

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

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The HR representative had never dealt with a situation like this before. Already panicked, having Vivienne scream through the phone nearly sent her into a tailspin. "Leo Yardley and his entire team just submitted their resignations. All at once."

"I heard that part!" Vivienne swung her legs off the spa bed, ignoring the expensive mask still smeared across her face as she snatched her designer coat. "I'm asking why!"

Of course she had heard the news; she just wanted a reason. A mass exodus on this scale, entirely out of the blue? She refused to believe it.

Sure, she had been a bit hard on them lately, but surely not enough to trigger a mass resignation?

Where else were they going to find a compensation package as lucrative as Sinclair Group's? Where else would they get to touch projects of this caliber?

Besides, most of those people were middle-aged with mortgages and families to support. Vivienne didn't buy for a second that they would recklessly throw away their careers without a backup plan.

On the other end of the line, the HR rep swallowed her frustration, feeling entirely unfairly targeted.

She had laid out the situation as clearly as possible. As for the why, she figured Vivienne ought to know the answer better than anyone.

But she also knew exactly how volatile Vivienne could be. Swallowing her pride, the rep repeated Leo's exact words. "They said if you wanted to know the reason for their departure, we should just ask you. They said you'd definitely know."

"How the hell would I know?" Vivienne erupted, her voice echoing off the spa walls. "Those ungrateful losers don't know what's good for them, and now they're trying to pin the blame on me? I am absolutely not taking the fall for this."

"You tell them right now that unless I sign off on it, their resignations are denied."

The HR rep silently groaned but forced her tone to remain perfectly polite. "But according to their employment contracts, employees have the right to resign with advance notice. As

long as they provide a thirty-day written notice to the company, their contracts will automatically terminate at the end of that period. So..."

Vivienne had absolutely zero patience to listen to corporate policy. She cut her off sharply. "That sounds like a you problem. Figure it out. My instructions are crystal clear: I am not approving their resignations. Handle the logistics however you want, but I expect results."

With that, she ended the call.

Listening to the dial tone, the HR rep muttered a string of curses under her breath. No wonder Leo's team was jumping ship. With a toxic manager like that, running for the hills was the only logical move.

The moment Vivienne hung up with HR, she dialed Leo's number.

Leo was in the middle of running data models. Seeing her name flash across the screen, his brow furrowed, but he ultimately decided to answer. Technically, they were still Sinclair employees on company time; there was no valid reason to dodge her call.

The second he swiped to accept, Vivienne's signature condescending sneer blasted through the speaker. "I hear you submitted your resignation."

"That's right," Leo replied coolly.

A cold scoff crackled over the line, followed by the shrill, arrogant tone he had come to deeply despise. "I am your direct supervisor. Why didn't you notify me before going to HR?"

Leo couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes. Back when he planned on staying at Sinclair Group, he had gritted his teeth and tolerated her abuse. Now that he had one foot out the door, playing nice was entirely off the table.

He shot back without missing a beat, "Why didn't we notify you first? Are you seriously pretending you don't know the answer to that?"

Vivienne was momentarily stunned by the blatant disrespect. When she recovered, her voice was glacial. "Is that how you speak to your superior? This is Sinclair Group. You don't just get to do whatever you want. There are procedures to follow. Bypassing me and going straight to HR is a direct violation of company policy."

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Leo's tone was equally icy. "What difference does it make? You know about it now, don't you?"

"Are you kidding me?" Vivienne's voice ticked up into a shrill screech.

Leo had zero patience left for her tantrums. "Let's cut the crap. What exactly do you want right now?"

"What I want is very simple. You're going to retract your resignation from HR, follow standard protocol, and submit it to me first."

"And if we do that, you'll approve it?" Leo challenged.

Vivienne put on her best executive airs. "That depends."

Leo wasn't the least bit surprised by her answer; in fact, he already had his counter ready. "If that's the case, why would we waste our time?"

"Because," Vivienne paused dramatically, "without my approval, none of you are leaving this company."

"I take it you've never heard of the at-will employment clauses and the thirty-day notice period?" Leo mocked. "You might want to spend some time brushing up on labor laws. Oh, and while you're at it, maybe read a book on gene editing, too. Otherwise, you just sound like a complete idiot."

"You—" Realizing she couldn't bully him with corporate red tape, Vivienne switched tactics and went for the jugular. "You really think you're going to find better prospects outside of Sinclair Group? You've had access to cutting-edge tech over the past few years, but don't forget, Sinclair handed you those resources. The second you walk out those doors, you're nobody. You'll be lucky to even land an interview!"

The more she spoke, the more frantic her rant became. "Besides, most of your team has mortgages and kids! Where do you think you're going to find salaries this high and job security this rock-solid? I'm not trying to put you down, but the market is flooded with dime-a-dozen analysts just like you. I could have a stack of new hires sitting at your desks by tomorrow morning. But for you? It's not going to be that easy."

Leo brushed off her threats with effortless disdain. He actually found her desperation amusing. "If that's true, then you better start interviewing. The faster you hire replacements, the faster we can get out of your hair. As for our future—whether we end up flipping burgers or striking it rich—that's absolutely none of your business."

Realizing he was entirely immune to her threats, Vivienne completely lost whatever remained of her composure. She screamed into the receiver, "You'll be crawling back to me on your knees!"

She slammed the phone down, ending the call.

But less than a second later, her phone began ringing again.

Assuming it was Leo calling back to apologize after realizing the gravity of his mistake, Vivienne felt a surge of triumph. She immediately started brainstorming a hundred different ways to humiliate him and grind his ego into the dirt. But when she glanced at the screen, her smug smile vanished instantly.

