

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

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He frowned. "Fine, then you tell me. What kind of person is he, really?"

Cold-hearted, arrogant, selfish, and utterly ruthless.

It would take all day and night to list his faults. Willow just didn't understand why he was asking.

"Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden?"

Silas thought she was defending Julian, and his frustration flared. His voice rose slightly. "Do you know what he did after you walked away? He kicked the car door. Hard. Multiple times."

"Yeah." Willow nodded, completely unfazed. That sounded exactly like something Julian would do.

But Silas was utterly dissatisfied with her nonchalant reaction. "You're just brushing this off," he snapped. "Do you realize what that means? It means he's dangerously unstable. Today it's a car door, but one day he could turn that rage on you!"

He was genuinely terrified for her. The thought of Julian turning his temper on Willow when he wasn't around to protect her sent a wave of suffocating panic through his chest.

Seeing his distress, Willow quickly tried to reassure him. "Don't worry. He won't ever get the chance."

"How do you know? You trust him that much?" The light turned red, and Silas hit the brakes, turning to look at her. His dark eyes swirled with worry, fear, and a much deeper, hidden sense of desperate longing.

"Do you really know him?"

"Do you actually trust him that much?"

"Do you have any idea what his life was like during the three years you were in Seattle?"

"Or do you just believe whatever he tells you? Can't you see through him?"

The barrage of questions left Willow entirely stunned.

She had never seen Silas like this before. It took her a long moment to process his outburst.

The only reason she had brushed it off was because her divorce from Julian was imminent. Once the papers were signed, they would have zero contact. Whether he was violent or prone to rage wouldn't matter anymore. That was why she knew he'd never get the chance to hurt her.

But Silas had clearly misunderstood her.

For a second, Willow hesitated, wondering if she should just tell him that the divorce was happening immediately. But she decided against it; it felt too private, and Silas probably didn't want to hear the messy details of her failed marriage anyway.

Instead, she offered a simpler explanation. "Actually, Julian and I don't have a good relationship. We barely see each other a few times a year. That's why I said he wouldn't get the chance."

Hearing this, Silas instantly fell silent.

It was as if the world had been put on mute. His clenched hands slowly relaxed on the steering wheel, all the hostility draining from his posture, leaving only the lingering echo of her words in his mind.

They didn't have a good relationship.

They barely saw each other.

Julian wouldn't get the chance.

Did that mean Willow had no feelings for Julian? That she didn't love him? Was their marriage just a hollow sham? And did that mean... he would soon have his own chance?

In the span of a few brief seconds, Silas's mind raced ahead, already picturing what kind of wedding dress she would wear when he finally married her.

His sudden silence left Willow feeling completely off balance. How had his explosive temper vanished into thin air?

She looked at him, bewildered. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Silas finally snapped back to reality, his tone infinitely softer now. "As long as you know how to protect yourself, that's all that matters."

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"I do." Willow nodded. She had fought too hard to get to this point; there was absolutely no way she was ever stepping back.

The car continued down the road, and Willow quickly recognized the route heading back to her apartment.

He was always like this—thoughtful, attentive, doing things quietly behind the scenes. Like driving her home. He had only asked for her address the very first time, and ever since, it had become a natural routine. He handled everything seamlessly, never making her stress over the details.

It seemed like he wasn't giving her a choice, but in reality, he had already taken care of every arrangement so she wouldn't have to lift a finger.

Willow turned her head slightly, her gaze falling on him.

Silas had one hand casually resting on the steering wheel and the other draped loosely over the gear shift. His long, elegant fingers looked striking in the dim light. As he drove with steady precision, the sharp, clean lines of his profile were illuminated, highlighting the strong cut of his jaw.

If he treated her this well, she couldn't even imagine how incredibly he must treat the woman he actually loved.

A tart pang of jealousy bloomed in her chest, like biting into an unripe plum, yet it was a bitterness she somehow wanted to hold onto.

