

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

Chapter 31

Martha Mercer: "Then how did Julian meet such powerful people?"

Julian certainly didn't know them, and even if he did, he wouldn't make the introduction. For a brief moment, Willow Horgan considered just telling her the truth, but seeing the desperate hope in her mother's eyes and her hollowed cheeks, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I don't know, probably through work," Willow said, feeding her some water. "Your only job right now is to focus on getting better."

Martha nodded. Ever since getting sick, she had become incredibly compliant with everything Willow said.

They chatted for a while longer before Martha urged her to go home. She insisted that since it was finally the weekend, Willow needed to rest, adding that she didn't need to keep running to the hospital if there wasn't an emergency. She could handle things on her own.

Leaving the hospital, Willow headed straight home. Upon opening the door, she was surprised to find that aside from Cooper, Jade Yates was also there.

Willow was thrilled. "Didn't you say you were swamped with work and couldn't make it back this week?"

"That was the plan," Jade said. She had just arrived and was busy unpacking her luggage. "But I have to travel out of state for a case next month and probably won't be back at all. I was worried about you, so I made sure to stop by this weekend."

"What's there to worry about? I'm twenty-four, not a child," Willow laughed.

"Age doesn't equal experience. Besides, twenty-four isn't exactly over the hill. In my eyes, you'll always be my little girl." As she spoke, she pulled a beautifully wrapped box from her suitcase and handed it over.

"What is this?" Willow took the elegant box with careful hands.

"Open it. It's a gift for you."

"A gift?" Willow was taken aback.

"Yeah, just see if you like it first."

Willow opened it to find a high-end designer handbag. She had seen the brand's commercials—understated, luxurious, and dripping with class—but she had never actually owned anything like it.

"Isn't this a bit too much?"

"How is it too much? When I saw it at the airport, my first thought was that it had your name written all over it. Try it on."

For a moment, Willow felt entirely out of her depth. This whole scenario—someone bringing her a thoughtful gift from a business trip—was something she had only seen in movies. After marrying Julian Sinclair, she had held out a sliver of hope that he might do the same. But over three years of marriage, she hadn't received a single gift. Not even a text message on her birthday. Eventually, she had just stopped expecting anything.

She never imagined that the warmth she had craved from Julian would end up coming from Jade.

Understanding her friend's intentions, Willow didn't push back. She slipped the bag over her shoulder. "It's beautiful. I love it."

Jade stepped back to admire it. "Gorgeous. It suits you perfectly." She studied Willow for a moment before clicking her tongue in approval. "I have to say, a beauty is a beauty. Sure, you've gained a few pounds compared to before, but that elegance and charm? Still completely there. Especially your eyes—that amber color. Up close, they're as deep as a lake. Absolutely mesmerizing."

Back when Willow was thinner, she had practically been the undisputed beauty queen of her college. But as she gained weight and weathered endless malicious comments, her self-esteem had steadily eroded.

Because of that, she assumed Jade was just trying to make her feel better.

"Then I'd better put this away somewhere safe."

"Why would you put it away? You have to use it." Jade finished organizing her things and dropped onto the sofa next to her. "By the way, did you hand over the divorce papers to Julian?"

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Willow nodded. "I gave them to him."

"Did he say anything?"

Willow replayed the scene in her mind. "There was a lot going on at the time, so I just dropped the papers and left. But knowing him, he's definitely going to have his lawyers comb through every word first."

Having been in the industry for years, Jade knew exactly how these elite circles operated. Running any agreement past a legal team was standard procedure for them, as they were ruthlessly obsessed with maximizing their own interests.

"Let him. I have a hundred ways to deal with scumbags like him. While I'm gone, call me immediately if anything comes up."

"I will," Willow said thoughtfully. "It probably won't take long. He wants this divorce desperately. After all, the only way he and Vivienne Sinclair can truly be together is if we're done."

Jade scoffed angrily. "When you're dealing with a degenerate like that, you don't drag things out. The best thing you can do is cut him off and get as far away as possible."

"Yeah."

The conversation naturally dampened their spirits, prompting Jade to suggest a change of pace. "I'm taking you somewhere fantastic tomorrow. You need to unwind."