The incoming call wasn't from Leo. It was an unsaved, anonymous number.

And she knew instantly that the man on the other end was Clarence Vance.

He had been harassing her relentlessly lately, usually calling multiple times a day. She had mostly been hanging up or letting it go to voicemail, but it was becoming glaringly obvious that Clarence wasn't someone she could just ignore away.

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The phone rang relentlessly. Just as it was about to go to voicemail, Vivienne finally answered, "Hello."

Clarence clearly hadn't expected her to actually pick up. Hearing her voice, he was thrown off balance for a moment. After a long pause, he practically vibrated with excitement. "Thank God. You finally answered my call."

Vivienne had always possessed a vicious tongue, and she was especially ruthless when dealing with people who were useless to her and required no polite facade.

Hearing his pathetic relief, she scoffed mercilessly. "I'm the one who answered the phone, so why are you thanking God? If you're going to thank someone, thank me."

Clarence was so used to being verbally battered by her that he didn't even register the insult. Instead, he forced a greasy, accommodating laugh. "Yes, of course, you're absolutely right. I should be thanking you. I've been calling non-stop, and you finally picked up."

"So, you're complaining that I've been ignoring your calls?" Vivienne immediately went on the offensive. She knew exactly why Clarence was calling, and she needed to establish dominance before he could even state his demands.

But her temper wasn't entirely unwarranted. The mess he had made of their last operation hadn't just failed to take down Willow—it had nearly dragged Vivienne down with him. There was no way she was going to play nice.

More importantly, Clarence had completely outlived his usefulness. She just wanted him gone.

"No, no, of course not. I wouldn't dare," Clarence groveled. Even though he had the leverage, he still instinctively cowered in her presence. "I know how busy you are. It's my fault for not checking your schedule before calling. I didn't mean to interrupt your day."

Satisfied that she had sufficiently broken his spirit, Vivienne dialed back the venom just a fraction. Feigning ignorance, she demanded, "What do you want? Spit it out."

Clarence hesitated, choosing his words with agonizing care. "I'm sure you've heard that Merit Biotech fired me. I've hit a dead end. I have nowhere else to go. I just wanted to ask... could you pull a few strings and find me a position?"

Vivienne was genuinely surprised. She had heard Silas Thorne issue the order during the meeting, but she assumed it was just executive grandstanding. She hadn't expected the termination to be executed so swiftly.

Would a billionaire CEO really waste his precious time micromanaging a mid-level firing? Or was he personally pushing the issue because it involved his own assistant? So he rushed it?

Suddenly, a disturbing thought flashed through her mind.

Clarence had just been fired, and almost simultaneously, Leo's team had submitted a mass resignation. Was there a connection?

After all, the common denominator between the two events was Willow Horgan. If Leo and his team were rushing to quit, could it be because they were preparing to jump ship to Merit Biotech? It wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility.

But Vivienne quickly brushed the thought aside. There was no way Willow had that kind of pull.

Firing Clarence was one thing—they had hard evidence against him, and Silas had publicly ordered it. But poaching an entire team of specialists? Sure, Willow might want to, but did she have the actual authority?

Even if Willow was a VP at Merit, she was likely still fighting to secure her own position. Orchestrating a mass lateral hire of that scale? She simply didn't have that kind of leverage.

After a long stretch of silence, Clarence nervously pressed the issue. "Ms. Sinclair? About my job situation... do you think you can arrange something?"

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"You actually have the nerve to ask me that?" Vivienne's tone turned venomous in an instant. "You completely botched the operation and nearly dragged me down with you, and now you have the audacity to make demands?"

Sensing the shift, panic bled into Clarence's voice. "You were there. You saw exactly how it went down. I laid everything on the line to protect your interests! And I didn't make a single move without getting your explicit approval first!"

"So, you're blaming me now?"

"I'm not blaming you, I'm just stating the facts." Though still denying it, Clarence's tone had hardened, losing the pathetic, groveling edge from earlier. This was a business transaction, and now that he realized Vivienne was preparing to burn him and walk away, he had to pivot to self-preservation.

"And what exactly do you want me to do?"

"I'm not asking for the moon. You know the situation I'm in. With a termination like that on my record, finding another job in this industry is going to be near impossible. All I'm asking is that you honor our original agreement and secure me a position."

"Secure you a position," Vivienne mocked coldly. "What exactly are you even qualified to do?"

"I think you know exactly what I'm capable of," Clarence fired back, refusing to back down. "Besides, wasn't my unique 'skill set' the reason you approached me in the first place? It's a little late to play dumb now. Do you want me to dig up our old message logs to refresh your memory on exactly what I bring to the table?"

His words were sharp and direct, serving a dual purpose: forcefully stating his demands while subtly hanging a massive threat over her head.

The underlying menace hit its mark. Vivienne's tone shifted abruptly, the arrogant sneer replaced by a distinct tremor of panic. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"Whether it's blackmail or not depends entirely on how you look at it. Just like whether you want to make a new friend or create a new enemy is entirely up to you."

Pushed into a corner, Vivienne realized she couldn't just brush him off. No matter how careful she had been, they had communicated far too many times. There was always a chance she had slipped up and left a digital paper trail. It was better to play it safe.

"Fine. I understand. I'll see what I can do."

Clarence's voice spiked with relief. "Are you serious?"

"Why would I lie to you?" Vivienne sneered. "If you don't trust me, you're more than welcome to take the nuclear option. Go ahead, leak those supposed chat logs and see how far that gets you."