Perhaps she had been staring too long, because Silas caught her gaze. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

His question was as direct as always.

Maybe it was the intoxicating moonlight, or the lingering intensity of his earlier outburst, but an undeniable urge pushed Willow to want to know more about him.

Riding that wave of courage, she blurted out, "I want to know... what is the girl you like really like?"

Hearing this, Silas shot her a long, unreadable look, but stayed silent.

To Willow, that glance felt like a warning. She instantly worried she had crossed a line and annoyed him.

Just as she was about to backpedal and drop the subject, Silas finally spoke. "She's stunning, incredibly sweet, and perfectly genuine."

Hearing him list those traits, the knot of jealousy in Willow's chest tightened. But she quickly reasoned with herself—of course the woman he loved would be absolutely flawless.

"Though, I am quite a bit older than her," Silas added softly.

Despite the hollow ache in her heart, Willow forced a supportive smile to comfort him. "Age doesn't matter. As long as you two connect and share the same values, an age gap isn't a problem."

Besides, Martha had always told her that older men knew how to cherish a partner better.

Willow couldn't help but sigh inwardly. Regardless, it was a chance she would never have.

"Do you really believe that?" Silas asked, catching onto her words.

"I do." Willow nodded. "Age is a factor in any relationship, but having the same worldview and compatible personalities is much more important. That's what makes a relationship comfortable."

Otherwise, what good was being the same age? Her miserable marriage with Julian was living proof of that.

Still, driven by her own quiet, selfish curiosity, she couldn't resist asking, "Exactly how much older are you?"

Silas didn't hesitate. "She's about your age."

Hearing this made Willow's heart sink even further. She felt a sudden, fierce wave of envy for this mystery woman who held his total devotion.

Gathering her composure, she pretended not to care and offered her objective advice. "That's not bad at all. Like I said, it really comes down to whether your personalities are a good match."

"Then what do you think of my personality and values?"

"Compared to hers?" Willow answered honestly. "I've never met her, so I don't know what she's like. I can't really say."

"Then compare us," Silas countered smoothly. "Between you and me, what do you think?"

What was the point of comparing them? It was like apples and oranges. Even if she felt they were a perfect match, she wasn't the woman he loved.

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"Let's not. It's better to judge these things with the actual person involved," Willow politely deflected. She really didn't want to insert herself into his romantic fantasies.

Seeing her reluctance, Silas didn't push the issue. Instead, he shifted gears. "Anything else you want to ask?"

"Huh?" Willow was caught off guard by the question.

Silas offered a gentle explanation. "I mean, is there anything else you want to know about me? You can ask me anything. Aren't you curious?"

Willow finally realized what he meant. She thought she had been hiding her curiosity well, but clearly, he had seen right through her.

"Don't you hate people prying into your personal life?" she asked.

"It depends on the person," Silas replied without missing a beat. "If it's you, I don't mind at all."

In fact, he didn't just 'not mind'—he was desperate to bare his entire soul to her.

But Willow suddenly lost her nerve. She didn't want to dig any deeper into his love life. Knowing too much would only make it harder.

She shook her head, signaling she was out of questions.

Just then, the car cruised past The Golden Fin. Seizing the opportunity, she offered, "Let me buy you dinner." She pointed out the window at the cozy bistro. "The food here is amazing. I eat here all the time. Want to try it?"

The last time he had waited for her here, she had offered to buy him a meal, but he had declined and driven her straight home. That move wouldn't work tonight; it was already getting late.

Internally, Silas was already saying yes, but he casually replied, "I'm up for it. But won't it be an issue if you don't head home for dinner?"

He asked purely out of a selfish desire to extract more details about her living situation.

Completely unaware of his ulterior motive, Willow answered easily. "It's not a problem. Jade works late, so we usually just sort out our own meals."

This caught Silas off guard. "You live with Jade?"