"Where to?"

"You'll see when we get there."

The next day.

The moment Willow got out of bed, Jade launched into full makeover mode. After hours of doing her makeup and picking out outfits, Willow stared at her reflection in the mirror, completely stunned.

It was still her, of course, but her entire aura had radically transformed.

She naturally had a radiant complexion, and Jade had deliberately chosen a bright, sky-blue dress to accentuate it. The vibrant color made her skin look incredibly luminous and flawless. Paired with the meticulously styled hair and makeup, the heaviness she usually carried seemed to vanish. Instead, she exuded the captivating allure of a classic, voluptuous beauty.

"Willow, you look absolutely stunning," Jade breathed out, unable to hide her awe.

Willow stayed silent.

"What's wrong? Don't you like it?" Jade asked.

"I love it," Willow murmured, a little dazed by the woman looking back at her. "I'm just not used to it."

Over the past few years, she had poured every ounce of her energy and time into her work, neglecting her own needs entirely. All she had ever wanted was for Julian to finally notice her. Let alone dressing up, she barely even had time for a basic skincare routine. She frequently worked until two or three in the morning, crashed into bed, and repeated the grueling cycle the next day.

Seeing her like this made Jade's heart ache. "There's nothing to be unused to. You'll get used to it soon enough."

"I think I should change back."

"Don't you dare. We're heading out soon, and you are wearing exactly this."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see when we get there," Jade repeated her mantra. "And keep the dress on. Once we arrive, you might even complain that I didn't dress you up enough."

Willow trusted Jade implicitly. Since her friend insisted, she let it go.

After lunch, the two headed out. When they finally arrived, Willow was nearly overwhelmed by the sheer opulence. The place dripped with gold and extravagance, making her feel as if she had stepped into another world. The Gilded Lily.

It was her first time at such an exclusive, high-end private club.

"Maybe we should just leave?"

"Leave? Absolutely not. I brought you here to relax and have a good time."

Jade pulled her inside. They found a table with a great view of the room and ordered two glasses of wine.

Jade handed a glass to her. "Try it."

It was a light, fruity wine. Willow took a sip and nodded. "It's good."

Jade ordered a spread of snacks, and Willow sampled them all, finding every single bite delicious.

There was live entertainment on stage. As they ate and watched the performance, the initial tension in Willow's shoulders began to melt away.

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Jade noticed her relaxing. "So, do you like it?"

"It's nice. Really nice."

"Then I'll bring you here more often. You've just been wound too tight, spending your whole life living for other people."

Willow thought about it and realized Jade was entirely right.

They chatted a bit more before Jade's phone suddenly rang. That was the reality of her profession—clients could call at any given moment. Seeing that Willow was finally comfortable, she excused herself to take the call outside.

Once Jade left, Willow shifted to a different seat—one that was out of the way but offered a much better view of the stage.

The performer had changed at some point. From a distance, Willow couldn't quite make out her facial features, but it was obvious she was a gorgeous woman with incredible poise and a stunning figure.

From the moment she stepped onto the stage, the crowd hadn't stopped taking photos and showering her with praise. Everyone seemed mesmerized by her beauty and elegant presence.

Under the spotlight, the woman began to play the piano. The white dress, the striking beauty, and the graceful melody instantly ignited the atmosphere in the room. Just as the song ended, she took the microphone and announced that she had played the piece for a very specific person. It was his birthday, and she wanted to wish him a happy birthday.

As soon as the words left her mouth, the crowd erupted into cheers. Everyone was dying to know who the lucky guy was—who on earth could capture the heart of such a stunning woman?

But Willow couldn't bring herself to smile. She recognized that voice instantly. It was Vivienne. And she knew exactly who the birthday boy was.

Sure enough, a second later, Julian stepped onto the stage. He wore a sharply tailored black suit that accentuated his tall, imposing frame. With his striking features and an aura of icy authority, he stood next to Vivienne. Dressed in black and white, they looked like the picture-perfect couple straight out of a Hollywood movie.

The moment Julian appeared, the crowd's murmurs turned into deafening cheers. Clearly captivated by how flawless they looked together, people started chanting for them to kiss.