"That won't be necessary. I was just speaking hypothetically. Please, don't take it personally." Clarence wasn't stupid. He was in this for the money, not a suicide mission against a Sinclair. Leaking the evidence wouldn't benefit him at all. But holding it over her head? That was his golden ticket.

"But let me make one thing crystal clear," Vivienne warned, her voice dropping to a lethal octave. "Until this is resolved, you keep your mouth shut. Don't mention this to anyone. And do not call this number again. When the arrangements are made, I will contact you."

"Understood. Hearing you say that puts my mind at ease. I promise I won't call again. I'll wait to hear from you."

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Having successfully sidelined Clarence, Vivienne could finally turn her full attention to the crisis with Leo and his team.

Over the past few days, the HR representative had approached her multiple times, reiterating that there was no way to block the resignations and strongly advising her to escalate the situation to Julian. A mass exodus of an entire department was unprecedented; Julian Sinclair was going to demand answers eventually.

But Vivienne absolutely refused. She understood the gravity of the situation, but her primary concern was insulating herself from the fallout and keeping her image pristine in Julian's eyes. The fact remained: Leo's team was leaving. Even with Julian's blatant favoritism, he would still launch an inquiry.

Her only play was to stall for time, hoping to resolve the mutiny before Julian caught wind of it.

Using a routine project update as an excuse, she called Leo again. It didn't take long for the conversation to pivot back to their impending departure.

She started with her usual condescending reprimands, but when Leo remained entirely unfazed, she forcefully pivoted to a more diplomatic approach. "I was informed that your team is resigning due to excessive workload. If that's truly the issue, I'm willing to reassess the project scope. After all, everyone has different limits. If the team is reaching burnout, it is my responsibility as a leader to reallocate resources."

Even while offering an olive branch, she still sounded like a royal decreeing a pardon to peasants.

Hearing this sudden shift in tone, Leo found it utterly laughable. "Who told you that? We've brought this issue up to you countless times in the past. It's funny how you completely ignored us when we complained, but suddenly you believe it because you heard it through the grapevine?"

"It doesn't matter where I heard it. Is that the reason or not?" Vivienne forced herself to swallow her pride. The current situation was far too precarious for her to lose her temper.

She threw down her final bargaining chip. "And it's not just about reducing your workload. I can push through promotions and salary bumps for the entire team. So, the choice is yours: stay at Sinclair Group with a higher title and better pay, or walk out the door into a completely unstable, dead-end job market."

At this point, Leo couldn't even be bothered to argue with her. But seeing her finally forced to swallow her pride and beg was a rare treat, and he decided to twist the knife one last time. "Why didn't you offer this earlier?"

"If I had offered it earlier, would you have stayed?" Vivienne countered.

"Probably not." Leo chuckled dryly. "But it would have been nice to see you grovel a little sooner. Weren't you the one claiming just a few days ago that we'd be crawling back on our knees to beg you for our jobs? And yet, here you are, begging us to stay. Karma really comes at you fast, doesn't it?"

Realizing she was being mocked, Vivienne's blood boiled. The fragile composure she had been clinging to shattered completely. She shrieked into the phone, "Leo Yardley, do not push your luck! These terms are my final offer! If you walk away now, you're going to regret it for the rest of your pathetic lives!"

"Is that right? I'd love to see what exactly we're going to regret. Why don't you expedite the paperwork so we can find out sooner rather than later?"

Leo couldn't care less about her empty threats. The worst she could do was fire them, which honestly would be a favor. Getting terminated meant bypassing the notice period and getting the hell out of Sinclair Group even faster.

Over the past few days, the entire team had successfully completed their first round of virtual interviews with Merit Biotech. The next stages required in-person meetings in New York City, so everyone was practically begging to be released so they could fly out.

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Vivienne was so furious she could barely speak. It took her a long moment to find her voice. Arrogant by nature, she always found a way to save face, even when she was backed into a corner.

"You talk a big game, but you still work for me, and you still have to follow my orders," she snapped. "Send me the latest project files right now."

She had only assigned this task two days ago. Under a normal workflow, it would take at least two weeks to complete. She knew they couldn't possibly have it done. By making this unreasonable demand, she wanted to humiliate Leo and extinguish the arrogance he had just shown.

To her surprise, Leo agreed immediately. "Sure. I'll send it right over."

With that, he hung up.

Vivienne frowned, replaying his cheerful tone in her head. Something felt off, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

A second later, Leo's files arrived. However, the entire document was filled with dense technical jargon and experimental data. She couldn't understand a single word of it.

Just then, Julian texted her, asking her to bring the latest project updates to his office. Without overthinking it, Vivienne copied the files onto a flash drive and headed upstairs.

Ever since the incident with Clarence Vance, Julian had been just as sullen and brooding as Vivienne.

On one hand, he was absolutely convinced that Willow was having an affair with Arthur Vance. He connected it to the unpleasant encounter they'd had at the hospital, and the more he thought about it, the angrier he got. He even firmly believed that Willow's sudden, unwavering demands regarding their marriage were entirely because of that Arthur guy.

On the other hand, the Clarence situation had awakened him to a severe crisis. In the current partnership with Merit Biotech, Sinclair Group was undoubtedly at a disadvantage. The only way to flip the power dynamic and gain more leverage was to execute this project flawlessly and produce groundbreaking results as quickly as possible.

A few moments later, Vivienne walked into Julian's office and handed him the files.