He had assumed she and Julian simply kept separate bedrooms or spent time apart occasionally. Did this mean they were fully separated?

"Yeah, I'm staying at her place right now," Willow admitted, seeing no reason to hide it. "When I first moved back from Seattle, the stress of my mom being sick was overwhelming, so Jade offered to let me crash with her."

Even though Jade was her best friend and Silas appreciated their bond, hearing this still twisted a knot in his chest. It hurt him deeply to know she had struggled so much while he hadn't been there to protect her.

"Do you want to move out?" he asked immediately. "If you do, I have several vacant properties. One is right next to the office and in a gorgeous neighborhood. You can move in whenever you're ready."

Hell, he would sign the deed over to her in a heartbeat.

Right now, all Silas wanted was to spoil her and make her life as effortless as possible.

But Willow shook her head. "I don't have any plans to move right now. Jade and I take good care of each other. If I do move, it'll be after my mom fully recovers, and I'll need to find a quiet place for her to recuperate."

"I have properties perfect for recovery, too," Silas countered without missing a beat. "I'll take you to look at them when the time comes."

Willow felt a twinge of anxiety—there was no way she could afford the rent on one of his luxury properties. But figuring he was just being polite and would likely forget about it later, she smiled. "Okay."

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As soon as she spoke, they pulled up to the curb, saving Willow from dwelling on the topic any further.

She led Silas into The Golden Fin, a cozy little bistro renowned for its rich seafood pasta. It was the sole reason most people flocked here.

Before they even stepped through the door, Willow gave him a disclaimer. "This place isn't going to be as upscale as the restaurants you're used to, but trust me, the food is incredible."

Silas honestly couldn't care less about the menu. As long as he was with her, she could serve him dry toast and he'd be thrilled. Plus, since she was so eagerly recommending it, he wouldn't dare turn his nose up at it.

He reached out to hold the heavy door open for her, naturally angling his body to shield her as she slipped inside. Once she was through, he flashed a warm, teasing smile. "Do I really strike you as some sort of food snob?"

His half-joking tone made Willow flush with embarrassment. "That's not what I meant. I just know you usually dine at high-end places, and I didn't want you to feel out of place."

"Not at all," Silas said, following her in. "If it's good enough for you, it's more than good enough for me."

As they spoke, they stepped into the dining area. The bistro was small and bathed in warm, golden lighting, the air thick with the mouth-watering aroma of garlic and fresh seafood. The wooden tables were spotless, the silverware neatly rolled—it wasn't a Michelin-star establishment, but it pulsed with a cozy, inviting warmth.

Willow ordered their signature seafood pasta for both of them. When the plates arrived, the creamy sauce steamed invitingly. The fish was perfectly deboned, garnished with fresh herbs—just looking at it promised a rich, savory bite.

"Try it. What do you think?" Willow watched him with shining, expectant eyes.

Silas gave a faint smile. Under her eager gaze, he meticulously inspected his plate, ensuring absolutely no stray bones were left in the fish. Instead of taking a bite, he slid his plate directly over to her. "You first."

He then swapped it with her untouched plate. This time, he didn't bother inspecting it, simply twirling a forkful and taking a bite. "Fresh but not overwhelming, rich but not heavy. It really is excellent."

Relieved that he genuinely liked it, Willow picked up her fork and took a bite. The flavor was just as brilliant as always, yet somehow... everything felt completely different tonight.

In the past, she had always come here alone, quietly picking through her meal in solitude. But tonight, he had thoroughly prepped her plate for her. The lingering emptiness in her chest seemed to have been completely scooped away, leaving only warmth.

They lingered over the meal, taking their time. Before they left, they ordered a takeout portion for Jade.

Earlier, Willow had texted Jade to see if she wanted food. Jade had enthusiastically agreed, saying she hadn't had it in ages and was already on the subway heading home.