They were more than happy to oblige. Julian pulled Vivienne into his arms and pressed his lips against hers. A deep flush quickly spread across Vivienne's cheeks, and she leaned shyly against his chest.

Standing in the shadows, Willow watched the entire scene unfold. Even though she already knew the truth about their relationship, seeing it with her own eyes was a completely different kind of agony. It felt like an invisible blade had been driven straight into her chest, leaving behind a suffocating wave of despair.

She didn't want to compare herself to Vivienne, but she couldn't stop the memories from surfacing. When they first got married, she had tried so hard to close the distance between them. She remembered reaching out to hold his hand in private, only for him to swat her away without a shred of hesitation. She had convinced herself that he just hated public displays of affection. She never imagined he would willingly put on a show like this for Vivienne.

Her brief moment of happiness shattered instantly. Unwilling to stay a second longer, Willow grabbed her things and headed out to find Jade. But the moment she stood up, she ran straight into three familiar figures—Seth Sterling, Lucas Lane, and Hugo Harrington.

They were clearly there to celebrate Julian's birthday. It wasn't unusual; this was exactly the kind of place wealthy heirs and socialites rented out for private parties. Seeing them here made perfect sense.

Spotting Willow, their faces lit up with malicious amusement, and they quickly closed in on her.

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"What are you doing here?" Seth was the first to approach, deliberately blocking her path.

Willow didn't have the energy to deal with him. She tried to sidestep him and leave, but her phone alarm chose that exact moment to go off. A voice prompt blared from the speaker: "It's Julian's birthday today. Wish him a happy birthday."

Willow panicked, scrambling to silence the alarm. It was a reminder she had set years ago. Back then, her workload had been so overwhelming that she was terrified of forgetting his birthday. With everything that had happened since she got back to New York, the date had completely slipped her mind, and she had forgotten to delete the alarm. The timing couldn't have been worse.

Unfortunately, they all heard it loud and clear.

Seth stared at her with a mockingly amused expression, acting as if he had her all figured out. He sneered, "So you did come for Julian's birthday. Well, your timing is terrible. As you can see, he's already got someone celebrating with him. Vivienne is prettier than you, has more class than you, and plays the piano. What exactly do you bring to the table?"

His grin widened into something cruel. "Another pathetic handmade piece of trash? Or maybe one of those painfully cringeworthy love letters? Let me spell it out for you—Julian was absolutely sick of receiving that garbage every year. He always handed it straight to us to throw away."

Willow's eyes snapped wide open. She stared at him, completely paralyzed by shock.

During the years she had loved Julian the most, preparing his birthday gift was the most important event of her year. Terrified that a store-bought item wouldn't convey her feelings, she poured her heart into making something by hand every single time.

She had always known there was a chance he wouldn't like them. But she never imagined he would treat her heart like actual trash, passing her deeply personal gifts around for his friends to mock.

The thought of her most vulnerable, desperate feelings being ridiculed by these men made her blood boil. Her voice dropped to a freezing register. "Do you have any concept of respect? Or privacy?"

"Nope, sure don't," Seth mocked effortlessly. "Why don't you teach us? With your incredible writing skills, I bet you'd be a fantastic teacher."

To prove his point, he casually recited two lines. At first, Willow didn't register what he was saying. But as he kept staring at her with that taunting smirk, it hit her like a physical blow—he was quoting one of the private letters she had written to Julian.

Trembling with pure fury, Willow raised her hand to slap him, but he easily caught her wrist mid-air.

Just as Seth was about to retaliate, Hugo suddenly stepped in. "Seth, that's enough."

Reluctantly, Seth let go of her arm. But as he did, he noticed something else. The woman standing in front of him looked remarkably different today. She was wearing makeup. And not just that—she actually looked stunning. The heaviness that usually defined her was completely gone, replaced by a radiant, sophisticated glow. Especially those eyes.

"You're wearing makeup?" he leaned in closer, studying her face. "You actually went out of your way to dress up and track him down here, all for his birthday?"

Willow shoved him hard. "Is it any of your business?"

Seth just laughed. "No need to be embarrassed. We all know how obsessed you are with Julian. I'll admit, your eyes are actually quite beautiful. Still doesn't hold a candle to Vivienne, though."