Julian took the drive without a word and began scrutinizing the data. Throughout the entire process, he didn't spare her a single glance or utter a single word.

In the past, whenever they discussed a project, Julian would always take a moment to ask how she was doing and show some concern. He had never been this rushed or cold before. It was as if she were just another faceless subordinate standing beside him, stripping away any special connection they shared.

Vivienne felt a surge of resentment. Just as she was about to voice a complaint, Julian beat her to it. His tone dripped with blatant dissatisfaction as he demanded, "Who put this data together? Did you even look at it before handing it to me?"

He had reprimanded her before. While it was humiliating, it was something Vivienne could usually tolerate. She instinctively picked up her notebook, ready to jot down his criticisms so she could dump the revisions onto Leo and his team. That was her standard playbook.

But this time, that strategy wasn't going to fly. Julian wasn't buying it. He clearly wanted to get to the bottom of this. "Who exactly made this?"

Vivienne knew him well enough to recognize that look on his face. The data must be severely flawed. Seizing the opportunity, she immediately deflected, "Leo and his team submitted it. Why? Is there a huge problem?"

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"Is there a huge problem?" Julian echoed, his voice laced with disbelief. "Did you even read this? Can you really not tell if there's a problem?"

Vivienne hadn't read it. Even if she had, it would have looked like pure gibberish to her.

Facing his rising anger, she scrambled for an excuse. "The deadline was so tight. I didn't have time to review it thoroughly, I just skimmed it."

Julian was far from satisfied with that pathetic excuse. "Even if you didn't look closely this time, I distinctly remember you claiming you'd be actively involved in the research for this project. If you were truly involved, how could you miss data errors this catastrophic?"

He tapped the screen, pointing out specific data sets. "Look at this yourself. Does any of this make sense to you?"

Although Vivienne didn't understand the granular details, she grasped the broad concepts and general direction of the experiment. Seeing the numbers he was pointing at, her heart sank.

These weren't minor experimental margins of error. They were wildly, embarrassingly wrong. The entire foundational direction of the research was off.

"And look at this," Julian's finger slid down to the conclusion section. "If you told me they did this with their eyes open, I wouldn't believe you. Sinclair Group pays top dollar for talent—is this the level of competence we're getting?"

At this point, as much as Vivienne hated to admit it, she knew she had been played by Leo and his crew.

No wonder he had been so agreeable when she demanded the files. In the past, he would have dragged his feet and delayed at every turn. They had planned this all along, knowing she never actually read the reports. They were just waiting for her to make a fool of herself.

She sneered inwardly. It seemed she had underestimated them. She never expected those peasants to be capable of such scheming.

But she had no time to dwell on revenge right now. Her immediate priority was soothing Julian's temper.

"Julian, please don't be mad," she pleaded, falling back on her usual tearful routine. "Maybe I've been too strict with them. They're upset, so they got sloppy with their work. Don't worry, I'll teach them a lesson. I promise this will never happen again."

Usually, her tears were enough to soften his resolve, and he would let the matter drop. But today was different. Perhaps his mind was already in knots over Willow, leaving him irritable and entirely devoid of patience for Vivienne's act.

"They're clearly at fault here, but ultimately, so are you. As the Project Lead, failing to catch these glaring errors is unacceptable. It's a good thing I caught them today while we still have a chance to fix it. But what if a client had seen this? How exactly would we recover from that?"

He rarely spoke to her with such harsh, authoritative severity, completely pulling rank on her. Vivienne was stunned, her body going rigid as she stared at him in disbelief.

But Julian wasn't finished. He was starting to connect the dots, realizing something was deeply wrong. This wasn't Leo's first year at Sinclair Group. When Willow was in charge, that team had never produced a single error. In fact, they had successfully spearheaded numerous new projects and patents for the company.

Yet the moment Willow left and Vivienne took over, everything went downhill. All he ever heard from Vivienne were complaints about their lack of cooperation, incompetence, and laziness. And now, they were suddenly making catastrophic data fabrications? He decided he needed to speak with them directly.

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Rather than cornering Vivienne any further, he shifted his focus. "Give me Leo's number. I'll call him and ask what exactly is going on."

Vivienne snapped into panic mode. Forget crying over his coldness—she needed an excuse, fast.

She absolutely could not let Julian and Leo speak. The moment they connected, her entire web of lies would unravel. Furthermore, she couldn't risk him finding out they had all threatened to quit. He'd just blame her poor management again.

She quickly wiped her eyes, her mind racing. "Leo took the day off. He said there was an emergency with an elderly family member, and it sounded pretty serious. It's probably best not to bother him right now. Otherwise, people will start saying Sinclair Group has no compassion for its employees."

Julian considered this and didn't push it. Instead, he pivoted to the rest of the team. "He has a few guys working under him, right? Give me their numbers. I'll contact them; they should know what's going on."

Vivienne couldn't allow that either. How was that any different from calling Leo? The entire team was thick as thieves. She knew for a fact they wouldn't say a single good thing about her.

"Let's just drop it for now," she urged. "Those guys are pure researchers. They're socially awkward and terrible at communicating. You won't get anything useful out of them. Plus, they're low-level staff. If the CEO suddenly calls them out of nowhere, they'll probably be too terrified to speak. It's better to just wait for Leo to get back. It'll only be a day or two, it won't derail anything."

Julian relented, but the gaze he turned on her was completely stripped of its usual warmth.

Vivienne shifted uncomfortably. "What is it? Why are you looking at me like that? Did I say something wrong?"

