby. The moment she spotted Willow, her face twisted into a mask of pure, unadulterated fury. She looked ready to rip Willow apart. "What are you doing here?"

Willow ignored her completely. She casually picked up a pebble from the path and tossed it directly into the water. The fish that had been swarming near Toby instantly scattered in a chaotic splash.

Toby burst into loud, dramatic sobs, glaring at Willow. "You old lady! You mean lady!"

He only ever had those two insults in his arsenal, so Willow couldn't care less. Seeing his spoiled little face crumple actually brought her a spark of satisfaction, and she gave him a deliberately provoking smirk.

Vivienne immediately pulled Toby into her arms, cooing to soothe him before snapping her venomous glare back to Willow. "I asked you a question! Why are you here? Do you have any idea what today is? This is no place for you!"

Willow crossed her arms, looking down at her with cool detachment. "Why don't you ask your husband why I'm here? He's the one who dragged me out. As for his reasons, your guess is as good as mine."

She shot a pointed glance toward Julian, who was standing a short distance away.

Vivienne bristled instantly. She had, in her own mind, considered Julian her husband for a long time. But since he had never actually given her a solid commitment, she didn't dare claim the title so publicly.

She put on a show of flustered outrage. "What nonsense are you spewing?"

"Nonsense?" Willow let out a dry laugh. "We all know each other too well for you to keep putting on this act. You think I don't know exactly what you want? Or maybe I'm just not being loud enough. Do you want me to grab a megaphone and announce it to the whole party? Because I'm more than happy to oblige."

"Willow!" Vivienne interrupted, her voice trembling with rage. "Drop the hypocritical act. You're the one playing games. You talk a big game about wanting a divorce and never

wanting to see Julian again, but the second there's a family gala, you're the first one to show up!"

"Oh, so that's what's got you all worked up. You consider this some highly exclusive event?" Willow kept a breezy smile on her face. "Then you really need to take that up with Julian. He's the one who insisted I come. He even drove all the way to the hospital to personally escort me here."

"That's enough!" Vivienne's face lost its color.

"Is it? Because I'm not done," Willow said, totally unbothered. "As for the divorce, I've already filed for it. The hold-up isn't on my end. Julian is the one refusing to sign. Actually, do me a favor and ask him why he's dragging his feet, because I'm losing my patience."

While they were arguing, Julian had started walking toward them. Deciding to play the helpful wife, Willow raised her voice and called out to him. "Hey! Come over here and explain this to us! We're both dying to know—why exactly won't you divorce me?"

The temperature around Julian seemed to drop ten degrees. "Can you just shut your mouth for one minute?" he snapped.

He then turned a similarly dark look on Vivienne. "And can you stop causing a scene?"

Willow didn't care in the slightest, but Vivienne looked absolutely devastated. Her eyes instantly welled with tears. To be fair, she actually was catching strays this time.

Seeing his mother upset, Toby clenched his tiny fists, his teeth grinding in anger.

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Breaking free from Vivienne's embrace, Toby charged at Willow like an angry little bull.

Seeing that he was putting all his weight into the tackle, Willow didn't move an inch. She waited until he was just inches away before suddenly sidestepping. With nothing to crash into, Toby's momentum carried him straight into the decorative stone fence. He hit it hard, a massive welt forming on his forehead as blood started to trickle down.

Terrified by the pain, he burst into a piercing wail.

Vivienne rushed over, scooping him up. While frantically trying to stop the bleeding, she screamed at Willow, “Why did you move?!”

Willow actually let out a laugh. What kind of twisted logic was that? Someone tries to tackle her, and she’s not allowed to step out of the way?

She didn't even bother arguing sensibly. Instead, she threw their own ridiculous logic right back at them. “I didn't move. He just aimed poorly and crashed.”

Vivienne was trembling with rage but had no way to counter. She looked desperately at Julian. “Julian...”

Willow cut in before she could start pleading. “Don't look at me. You saw it yourself. He missed. I stood completely still.”

“How can you lie so blatantly?!” Vivienne shrieked.

“I’m just stating the facts.”

Throughout their bickering, Julian hadn't said a word. Instead, he was watching Willow with an intensely complicated expression. Willow couldn't care less. She hadn't come today to make things easy for them.

Plus, she was starting to realize that watching Vivienne seethe with helpless rage was incredibly entertaining. No wonder Vivienne used to love pulling these exact same stunts on her.

After a long pause, Julian finally spoke up. “Vivienne, take Toby to the hospital.”

Vivienne wasn't having it. “But she just—”

“Go,” Julian commanded, cutting her off.

Vivienne shot Willow a look of pure hatred but had no choice but to listen. She turned and rushed off.

With Vivienne gone, Willow prepared to walk away too. She had only stomachached talking to Julian to rile Vivienne up. Now that the audience was gone, the show was over.

She took a step, but Julian blocked her path. “Are you happy now?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” Willow tried to step around him.

Julian shifted, refusing to let her pass. His gaze was dark and unreadable. “Don’t act like I don’t know exactly what you were doing. Punishing Toby just to humiliate Vivienne. Did that make you feel good?”

Willow met his eyes head-on. "Oh, so you did notice. I thought you were just oblivious. That makes you pretty pathetic, honestly. You saw it happening and didn't step in to stop it. Guess you don't love her as much as you claim."

"Willow!" Julian exploded. "Just because I let it slide once doesn't mean I'll tolerate your behavior forever."

He glared at her. "So what exactly was the point of all this?"

"You said it yourself. To make myself happy," Willow said, completely unfazed by his anger. She purposely added a mocking edge to her voice. "Don't tell me you actually thought I was acting out of jealousy over you?"

"Shut up," Julian snapped, feeling his pride take a direct hit.

The angrier he got, the more Willow wanted to push him. "Looks like I hit the nail on the head."

She raised an eyebrow and let out a dry chuckle. "Julian, what am I going to do with you? Your ego is truly something else. After everything, you still think I'd fight over you?"

"If not for me, then who else?" Julian's voice suddenly dropped to a dangerous whisper.

"Whoever it is, it has nothing to do with you."

"You better hope I never find out who he is."