At his words, both Lucas and Hugo subconsciously looked at her eyes.

Lucas froze. It was only then that he realized Willow's eyes were a striking shade of amber. He had always been hyper-aware of amber eyes, purely because he remembered his long-lost sister having the exact same color.

Hugo, on the other hand, just gave her a brief look before quietly shifting his gaze away.

A moment later, Julian and Vivienne walked over, their hands intertwined. Vivienne's cheeks were still flushed, clearly still riding the high of the public kiss.

When she saw Willow, a flicker of genuine surprise crossed her face at how stunning she looked. But the shock vanished in an instant, quickly replaced by the arrogant smirk of a victorious queen.

Julian remained entirely indifferent. He looked at Willow as if her pathetic presence was exactly what he expected, his eyes flashing with nothing but disdain and irritation.

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"So, Willow, what exactly did you bring for Julian this year?" Seth stirred the pot. "Since we're all here, why don't you just hand it over now? Saves you the trouble of giving it to him privately, and saves him the hassle of passing it around for us to laugh at."

Vivienne's lips immediately curled into a mocking smirk.

Willow fired back, her voice tight with anger. "I already told you, my being here has absolutely nothing to do with him. If I had known any of you were going to be here, I would have stayed as far away as possible."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Seth sneered, not buying a word of it.

"Seth," Julian warned, sounding like his patience had finally run out. He clearly had zero interest in entertaining this circus any longer. "Let's go. The party is starting."

With that, he wrapped an arm around Vivienne and walked away. The rest of the entourage quickly followed suit—except for Lucas.

He stood a few feet away, his gaze locked onto Willow.

Willow despised every single person in that group, and Lucas was no exception. He had never missed an opportunity to make her life hell in the past. She shot him a heated glare. "What the hell are you looking at?"

Lucas was staring at her eyes. They really were amber. But then logic kicked in. What were the chances?

There were thousands of people with amber eyes in the world. Was he going to think every single one of them was his missing sister? Besides, Julian had mentioned before that Willow's parents were alive and that she had grown up in New York.

Lucas realized he was letting his desperation get the better of him.

Instead of chasing ghosts, he figured he should just focus on treating Vivienne better. After all, he had watched her grow up. She had been a sweet, obedient kid who trailed after him calling him "brother" since they were little. In a way, she was already the sister he had lost.

Dismissing the thought, Lucas gave Willow one last glance, ignored her question completely, and turned to leave.

Willow watched him walk away, feeling utterly bewildered. But then again, anyone who chose to associate with Julian was bound to be a terrible person.

Except maybe Hugo. He hadn't actively bullied her, but the fact that he constantly hung around Julian didn't win him any points in her book. They actually went way back—they had been college classmates. Hugo had always been glued to Julian's side on campus, and apparently, nothing had changed after graduation.

Even though the toxic group was gone, Willow's mood was completely ruined. She decided to go find Jade. The moment she stepped outside, she spotted Jade on the phone, looking incredibly tense.

Willow waited quietly until the call ended before approaching. "What's wrong?"

"There's an issue with the case. Opposing counsel just submitted new evidence."

"Is it bad?"

"Yeah." Jade didn't try to sugarcoat it. The case she was working on was massive, involving high-stakes corporate and government interests. One wrong move, and the fallout would be far worse than just losing a lawsuit.

"Willow, I'm so sorry. I have to head back and pack for my flight right now."

"Right now?"

"Yeah," Jade sighed, looking incredibly guilty. "I wanted to take you out and help you unwind, and now this happens. By the way, were you having a good time in there?"

Thinking about her run-in with Julian's crew made Willow sick to her stomach, but she knew Jade was already overwhelmed. She wasn't about to add fuel to the fire, especially knowing that Jade, being the vanguard of justice she was, would absolutely march back in there to start a war if she knew the truth.

"It was nice. Really nice," Willow lied smoothly. "Your work is the priority. I totally get it. Emergencies happen."

"Thank you for being so understanding," Jade said, genuinely touched. "How about this—I'll head back, and you stay here and enjoy the rest of the night. Everything is already paid for."

"No, I'll go back with you."