"Nothing," Julian said, still studying her coolly. "I just didn't expect you to defend them. Given how you usually talk about them, you don't seem to like them very much."

Caught off guard, Vivienne forced an awkward laugh. "How could I? They're my team. I don't hate them. It's just that I hold them to a very high standard, and when they fall short, I tend to get a little anxious."

"Setting high standards for your subordinates is a good thing," Julian redirected the conversation back to her. "But sometimes you need to refine your approach. They're based in Seattle. Their mindset and way of working are different from ours. Applying relentless pressure can backfire. You could stand to learn a thing or two from Willow in that regard."

Hearing him praise Willow was the last straw. Her eyes flashed with jealous anger as she bit out, "They were her people! They've followed Willow for years, of course they listen to her. If I had my own team in there, I wouldn't do any worse than she did."

Seeing her visceral reaction, Julian realized he had slipped up. It was strange—the comparison had spilled out of him completely instinctively, without any forethought.

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He had no intention of apologizing to Vivienne. He was getting exhausted by all of this. "You know the situation the company is in right now. Aside from their unit, we have absolutely no one else who understands gene editing."

Vivienne chafed at his words, but a knot of worry tightened in her chest. She realized Julian placed an incredibly high value on Leo's team. If he found out they were planning a mass exodus, he would absolutely blame her.

She needed to start doing damage control immediately. "They aren't that special. If you ask me, they're just riding Sinclair Group's coattails. With our platform and resources, anyone could succeed. If they left us, they'd be nothing. We could easily replace them and get the exact same results."

Noticing her escalating temper, Julian couldn't be bothered to argue. He cut straight to the point: "Do you have people ready to step in?"

"Not right this second," Vivienne pouted. "But just because I don't have them right now doesn't mean I won't. If we need them, I can arrange it immediately. I made a lot of connections when I was studying abroad. They're still in the industry, and it would only take one phone call to bring them over."

Julian didn't care enough to unpack the bluff behind her words. "Whatever the case may be, I'm just warning you. Think it over carefully."

Realizing this was his polite way of dismissing her, Vivienne didn't linger. She was dealing with enough messes right now and didn't have the energy to argue with him. More importantly, she was starting to realize that simply acting sweet and pitiful wasn't enough to keep a hold on Julian anymore. She needed to prove her actual worth to earn his respect.

After Vivienne left, Julian tried to get back to work, but he found it impossible to focus. Every single thing happening around him lately seemed tethered to Willow. She had severely derailed his peace of mind, and he knew he had to confront her face-to-face to clear the air.

That afternoon, Julian left the office early, intent on tracking Willow down. Since he couldn't make sense of any of this, he decided to confront the woman driving him crazy directly.

On the way, he tried to contact her, only to discover he was blocked on both his phone and WeChat. Left with no other option, he drove straight to Merit Biotech. When he arrived, the front desk informed him she was out of the office for the day and they weren't sure when she'd be back.

Julian hit a brick wall. He drove aimlessly through the city streets, a suffocating wave of frustration tightening his chest.

For as long as he could remember, he had never been rejected like this. People always scheduled around his time and waited on him. He had never been in a position where he actively pursued someone and got shut out.

Unable to swallow his pride, he debated waiting outside her apartment building. But then he remembered he didn't even know where she lived. That idea was quickly scrapped. Defeated, he had no choice but to head home and try again the next day.

For the next two days, Julian spent every afternoon waiting outside Merit Biotech. Finally, after work hours on the second day, he spotted her.

She had just walked out of the office building, the evening breeze lightly catching the stray hairs framing her face.

She wore a simple, tailored work outfit, devoid of any flashy accessories, yet she looked absolutely radiant and effortlessly graceful.

Julian narrowed his eyes, waited for the right moment, and strode directly into her path. His opening line was sharp: "It's certainly not easy getting a moment with you."

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Willow stopped in her tracks, startled by his sudden appearance. But she quickly regained her composure. The receptionist had warned her that Julian had been looking for her, so she was at least somewhat prepared.

Her tone was freezing, and she didn't even want to look at him. "What do you want? There is absolutely nothing left for us to talk about."

Julian was already simmering with pent-up frustration. Her blunt dismissal only fueled his temper. "Do you have any idea how many days I've been waiting out here for you? Have you been avoiding me on purpose?"

Willow rolled her eyes and shot back, "No one asked you to wait."

He was being totally unreasonable, and she resented him for disrupting her peace.

With that, she turned to leave, but Julian stepped forward, blocking her path. "Hold it. We need to talk."

Willow took two steps back and crossed her arms, her body language radiating pure defensive hostility. "Speak."

Truthfully, she had something to tell him as well. She had planned to call him later to confirm it, but since he was here, she figured she might as well get it over with.

Julian refused. "Let's talk in my car."

Willow held her ground. "We talk here."

Julian stared at her for a long moment, then let out a sharp, mocking laugh. "Fine. If you don't care about broadcasting your private business to the entire street, then this works perfectly for me."

As he made a show of opening his mouth, Willow glared fiercely at him, eventually relenting and following him over to his car.

Julian gestured for her to get in, but she flatly refused again. Walking over was her maximum compromise. If he wanted to talk, fine. If not, she was leaving the second she delivered her news.

Realizing she wasn't going to budge, and that pushing her would get him nowhere, Julian compromised and decided to speak outside the car.

Before he started, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"Lately, Leo and his team have been acting out. They're making constant mistakes and their attitude is a far cry from the dedication they showed when you were around." He exhaled a plume of smoke and finally posed his question, "Have they contacted you recently? Do you know what's going on?"