But to their surprise, the timing was almost too perfect. Just as they walked out the door, they spotted Jade marching down the sidewalk toward them.

Jade stopped in her tracks, eyes widening. She knew Willow was grabbing dinner, but she had no idea it was with Silas Thorne. As she approached, she shot Willow a flurry of exaggerated, knowing winks.

Willow knew exactly what her best friend was implying, but with Silas standing right there, she couldn't exactly scold her. She pretended not to notice, silently vowing to deal with Jade later.

Silas had originally fully intended to drive Willow the rest of the way home, knowing she wasn't living with Julian anymore. But with Jade here, playing chauffeur felt a bit too intrusive. He decided to call it a night.

However, before he left, he made a point to address Jade directly. He sincerely thanked her for taking such good care of Willow recently, assured her that their business partnership would remain rock-solid, and told her to contact him immediately if they ever ran into any trouble.

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At first, Jade was absolutely thrilled to have secured such a powerhouse connection. But as she watched his taillights disappear, it hit her. Wait a minute. She was Willow's best friend. Taking care of Willow was her job. Why was Silas thanking her like he was Willow's husband? It sounded like he and Willow were already a package deal.

"Why do I get the distinct impression that you two are already married?" Jade blurted out, turning to Willow.

The sudden accusation made Willow jump. Flushed with embarrassment, she shoved Jade playfully. "Don't talk nonsense."

"Am I, though?" Jade started ticking points off her fingers. "Driving you home this late, personally thanking me for keeping an eye on you, promising me the moon if we ever need help. Add it all up, and if you tell me you guys aren't secretly dating, I'll call you a liar to your face."

"Alright, enough with the conspiracy theories," Willow said, pulling Jade down the sidewalk. "If we don't hurry up, your dinner is going to be ice-cold."

The threat of cold food got Jade moving, but her mind was still hyper-focused on the gossip. "Seriously, Willow. Swear to me you two aren't hooking up."

Willow shook her head. "How could we be? My marriage to Julian isn't even over yet. And even if that wasn't standing in the way, it's impossible. He already has someone he's in love with."

She paused before adding, "We actually talked about her on the ride over."

"What?" Jade looked at her like she had grown a second head. After years of judging men, she knew what she saw. Silas was ridiculously gentle and attentive with Willow. The idea that he didn't have feelings for her was laughable.

He was moving mountains for her, acting as her personal bodyguard and chauffeur. Why on earth would a billionaire go to those extreme lengths if he wasn't madly in love?

Yet Willow was insisting he was in love with someone else.

"Are you absolutely sure you didn't mishear him?" Jade pressed.

The night had settled in heavily, blanketing the city like ink. As they walked under a streetlamp, the golden glow illuminated half of Willow's face, leaving the rest swallowed by shadows.

"I'm sure," Willow said softly. "He told me himself. He even described her personality. I didn't mishear."

"But that makes zero sense," Jade argued, totally baffled. "Don't tell me you can't feel how good he is to you. It's way past 'friendly coworker' territory. A guy with his kind of money doesn't just randomly drive you home and happily eat at a neighborhood bistro unless he's trying to impress you."

Willow couldn't deny it. She had felt his underlying devotion, too. But the facts were the facts, and she had to rationalize it somehow.

"Maybe he's just a genuinely good guy. Or maybe he just really respects my professional capabilities," she reasoned.

Jade scoffed. "Out of those two, the second is barely plausible. But don't forget the rumors about him. The 'Cold King' doesn't just do charity."

Willow frowned. "You said it yourself—they're just rumors. You've met him a few times now. What do you think?"

In Jade's eyes, Silas was undeniably a polished gentleman, but that still didn't explain why he was playing Willow's personal escort.

She chewed on the thought for a long moment before a wild theory hit her. She gasped. "Wait... what if the woman he likes... is you?"

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The words struck Willow like a physical blow, rooting her to the spot. Her breath hitched in her throat, her eyelashes fluttering in sudden, panicked confusion.