"Alright. We'll come back another time. Honestly, I wouldn't feel great leaving you here all by yourself anyway."

When Lucas finally returned to the private room, the rest of the group was already settled. Seeing him walk in late, Seth couldn't resist throwing a jab. "What took you so long? Don't tell me you're actually interested in Willow. I mean, I'll admit, she did look surprisingly decent today."

The moment the words left his mouth, all eyes snapped toward Lucas.

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Vivienne reacted instantly. Her fingers paused mid-pour as genuine irritation and jealousy flashed across her face. She had noticed Willow earlier too. Sure, the woman looked a bit more polished than usual, but comparing Willow to her was a joke.

Yet, she couldn't tolerate anyone else stealing the spotlight that rightfully belonged to her. First, it was Hugo, and now Lucas. They were supposed to revolve entirely around her.

Hugo's expression remained completely neutral, giving nothing away.

Julian, on the other hand, watched Lucas with a dark, calculating smirk.

Lucas shifted uncomfortably under their stares. Annoyed by how ridiculous Seth's accusation was, he snapped, "What the hell are you talking about? You're losing your damn mind."

Seth threw his hands up in mock surrender, signaling he meant no harm. To him, Willow was nothing more than a punching bag for their amusement. He loved pushing boundaries just for the thrill of it, knowing perfectly well there would never be any consequences.

Ignoring him, Lucas walked past and dropped into the seat next to Julian, grabbing a glass. "Don't listen to him. You know how he is. Brain-dead and zero filter."

Julian chuckled, completely unfazed. He handed a plate of sliced fruit to Vivienne before casually replying, "She's not exactly capable of affecting me anyway."

"Yeah," Lucas muttered, taking a heavy swig of his drink, his mood clearly souring. "You know about my sister, right?"

"I do. What about it?" Not only did Julian know, but he had also been actively utilizing his resources to help Lucas search for her all these years.

Lucas rubbed the back of his neck in frustration. "I don't know, man. Seeing Willow just now... for a split second, it reminded me of her."

Julian didn't respond immediately. He clinked his glass silently against Lucas's, letting the moment stretch before finally speaking. "You're under too much stress lately. It's impossible for it to be her."

Before marrying Willow, Julian had ordered a thorough background check. The very reason he had chosen her was because of her painfully ordinary, powerless background. Couple that with her desperate infatuation with him, and she was the perfect, easily manipulated pawn.

"Yeah," Lucas grunted, downing the rest of his drink in one go.

"Relax," Julian assured him. "I still have people looking into it. The moment there's an update, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks."

That night, Lucas got completely wasted—a rare occurrence for him.

Ever since Vanessa Lane brought him into the Lane family, he had lived by her strict rules: stay humble, stay disciplined, and never lose control. This was one of the few times he had let himself slip.

When he stumbled through the front door, Vanessa took one look at his disheveled state and immediately started lecturing him. "Look at the state of you! What if your father sees you like this? Go sober up before he gets home."

Lucas didn't budge. "It was Julian's birthday today. I had a few extra drinks."

"Oh, it was Julian's birthday?" Vanessa's demeanor flipped in a split second. "Well, then it makes sense to drink a little more. How was it? Did you have a good time? What did you get him? Did he like it?"

Lucas grimaced. For as long as he could remember, Vanessa only ever hammered two concepts into his head: "Keep your father happy," and "Stay as close to the Sinclairs as humanly possible."

He knew exactly why she was so paranoid. She had married into the Lane family as a widow with a child, and in all these years, she hadn't been able to give her new husband a child of his own. The lack of security was eating her alive, so she constantly clung to any outside power she could find.

But over time, the suffocating pressure was starting to break him. He had even abandoned his own last name for this family. What more did she want? As for the Sinclairs, he genuinely considered Julian a solid friend, and Vivienne was like a sweet little sister. That was the only reason he looked out for them.

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"It was fine."

"What do you mean, fine?" Vanessa's voice went up an octave. "Did you half-ass the gift? I've told you a million times, our connection to the Sinclair family is our lifeline! If you don't secure it—"

"I get it." Lucas was entirely out of patience for this lecture.