Leo hadn't actually discussed it with her, and Willow hadn't asked, but she didn't need to. She knew exactly what was happening. They had hit their breaking point with Vivienne and were actively retaliating. Knowing them, they would never have an "attitude problem," let alone make frequent, glaring errors. There was only one logical explanation: it was deliberate sabotage.

Did her offering them a lifeline at Merit give them the confidence to rebel? Probably. But she considered it entirely natural and perfectly justified.

When anger and oppression reached a boiling point, and an exit strategy finally appeared, it was completely understandable for victims of bullying to strike back. Besides, all they were doing was expressing a tiny fraction of their dissatisfaction.

Willow met his gaze, her eyes brimming with sarcasm. "Shouldn't you be asking Vivienne? She's their manager, isn't she? When a team starts having issues, isn't it the manager's job to investigate and fix it? Why on earth are you coming to me?"

She let out a dry laugh. "Honestly, I don't know what's going through your head. You didn't actually think I was going to help you, did you?"

She threw the exact condescending tone they used to use on her right back in his face. The moment the words left her lips, she watched Julian's expression visibly darken.

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But Willow wasn't intimidated in the slightest. Just thinking about how they had not only bullied her, but immediately started bullying Leo and his team the second she left, turned her heart to ice.

"What's wrong? You can't handle a couple of harsh words? Compared to how you all treated me, this is absolutely nothing."

Julian opened his mouth, clearly intending to snap back, but Willow cut him off. She didn't care what he was thinking, and she certainly didn't care what he had to say. Naturally, she wasn't about to breathe a word about Leo's team defecting to Merit. Silence was the best weapon until the deal was finalized, especially when dealing with people like him.

However, she decided to throw him a single, meager bone. "Since you went out of your way to ambush me, I suppose I shouldn't leave you completely empty-handed. If you really want answers, start looking at Vivienne. When subordinates have emotional breakdowns, shouldn't she be held accountable?"

"I don't need you to tell me how to do my job; I'll investigate it myself," Julian said, his jaw tightening as his knuckles turned white. It was obvious he was seething.

Willow waved a hand dismissively, projecting an air of total indifference.

She highly doubted he had stalked her for days just to ask about an employee dispute. She gestured for him to finish whatever else was on his mind so she could drop her news and leave.

Julian, provoked by her utter apathy, ground his cigarette out with sudden, violent force, glaring at her with barely contained fury.

As their eyes locked, Julian stared into her amber gaze and suddenly realized exactly what had been tormenting him for the past few weeks.

It was her.

It was her and that damn rumor about Arthur Vance.

Even the issue with Leo, he now realized, was just an excuse to see her. Did he care about the team? Of course he did. They were vital to Sinclair Group's future, and as the CEO, he couldn't afford to lose them.

But did he care enough to personally track her down over it? Julian knew he was lying to himself.

It hit him hardest just now, listening to her mock him, watching her treat him as though he meant absolutely nothing to her. Every word out of her mouth was steeped in sarcasm and disdain.

She didn't care about him. She didn't care about his opinions, and she didn't care about his problems.

The realization slammed into him—that was what he truly couldn't stand.

Without any logical transition, Julian abruptly pivoted the conversation. "What exactly is going on between you and Arthur Vance? Is it true what Clarence said? Are you two involved? Was he the man with you at the hospital?"

He had asked these exact same questions before, but last time, his tone had been accusatory, fueled by disbelief and anger.

This time, it was different. As clarity settled over him, his emotions shifted. Beneath the anger was a raw, visceral ache.

And this time, he needed to hear the answer from her own lips.

Willow looked at him as if he were a lunatic. "What does it matter to you who I'm involved with? Haven't I made myself clear enough?"

She was exhausted by this conversation. He clearly hadn't gotten tired of hearing it, but she was definitely tired of saying it.

Julian suddenly took two steps forward, towering over her. "How does it not matter? We are still married. As long as that relationship exists, I have every right to know."

Willow's brow furrowed, her face hardening into a mask of offended revulsion.

She had planned to bring this up anyway, but it was incredibly irritating that he'd triggered the topic first. In just a few minutes, he had managed to disgust her all over again.

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Since he had opened the door, she walked right through it. "I suggest you watch your tone. This dead marriage of ours will be officially over in a few days."

"What are you talking about?" Julian froze, his eyes going blank for a second.

Willow had zero patience for his attitude, but this was too important to mess up. She didn't want him causing any last-minute complications, so she forced herself to spell it out. "Our divorce hearing is this Friday at 10 AM. Don't forget to show up."

The words knocked the breath out of Julian's lungs. His pupils constricted sharply.

He spoke with a dangerous edge. "Do you actually find it amusing to play these games?"

Willow genuinely thought he was out of his mind. She stared him dead in the eye and spoke with uncompromising sharpness. "Do I look like I'm playing games? And why would I lie? This hasn't been a sudden decision. Honestly, reaching this step has taken entirely too long. I can't wait for it to be over so I never have to deal with you again."

The words seared into Julian's ears like a branding iron. He refused to believe it. He couldn't accept it.

Forcing down his panic, he countered, "There has to be a mandatory mediation session before a trial. It's the standard legal procedure for a divorce. We haven't even gone to mediation, so how could we possibly be at the trial stage?"

"Have you completely lost your memory?" Willow looked at him as if he were an idiot. She pulled out her phone and swiped to a photo. "Why don't you take a good look at this?"

It was a formal record of a failed mediation session. Julian had absolutely no memory of it, yet his signature was clearly scrawled at the bottom.