Could that actually be possible?

But barely a second later, she ruthlessly crushed the thought.

Silas knew every messy detail about her marriage to Julian. Realistically, why would any man—let alone someone of his elite status and endless options—harbor romantic feelings for a woman tangled in such a toxic, public divorce?

Before Willow could even formulate an answer, Jade let out a long sigh, deflating her own theory. Now that she said it out loud, it sounded a bit too much like a movie plot.

It wasn't that Willow wasn't spectacular—she was. But Willow had never even mentioned Silas's name until a few months ago. And based on what he had allegedly said, his feelings for this mystery woman sounded deeply rooted over a long period of time.

Comparing that to the handful of months he and Willow had actually been working together, the timeline just didn't add up.

So, even Jade had to admit she was probably grasping at straws.

Fortunately, Jade had the kind of personality where she fired off wild thoughts and moved on from them just as fast.

She quickly brushed the speculation aside. They had infinitely more pressing matters to discuss anyway.

Once they were inside the apartment, Jade dug into her pasta while bringing up the real issue. "Your divorce hearing with Julian is this Friday. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely," Willow nodded fiercely. She was beyond ready; she had been counting down the days with desperate anticipation.

"Good," Jade said, shifting into lawyer mode. "I'm taking Friday off. I'm going with you."

That made Willow a little anxious. "You just started at Sterling & Faircrest. Is your boss really going to approve a random day off?"

A fleeting shadow crossed Jade's face. Ever since her first day, she hadn't caught a single glimpse of Hugo.

But she quickly plastered on a bright smile, blinking away the disappointment. She slurped up a noodle and waved her fork dismissively. "Don't sweat it. Mr. Harrington is super chill. He won't care about a minor scheduling thing."

"That's small potatoes," Jade reminded her firmly. "What matters is the hearing. You need to brace yourself. We've prepped like crazy, but Julian is a vicious shark. Knowing him, he's going to twist the facts, weaponize evidence, and do everything he can to drag this out."

"Willow, you need to mentally steel yourself. Fighting him on this divorce is going to be brutal. You need to prepare for a long, drawn-out war."

Even without Jade's warning, Willow knew exactly what to expect. Julian's ego wouldn't let him walk away quietly. But she wasn't scared. As long as she took this crucial first step, she could endure whatever hell he unleashed.

"Don't worry. After dealing with him for so long, I know exactly what kind of monster he is. I have zero expectations of him showing any decency. Just getting him into that courtroom is a massive victory for me."

"That's my girl. Keep that mindset. And don't worry, I'll be glued to your side the whole time."

Friday arrived in a flash, and Jade accompanied Willow to the courthouse.

Just as they had predicted, Julian showed up flanked by the most ruthless, high-profile divorce attorney in New York. He clearly had zero intentions of making this easy.

The entire hearing played out exactly as Jade had warned. Julian flatly refused to consent to the divorce, spinning wild narratives to fit his agenda.

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When Willow argued that the marriage was irreparably broken, Julian fired back with examples claiming they could still reconcile. He even dug up ancient history, pointing out that Willow had pursued him first years ago.

When Willow brought up his cohabitation with another woman, Julian smoothly countered that Vivienne was his sister, even producing official family registry documents as "proof."

When Willow stated they had been separated for ages, he manufactured excuses, claiming the separation was forced upon him and that he had never legally consented to it.

Throughout the entire hearing, he remained frustratingly calm and detached, surgically dismantling every point they raised. He sat there looking like a king who already knew he had won the war.

The outcome was entirely predictable. Although the judge stated the ruling would be "announced at a later date," the writing was already on the wall.

Their first attempt at pushing the divorce through had failed. But since they had expected this roadblock from the start, it wasn't too crushing.

Willow actually felt perfectly fine. It was Jade who was vibrating with rage. The moment they stepped out of the courthouse, Jade cornered Julian on the sidewalk and absolutely tore into him and his attorney without an ounce of hesitation.