But Vanessa refused to drop it. "Was Vivienne there? Did you talk to her? She's still single, you know. You still have a chance."

Lucas had hit his absolute limit. He pinched the bridge of his nose in exhaustion. "Mom, can you please stop trying to play matchmaker? How many times do I have to tell you? She is with Julian, and they are incredibly happy together. I literally look at her like a sister. Give it a rest!"

Vanessa muttered under her breath, "But Julian is married."

"Even if he's married, he's with Vivienne. He only got married in the first place for her sake. Can you just stay out of this? You don't understand how their world works. Let me say this one last time: I only see her as a sister."

"Fine, fine," Vanessa conceded, finally backing off. "A sister is better than nothing."

"Go take a shower, and I'll have some hangover soup ready for you when you get out," she urged.

Lucas started to walk away, but stopped halfway down the hall. He turned back to look at her. "Mom, if I remember correctly, Daisy had amber eyes, right?"

Daisy was his sister's childhood nickname. He had been so young when she disappeared that he only remembered the nickname.

Vanessa froze. A flash of profound discomfort crossed her face. "Why are you suddenly bringing this up?"

"Just answer the question."

"I don't remember. It's been over twenty years, who remembers that kind of detail?" she snapped, clearly agitated. "Why are you obsessed with this all of a sudden?"

"No reason. Just asking." Lucas stared at her, suddenly realizing that Vanessa also had amber eyes.

He pushed a little further. "When Daisy went missing, did she have anything on her that could be used to identify her?"

Vanessa's patience completely snapped. "It was decades ago! I forgot! And let's be honest, we don't even know if she's still alive. What is the point of torturing yourself over this?"

Seeing her completely lose her composure, Lucas dropped the subject. He turned and walked into the bathroom in heavy silence.

—

Meanwhile, back at the apartment, Willow and Jade had immediately started packing for Jade's sudden business trip.

Thankfully, Jade practically lived out of a suitcase, so the packing was done in record time.

But right before walking out the door, Jade still couldn't shake her concern. "I'm going to be gone for a whole month. If anything happens, you call me immediately. Especially if it has anything to do with the divorce."

"I know, I know. You've told me five times already," Willow smiled.

Realizing she was being a bit overbearing, Jade let it go. She pulled a card from her wallet and handed it to Willow. "I signed you up for a gym membership. Whenever you have free time, go check it out. It's the best gym in New York, and it's not too far from here."

"Since you're quitting anyway, you don't need to kill yourself over work anymore. You'll have plenty of time to exercise. I know it won't take long for you to get back in shape."

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Even though she was already doing fine now, Jade still desperately wanted Willow to reclaim the radiant confidence she once had.

A temporary setback didn't define her. She had a long life ahead of her. Rebuilding herself and finding her footing again was the most important thing she needed to focus on right now.

Willow gladly accepted the card, silently making a mental note to pay Jade back for the membership. She was already living in Jade's apartment rent-free, and while her friend wouldn't care about the money, Willow refused to keep taking advantage of her generosity.

But if she was going to pay her back, she needed to budget carefully.

The \$300,000 nest egg was absolutely off-limits—that was her mother's medical fund.

The millions of dollars that Mr. Vance had transferred to her were also out of the question. Even though Silas Thorne had been incredibly generous and explicitly told her she didn't need to repay it, Willow's pride wouldn't allow her to just keep it. After deducting her mother's hospital bills, she planned to return the remaining balance immediately and slowly pay back the rest over time.

That meant her only real source of income right now was her upcoming year-end project bonus.

The People & Culture Department had already informed her that her base salary and standard year-end bonus were forfeited. Thankfully, the project-specific bonus was evaluated separately, so Willow assumed she would still receive a substantial payout.

The next day, Monday.

When she arrived at the office, the upcoming bonuses were the only thing anyone was talking about. December was the official performance review month at Sinclair Group, making it the inescapable topic of the day.

Listening to the office chatter, Willow caught fragments of the bigger picture. The Sinclair Group had seen an incredibly lucrative year, dominating across all sectors. But among all the subsidiaries, the Seattle branch had delivered the most spectacular results.