His mind raced. He honestly couldn't remember if he had signed it or not. His lawyers had briefly mentioned something about it a while ago, but he had been swamped with other issues. He had arrogantly assumed Willow would never actually go through with it—that the whole divorce threat was just a bluff for attention. He had completely brushed it off.

Staring at the document, he was at a total loss for words. Finally, he let out a cold scoff. "It seems I underestimated you."

"Think whatever you want," Willow replied. His opinions had completely lost their power to affect her. "Just make sure you show up to court on time."

"I'm not going. And I am not divorcing you," Julian stated, his voice laced with absolute finality.

But Willow was ready for that. "If the defendant fails to appear, the judge can rule in absentia. I'm sure your lawyers explained that to you."

The cold smile on Julian's face deepened. "You've really done your homework for this."

"Of course I have. Leaving you is the best thing that's ever happened to me. I had to make sure everything was perfect."

Having said her piece, Willow turned to leave, but tossed one last piece of parting advice over her shoulder. "You really should find the time to visit a hospital. Better yet, book a session with a psychiatrist. Because right now..." She paused, tapping her temple mockingly. "You are completely out of your mind."

After Willow left, Julian kicked his car door with explosive force before throwing himself into the driver's seat.

The very first thing he did was dial his lawyer. He unleashed a furious tirade, aggressively insisting he had never signed the mediation failure record and demanding the lawyer fix the mess immediately.

The lawyer on the other end of the line was terrified. He apologized profusely, but ultimately, desperate to save his own career and risking Julian's wrath, he insisted the document had indeed been authorized. He pleaded with Julian to check his own text records for proof.

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Julian froze. If the lawyer was insisting on it with his job on the line, it had to be true. He wouldn't dare lie about something this serious.

As the lawyer continued offering a string of panicked apologies and potential damage control strategies, Julian lost his patience. A sudden realization hit him. He hung up the phone and slammed on the gas.

When he arrived home, Toby was in the living room playing with a puzzle. Vivienne was sitting nearby, glued to her phone, paying absolutely no attention to the boy.

The moment Julian walked in, Toby's eyes lit up like he'd seen a savior. He scrambled up and ran straight into Julian's legs. "Dad, you're finally home! Come play puzzles with me. When you're not here, nobody plays with me. It's so boring by myself."

Julian didn't react much. He simply patted the boy's cheek, quietly signaling that he was busy and telling him to go play on his own.

Vivienne, however, snapped to attention. She immediately put her phone down, hurried over to Toby, and crouched down with an overly sweet smile. "Toby, don't bother your dad. I'll play with you."

Toby didn't look thrilled. In fact, he looked confused. "But I just asked you, and you said you didn't have time." He pouted. "Besides, I don't want you to play with me. You always rush me, and you make us stop before I even finish."

Vivienne flushed with embarrassment, acutely aware of Julian watching her. She forced an awkward laugh. "That's not true, I was just a little busy earlier. I promise I'll actually play with you this time, okay?"

Toby reluctantly agreed.

Julian hadn't said a word during their exchange, but Toby's complaint painted a clear picture. Still, he didn't care enough to make an issue of it. Vivienne worked all day, and it was normal to be exhausted at home. He could overlook her lack of patience.

What he absolutely could not overlook was someone secretly taking his phone and replying to his messages.

He had spent the entire drive home thinking about what the lawyer had said. After parking the car, he had meticulously scrolled through his messages. The lawyer was right—there was a confirmation reply sent from his phone. But Julian knew with absolute certainty that he hadn't typed it.

If it wasn't him, there was only one possible explanation. Someone else had used his phone.

For years, there was only one other person in the world who knew his passcode: Vivienne.

Watching her pretend to bond over a puzzle with Toby, Julian finally spoke up. "Vivienne, come here for a second. We need to talk."

Desperate to perform the role of a loving mother in front of him, Vivienne brushed him off without glancing up. "Whatever it is, just tell me here. We're at a crucial part of the puzzle, I can't step away right now."

Julian didn't hesitate. He cut straight to the chase: "Did you touch my phone?"

Vivienne went completely rigid, her fingers freezing over the puzzle piece. She had touched it. Not only had she touched it, she had actively replied to his lawyer's message.

She immediately knew exactly what he was referring to. Forcing her heart rate to slow, she played dumb. "Oh, yes, I grabbed it a few days ago. Toby was throwing a tantrum wanting to play a game, and my phone was charging. I was in a rush, so I handed him yours. Why? Did he break something on it?"

In one breath, she admitted to having the phone while seamlessly throwing Toby under the bus. If there was a problem, it was the kid's fault, not hers.

Julian lowered his gaze, his dark, heavy stare locking onto her. He didn't say a word. He just stood there, his eyes bottomless and calculating, silently analyzing her every move.

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After a long, suffocating silence, Julian finally spoke again.

"A specific message on my phone was altered. I want to know if you were the one who did it."

He was even more direct this time.

Vivienne kept her head bowed, refusing to meet his eyes. "How could I? I know my boundaries. I never look through your private things, let alone reply to messages for you."

She shot a glance at Toby, doubling down on her scapegoat. "It must have been Toby. He probably tapped something by accident while he was playing his game. Don't worry, I'll be more careful next time. I won't let him play with your phone again."

Julian didn't say he believed her, nor did he call her a liar. He just stared at them for another agonizing moment before his voice flattened into total indifference. "Keep playing. I'm going to my room."