"Do you have no shame, Julian? Have you conveniently forgotten everything you've done? How the hell did you sit in there and lie through your teeth? No wonder Willow is fighting tooth and nail to escape you! You and that pathetic trash Vivienne truly deserve each other!"

She then whipped around to glare at his lawyer. "And you! Do you have a single shred of professional ethics left? Selling your soul just for a paycheck—you're a disgrace to the entire legal field! Karma is going to catch up to you!"

The high-priced attorney wasn't used to being berated on the street. Having taken Julian's massive retainer, his immediate instinct was to bite back.

But Julian raised a hand, stopping him cold. He waved the lawyer off, signaling him to wait by the car.

Julian then turned his chilling gaze toward Willow and Jade. When he finally spoke, his voice was deathly quiet, laced with a venomous, suffocating authority. "Give it up. Without my explicit consent, this marriage will never end."

"Is that so?" Willow met his predatory gaze dead-on, not flinching for a second. "Then we'll just have to see about that."

Without wasting another breath, she grabbed Jade's arm and walked away.

During the ride away, Jade was still seeing red, spending the entire trip aggressively cursing Julian's entire existence. Willow let her vent. She knew Jade's fury came from a place of fierce loyalty. Willow herself was numb to Julian's toxicity, but Jade was still genuinely horrified by it.

When Jade finally ran out of steam, Willow spoke calmly. "Honestly, just getting to this stage today is a massive win for me. We knew he was going to pull this exact stunt."

"True," Jade sighed, finally calming down. "Divorce proceedings are always a nightmare. Unless the other party cooperates, stressing over it won't speed up the clock."

"As long as there's a light at the end of the tunnel, I'm not scared," Willow said firmly. "I don't care how long it takes. One day, I will be legally free of him."

She was incredibly goal-oriented. As long as she knew the ultimate outcome would be her freedom, she could swallow whatever misery she had to face in the interim.

Feeling a genuine weight lift from her shoulders, she offered a bright smile. "To celebrate officially kicking off this war, let me treat you to dinner. There's this spot called Crimson Hearth that I've been dying to try. What do you say?"

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"I am absolutely in," Jade agreed. Since she had the whole day off, her schedule was wide open. "We haven't had a proper feast in forever. And afterward, we can swing by the hospital to see your mom. I've been so swamped lately I haven't been able to visit."

"Sounds like a plan. Mom's been completely stable lately. She's still under observation, but don't stress about her—just focus on your new job," Willow reassured her.

Pulling up the address for Crimson Hearth on her phone, they hailed a cab and sped off toward the restaurant.

Julian stood in the shadows near the courthouse, watching the cab until it completely vanished from sight. Only then did he drop his cigarette, grinding it out ruthlessly beneath his heel before walking away.

He hadn't left after their confrontation. Instead, he had lingered in a blind spot, obsessively watching them. Seeing Willow's face completely devoid of anger or sorrow—seeing her totally unaffected by his threats—sent a sickening jolt straight to the pit of his stomach.

Did she truly not care about him anymore? Not even a fraction?

Whether he harassed her, offered hollow olive branches, or declared all-out war in court, absolutely nothing he did seemed to trigger any emotional response from her anymore.

A bitter scoff escaped Julian's lips. He twisted his shoe over the crushed cigarette, the harsh grinding noise echoing his internal rage. The last embers died instantly, much like the final traces of warmth in his eyes, leaving behind nothing but a frigid, predatory resolve.

No matter what it took, he was never, ever letting her go.

He didn't stick around. He got straight into his car and drove back toward the Sinclair Group tower. Approaching the Gilded Bean down the block, his foul mood prompted him to roll the window down for some air. As he glanced over, his eyes locked onto two figures

huddled in the corner of the cafe. One was Clarence Vance, the man from Merit Biotech. The other was the mystery woman from the photos.