As a relatively new division, Seattle didn't have the highest total revenue, but its profit margins completely blew every other department out of the water, and its future growth potential was astronomical. The driving force behind this massive success was directly tied to the Gene-Editing Patent Willow had developed, which had allowed the firm to crush the competition.

From the whispers around the office, it was obvious her colleagues were deeply envious, but the numbers didn't lie. Since they couldn't openly dispute her success, they resorted to freezing her out with passive-aggressive silence.

At 10:00 AM sharp, the official performance review email was blasted out to the entire company. The contents left everyone utterly shocked.

Willow, who was single-handedly responsible for the massive profit margins, had received a performance score of absolute zero. And it wasn't just her—every single member of her project team had their scores brutally slashed.

In stark contrast, Vivienne was awarded the highest possible honor for the Seattle project. Her massive portrait dominated the email, accompanied by paragraphs of glowing praise that specifically credited her for the Gene-Editing Patent. To Willow, the sight was absolutely sickening.

The office sycophants wasted no time jumping on the bandwagon, their mocking comments deliberately loud enough for her to hear.

"Wow, some people really don't know their place. You'd think she actually accomplished something. If it weren't for Ms. Sinclair backing her up, do you really think she could've survived in Seattle? Giving the top honor to Ms. Sinclair is exactly what should have happened."

"Right? Ms. Sinclair has a Ph.D. in biology from a top-tier university abroad, and she studied under absolute legends. It makes perfect sense that she's the one who developed the patent. Some people just try to exploit the information gap, thinking they can hide in Seattle and take all the credit. Look what happened the second she came back to headquarters—totally exposed."

"Exactly. This is how you deal with frauds. Expose them in front of the whole firm, or they'll never stop acting so high and mighty. She walks around here looking miserable all day, acting like she's better than everyone. Have you seen the size of her? Ms. Sinclair is a thousand times prettier, smarter, and nicer to us. Who the hell does Willow think she is?"

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All sorts of vile comments reached Willow's ears, but she genuinely couldn't care less about the personal insults. The only thing she cared about was the project bonus, because this didn't just affect her—it directly impacted her entire team!

These people had followed her to Seattle and poured their blood, sweat, and tears into this project for years, pulling all-nighters without a single complaint. They had worked relentlessly for an entire year, only to be entirely stripped of their rightful compensation. This was a line she would not let them cross.

And she knew exactly who was pulling the strings.

She grabbed her things, shoved her way through the whispering crowd, and marched straight toward Julian's office.

When she arrived, Julian clearly wasn't in a meeting, yet he refused to see her, sending his assistant out to block the door. Willow wasn't having any of it. She shoved past the assistant and barged right in.

Julian was on the phone. When he saw her enter, a dark scowl formed on his face. Ignoring her entirely, he glared at his assistant. "Did you fail to relay my orders?"

He didn't even glance in Willow's direction, treating her as if she were completely invisible.

The assistant turned deathly pale, trembling as he stood to the side. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Sinclair, I couldn't stop her. And Ms. Horgan said it was an emergency, so I thought..."

Julian cut him off mercilessly. "You know how I operate. Go to Human Resources and process your resignation."

The moment the words registered, the assistant collapsed to his knees, pleading in sheer panic. "Mr. Sinclair, I'm so sorry! Please, give me another chance! I'm begging you!"

Minutes dragged by, and Julian remained completely indifferent.

Willow couldn't stomach the cruelty. In her blind rage, she hadn't considered the collateral damage of barging in. And she certainly hadn't expected Julian to be this sociopathic. "I forced my way in. It has nothing to do with him. If you want to punish someone, punish me."

"Are you actually trying to beg for him?" Julian finally shifted his icy gaze toward her. "Who do you think you are? Do you really think you have the right to negotiate with me?"

"At the end of the day, he's losing his job because of you."

He coldly turned back to the sobbing assistant. "If you want to blame someone, blame her. Let this be a lesson. Don't help people who don't deserve it, and don't do things you have no business doing."

With a dismissive wave of his hand, he ordered them both out. "Get out."

Tears streaming down his face, the assistant practically scrambled out of the room. But Willow stood her ground. The heavy doors clicked shut, leaving just the two of them in the sprawling office.