The moment Julian was out of sight, the tension snapped, and Vivienne sagged with relief. She wiped a layer of cold sweat from her forehead. Having completely lost the energy to keep up the charade, she tossed the puzzle piece onto the floor and retreated to her seat on the couch.

She knew Julian was highly suspicious of her. But taking that massive risk to reply to the lawyer had been an act of desperation. She simply couldn't endure watching Julian and Willow's endless, messy entanglement anymore. She needed them divorced immediately so she could finally secure her position.

Toby, oblivious to the high-stakes manipulation, only knew that his mother had promised to play with him and had immediately abandoned him again. He whined, "Mommy, why did you stop playing with me?"

"What's there to play?" Vivienne's sweet, patient facade shattered, replaced by a cold, vicious glare. "All you do is play! You're completely useless. What's the point of even raising you?"

Toby was too young to understand what ambition or usefulness meant, but the venom in her voice terrified him. Tears welled in his eyes. He thought his mother was acting incredibly strange.

Remembering what she had just said to Julian, he grew even more confused and upset. "I never even played with Dad's phone! Why did you say that? I'm going to tell Dad!"

He scrambled off the floor, ready to run straight to Julian's room.

Vivienne lunged forward and grabbed him. She was about to explode, but seeing the stubborn defiance on his tear-streaked face, a jolt of fear spiked through her. "Okay, okay, Mommy is sorry. Mommy will keep playing the puzzle with you, alright?"

She pulled him into a tight hug, quickly shoving a piece of fruit into his hands and kissing his cheek. "Mommy will play with you right now."

He was just a kid, after all. A few sweet words and some affection quickly quieted him down. Sensing she had him under control again, Vivienne lowered her voice. "Toby, what Mommy said earlier was for your own good. Can you promise Mommy that you will never, ever mention the phone to Dad?"

"Why?" Toby asked, bewildered.

"Don't ask questions. Kids don't need to know everything. All you need to do is promise me. If you do, Mommy will always play puzzles with you and always stay by your side. But if you don't promise, Mommy won't be able to stay with you anymore. I'll have to give you away to the wicked witch, Willow. Aren't you scared of her?"

Every single thing Toby knew about the world, he had learned from Vivienne. In his mind, Willow was a terrifying monster. He immediately burst into terrified tears. "Mommy, I won't say anything! Please don't give me to her! I'm scared!"

Vivienne finally smiled, deeply satisfied. "Good boy. As long as you listen to Mommy, I'll never give you to her."

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Meanwhile, right after Willow left the office building, her phone rang. It was Silas.

Assuming he wanted to discuss work, she immediately shifted into professional mode. She stopped on the sidewalk to take the call. "Mr. Thorne, is something wrong?"

Silas's voice sounded strange over the speaker. While it retained its usual deep cadence, there was a rigid, frosty edge to it that hadn't been there before. "Look to your right."

Startled, Willow turned her head. To her surprise, she spotted his car parked nearby. He was driving a Rolls-Royce Cullinan today. The sleek, predatory vehicle, painted in a shade as dark as midnight, had been the talk of the office since the moment he arrived that morning.

Naturally, Willow had heard all the gossip about it.

Before she could even process her surprise, Silas's voice clipped through the phone again. "Stay right there."

The line went dead before she could respond. A moment later, the Cullinan glided smoothly over and idled right next to her.

The window rolled down, framing the sharp, uncompromising lines of his jaw. A faint, masculine scent of cedar drifted from the interior. He turned his dark gaze toward her, his voice low and commanding. "Get in."

"Oh." Willow didn't argue. She pulled the door open and slid into the passenger seat.

If his tone over the phone had only suggested he was annoyed, seeing him up close confirmed it. Silas was absolutely furious.

She just had no idea why. But considering he had tracked her down after hours with such urgency, she figured it had to be a work crisis.

She cautiously broke the silence. "Mr. Thorne, is there a problem with the project?"

Silas kept his eyes locked on the road ahead, his jaw tight. "This has nothing to do with the project."

Willow let out a sigh of relief. "Then why were you in such a rush to find me? Did something happen?"

Hearing the blatant relief in her voice only fueled Silas's irritation. Was the project the only thing she cared about? Did nothing else register on her radar?

He had watched her entire interaction with Julian outside the building. He had even watched Julian violently kick his own car door after she walked away.

He honestly couldn't understand how she had stayed with a degenerate like that for so long.

Did she not care about her own safety at all?

That was exactly why he was so angry. If Julian was willing to act that aggressively in public, what was he capable of behind closed doors?

"You just met with Julian, didn't you?" Silas asked point-blank.

"How did you know?" Willow blinked in surprise.

"You were standing right outside the building. It was hard to miss."

"Oh. Right." Willow flushed with embarrassment, but mostly she felt terribly guilty. She had deliberately chosen a spot slightly away from the main entrance to avoid being seen by her colleagues, but her boss had witnessed the whole thing anyway.

"I'm so sorry about that. I'll be more careful next time. I really try not to let personal drama affect the firm's image."

Silas frowned deeply at her apology. "You think I'm worried about the firm? Merit isn't going to be shaken by something this trivial."

"Then why are you upset?"

Seeing that she genuinely didn't understand, Silas let out a heavy sigh. "Do you actually know what kind of man Julian is?"

Willow nodded. While she might not know every single secret Julian kept, she was intimately familiar with his core character and toxic personality.

Seeing her nod made Silas's blood boil even hotter. To him, it meant she knew exactly what a scoundrel Julian was, yet she had willingly ignored his character and chosen to tie her life to his anyway.