She was in her usual disguise—sunglasses and a low-brimmed hat—making it impossible to see her face. But a jarring sense of familiarity struck Julian. The posture, the aura... it felt disturbingly like Vivienne.

His suspicion spiked. He aggressively yanked the steering wheel, pulling the car up to the curb right in front of the cafe. But by the time he killed the engine and looked back, the two figures had completely vanished.

Julian grimaced, assuming he was just seeing things. His mind was so twisted up by the courtroom disaster with Willow that he was jumping at shadows. Besides, Vivienne had already sworn to him that she had zero backdoor dealings with Clarence Vance.

After scanning the area for another minute and finding nothing, he drove off.

What he didn't realize was that seconds after his taillights disappeared, two figures stepped out from the blind spot of the alleyway. It was indeed Vivienne and Clarence.

Clarence had forced this meeting. Vivienne had tried dodging him, but he had literally ambushed her outside the Sinclair Group lobby. To avoid a public scene, she had reluctantly agreed to meet at the cafe.

It was the exact same ultimatum: Clarence demanded she secure him a high-paying job and take full responsibility for ruining his career.

Initially, he had been cautious, terrified that backing her into a corner would cause her to completely cut ties and leave him with nothing. But after observing her obvious panic around Julian, Clarence had lost his fear.

He had easily deduced her fatal weakness—her absolute desperation to maintain her perfect image in Julian's eyes. Since she was petrified of Julian discovering her plagiarism scheme, why shouldn't he exploit that?

Acting on that leverage, Clarence threw his cards on the table. "Seems like you're pretty terrified of Julian finding out about our little arrangement, aren't you? If you know what's good for you, you'll do exactly as I say. Because if I get desperate enough, all it takes is one quick phone call to him to blow up your entire life."

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Clarence dropped all pretense of respect. Their interests were at odds, and the masks were officially off.

After their previous clashes, he had figured out exactly what kind of monster Vivienne was. She wasn't intimidated by standard threats, and she clearly had zero moral compass. The only way to force her hand was to hold her most prized possession hostage.

But he had grossly underestimated her. He had no idea just how vile her methods could truly be.

Instead of panicking at his threat, Vivienne simply scoffed. Her eyes filled with naked mockery as she delivered a slow, venomous sneer. "Trying to play me? You're painfully naive."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Clarence scowled.

Her smile widened, cold and predatory. "Before you go around threatening people, shouldn't you look in the mirror? Do you really think you have nothing left to lose?"

Reaching into her designer bag, she pulled out a thick stack of photographs and slammed them onto the table between them. "Take a look."

Frowning, Clarence picked them up. As he flipped through the images, the color rapidly drained from his face.

Every single photo featured two people: his young daughter and his mother. They were clearly taken by a private investigator. Dozens of high-resolution shots documented his mother dropping his daughter off at school, picking her up, and walking through their neighborhood.

It wasn't just a one-off stakeout, either. The outfits changed in the photos, proving they had been tracked intimately for at least three consecutive days.

"What the hell are you trying to pull?" A suffocating wave of pure terror crashed over him. Clarence was a corrupt scumbag with zero professional ethics, but his mother and daughter were his entire world. Everything he did, he did to build a nest egg for them.

Seeing his panic, Vivienne looked supremely satisfied. "Weren't you just trying to blackmail me a second ago? What happened to all that bravado? I warned you not to push me, Clarence. Push me, and I can't guarantee what accidents might happen."

With his family's safety on the line, Clarence didn't dare call her bluff. "Come after me all you want, but don't you dare touch them!"

The power dynamic shifted instantly. Vivienne smirked in triumph. "Why would I hurt them? They aren't my targets. I'm obviously coming after you, because this entire trap was designed exclusively for you."

Outplayed and utterly defeated, Clarence closed his eyes in despair. "Fine. What do I have to do to make sure you leave them alone?"