She stared at him with pure disdain. She knew exactly what he was doing. He had fired the assistant just to send a message to the entire company: anyone who dared to help Willow Horgan would be completely destroyed.

Julian let out a dark chuckle, leaning back in his leather chair. "You didn't actually think I was only talking to him just now, did you?"

"I have something to say, and I will leave the second I'm done," Willow stated coldly.

"I'm not your direct superior. You have no business speaking to me. You've been at the firm this long, and I still have to teach you basic corporate structure?"

"You are the only person who can resolve this." She wouldn't be standing here if there was literally any other option.

"And if I say no?"

"Then I'll just have to confront Vivienne in front of everyone. After all, she's neck-deep in this fraud too."

At the mention of Vivienne, Julian's demeanor hardened. He shot her a lethal glare. "You have five minutes."

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

Chapter 40

Willow didn't waste time on pleasantries. "What gives you the right to withhold our project bonuses?"

"Our?" Julian looked at her with a mocking smirk. "Who exactly are you referring to, aside from yourself?"

"My team. The people who actually did the work."

"So, barging into my office wasn't just your brilliant idea, it was theirs too?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters immensely," Julian replied, his voice laced with ice. "I was actually considering leaving them a way out, but it seems that won't be necessary. Since you're all so united, I'll go ahead and adjust their bonuses to match yours perfectly."

Willow was seething. Matching hers meant zero. Her team had killed themselves working all year, relying on this exact payout. Now, not only was he violating corporate policy, but he was intentionally bankrupting her team just to torture her.

"Coming here was my decision. They had absolutely nothing to do with it. Besides, you can't just casually manipulate their compensation. Every single one of us signed a contract."

"A contract?" Julian looked at her like she was the dumbest person on earth. "Do you really think the Sinclair legal team is so incompetent that they'd be held hostage by a few sheets of paper? If they want to blame someone, they can blame themselves for following the wrong leader."

He was right. Willow had seen the Sinclair legal team in action—they were a battalion of the most vicious, elite lawyers in the country. They had never lost a case.

Julian clearly knew his absolute power, which was exactly why he operated with such terrifying arrogance.

And the worst part was, she couldn't do a damn thing to stop him.

The more Willow thought about it, the more furious she became. She hadn't even planned to bring up the patent, but the injustice pushed her over the edge. "I think I need to remind you of a little detail. I am the sole developer of the Gene-Editing Patent. You have absolutely no legal right to just hand the credit over to Vivienne."

"You developed it?" Julian stared at her, completely deadpan. "Do you have proof?"

"I have every single piece of experimental data and every lab report."

"Let's get one thing straight. Do you have it, or does the firm have it?"

Willow froze. Meeting his cold, utterly repulsed gaze, she felt a sudden, violent crack in her composure. She had walked in here armed to the teeth, yet she still found herself completely unraveling.

This exact tone, this exact look of utter disgust—she had endured it countless times over the past three years. It was death by a thousand cuts. How many nights had she woken up drenched in cold sweat, trapped in this exact nightmare?

So, he wasn't just going to destroy her marriage; he was going to execute her professionally, too. He was dead set on stripping her of everything she had bled for and laying it all at Vivienne's feet.

Willow had heard the rumors before—whispers that Vivienne was the true mastermind behind the Seattle project, that Vivienne had driven its success, and that without her, the division would be nothing.

At the time, Willow had brushed it off as toxic office gossip. But looking at the reality now, it all made perfect sense. Where there's smoke, there's fire.

Julian's blatant favoritism was the ultimate green light for everyone else to follow suit.

He wanted her to be nothing more than a stepping stone for Vivienne. He wanted her entire team to pave the way for his precious ward, just so he could crush Willow under his heel.

Willow fought desperately to maintain her sanity, but the sheer cruelty broke her. "Julian, you cannot do this! Do you have any idea what I sacrificed for that patent? I worked from dawn until midnight! I literally lived in the office for an entire month just to secure a single baseline metric! And even then, the data kept failing. I had to redo the trials over, and over, and over again. The stress was so suffocating I was living on anti-anxiety pills. I was so sleep-deprived and sick that I almost collapsed and died in that lab!"