"It's brilliantly simple. Pack your bags and get out of New York. Disappear completely. Delete every shred of evidence you have against me, and take this secret to your grave."

Backed into a corner with no way out, Clarence spat, "Aren't you terrified of karma? You played both sides. You used me to frame Willow, and now you're stabbing me in the back. Even if I keep my mouth shut, the truth always finds the light. What are you going to do when Julian inevitably finds out?"

Vivienne brushed off the warning, totally convinced she was untouchable. "Instead of worrying about hypothetical karma, you should worry about your own miserable life. Once you're run out of New York, where are you going to scavenge your next meal?"

"And drop the moral superiority act. The only reason you agreed to help me was because you saw a payday. I'm a businesswoman, Clarence; I only care about results. You spectacularly failed to deliver what you promised, so what makes you think you deserve a dime?"

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After Clarence scurried off, Vivienne didn't head straight back to the office. Instead, she ducked into a nearby luxury boutique, bought a brand new outfit, and changed into it before finally returning to the Sinclair Group tower.

Her very first stop was Julian's office. Under the guise of reporting on project updates, she paraded right in, eager to gauge if his sudden appearance at the cafe meant he suspected her.

She was dead certain he had spotted something while she was sitting in the corner, otherwise he wouldn't have aggressively pulled up like that.

When she walked in, Julian's immediate instinct was to scan her outfit. Seeing that she was wearing something entirely different from the woman at the Gilded Bean, the tight knot of suspicion in his brow finally relaxed.

Still, his paranoia pushed him to ask, "Where were you just now? I didn't see you around."

Knowing he was testing the waters, Vivienne maintained total composure. She offered a bright, easy smile. "I haven't gone anywhere. I've been in meetings all morning. I was probably locked in the conference room right when you got back."

Without missing a beat, she expertly redirected the interrogation. "What about you? You're back early. How did the divorce hearing go?"

Julian's head snapped up instantly. "Hearing?"

With that single word, Vivienne realized she had catastrophically slipped up. He had never officially told her today was the court date—she had pried that information out of his inner circle, a fact she desperately needed to keep hidden.

"Oh, don't misunderstand!" she scrambled to cover her tracks. "I heard the maids gossiping about it while they were cleaning. They were asking if I needed to prep anything for you."

"Right." Julian didn't press the issue. He wasn't entirely convinced, but he had ordered the staff to pull his old files before the hearing, so her excuse was plausible.

But as for her question about the outcome, he had absolutely no intention of discussing it with her. The judge stonewalling the divorce was exactly the victory he and his attorney had engineered.

For her, however, it meant a devastating delay in her master plan.

Refusing to drag his messy personal life out in the office, Julian gave a dismissive brush-off. "There's no result yet. We're waiting on the judge's formal ruling."

He immediately pivoted to business. "What's the status on the disaster with Leo and his team?"

Just the mention of Leo Yardley's name made Vivienne's head throb. Leo had completely dug his heels in. Aside from the bare minimum of corporate emails, he refused to communicate with her. The team's usual culture of intense overtime had vanished, leaving critical project milestones dangerously close to failing, forcing her to scramble and cover the workload herself.

"It's handled," she lied straight to Julian's face without blinking. "They admitted the data error was due to their own negligence and promised they'll be tracking the lab results much closer from now on. There won't be any more slip-ups."

She knew better than to paint too perfect a picture; flawless lies were always the easiest to spot. Having played the corporate survival game for years, she knew exactly how to spin it.

So, she feigned a moment of humble self-reflection. "I've also thought a lot about what you said last time. You were right—it is my responsibility. As their Project Lead, I failed to properly supervise the final data check. But I promise you, Julian, I'll be strictly monitoring them moving forward."

Since she was saying all the right things, Julian had no reason to press further. Lectures were just empty words anyway; he would just have to keep a close eye on her actual results.