

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

Chapter 51

He stared at the photo for a long time. Sensing Arthur's nervous gaze, Silas finally locked his screen and slipped the phone into his pocket.

"So, when are we heading back?" Arthur asked, braving the awkward silence.

"Tomorrow."

"Already?" Arthur was stunned. They had been in New York for barely twenty-four hours. They had literally flown across the country to do exactly two things: visit Harbor Mercy Hospital and have Arthur eat dinner with Willow.

"There's a lot of business to attend to at the firm," Silas replied smoothly, not looking up.

Oh, so you do remember we run a company, Arthur thought to himself.

It was the end of the fiscal year—the busiest season for Merit Biotech. There were endless strategy meetings and high-stakes negotiations scheduled at headquarters. When Silas had first suggested the spontaneous trip to New York, Arthur had strongly advised against it.

But Silas was the boss, so Arthur had packed his bags. He assumed that since they were already in the city, they would at least meet with their East Coast partners. But no, the billionaire wanted to fly right back?

When Arthur didn't immediately respond, Silas's patience vanished. "Is there a problem? Do you have an objection?"

Arthur snapped back to reality. "No! No objections at all. I'll arrange the flight immediately."

—

When Willow finally got back to her apartment, she spent some time playing with Cooper. The little dog had recovered slightly from the abuse, but his energy levels were still concerningly low. He slept for most of the day, only managing a weak tail wag when she walked through the front door.

Not wanting to tire him out, she quickly put him back in his bed to rest. She then headed into her bedroom to finally catch up on her own life.

Working at the Sinclair Group had drained her of any free time. But now that her days there were numbered, she didn't need to kill herself for Julian's approval anymore. She could finally focus on her own passions.

She pulled out the gym membership card Jade had given her, making a mental note to go for a workout after her shift tomorrow. Then, she booted up her laptop and logged into a global biotech networking forum to check the latest industry news.

She was deeply passionate about gene editing, always keeping tabs on international breakthroughs. She preferred this specific platform because it bypassed regional firewalls, allowing researchers from around the world to openly debate and share their data.

The second she logged in, her notification bell exploded. She had hundreds of mentions, direct messages, and comment replies. Scrolling through the chaos, she realized it was all tracing back to a single comment she had left on an article weeks ago.

The paper had been published by a renowned international expert named Mr. Smith, detailing his team's latest advancements in gene sequencing. The article was a massive hit, shooting straight to the top of the forum's trending page, which was how Willow had found it.

By the time she read it, the comment section was already flooded with thousands of replies. Noticing a few theoretical gaps in his methodology that contradicted her own private research, she had typed out a detailed, objective critique and hit send.

She had completely forgotten about it since then. She certainly hadn't expected to log back in and find her comment pinned to the top of the thread, let alone "liked" by Mr. Smith himself.

Mr. Smith hadn't just validated her critique; he publicly praised her unique perspective, declaring her hypothesis highly valuable. He even openly stated he was willing to offer substantial funding to contact her directly. The frenzy in her inbox was simply the entire forum trying to figure out who she was.

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Willow Horgan was a naturally cautious person who despised drawing attention to herself. Mr. Smith's highly public online search for her felt overwhelming, so after answering a few of his professional questions, she quickly logged off. The following evening after work, Willow headed to the gym Jade Yates had recommended. The facility was incredibly high-end, boasting state-of-the-art equipment and a spotless, modern interior. The moment she walked through the doors, a cheerful young receptionist with deep dimples greeted her.

"Welcome! How can I help you today?" Stepping into a place like this made Willow deeply uncomfortable. She knew perfectly well that she had put on weight over the years, and as a defense mechanism, she usually hid her body beneath oversized, baggy clothes. But walking into a gym meant there was nowhere left to hide; her physique was going to be the central topic.

"I'd like to get some information about a membership," she replied softly.

"Absolutely. Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I don't." It was her first time, and she hadn't realized she needed one.

"That's perfectly fine," the receptionist smiled warmly.

"Let me give you a tour first." The gym was massive, but the staff member was incredibly patient, explaining every detail of the facility. Willow was thoroughly impressed.

"Can I start working out today?"

"Of course," the receptionist nodded.

"But before you begin, I'll need to take you to the locker room to change."

"Change?"

"Yes, we provide specialized workout apparel for our guests."

"Do I have to?" Willow gripped the edge of her oversized sweater, her insecurities flaring. The receptionist looked a bit helpless, and Willow didn't want to make her job difficult.

"Never mind, lead the way." The staff member picked out a set of deep navy-blue athletic wear for her. When Willow changed into it, she was surprised to find that it fit perfectly. It wasn't just the size; the color complemented her beautifully. She had a naturally luminous complexion, and the dark blue made her skin glow. With her hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail, her delicate facial features were on full display, making her look incredibly fresh and radiant.

Still, staring at her reflection in the mirror, a heavy wave of self-doubt washed over her. For years, the word 'heavyweight' had clung to her like a suffocating shadow. It wasn't just an insult anymore; it was an instinctual reaction that completely blinded her to any of her positive traits. Because she took so long in the dressing room, the receptionist peeked in to check on her. The moment the girl saw Willow, she let out a genuine gasp.

"Oh wow, you look stunning in that set! The navy blue is absolutely your color." Willow shifted awkwardly.

"You don't think it makes me look out of shape?"

"Not at all! You might not be stick-thin, but you are definitely not out of shape. You have stunning curves, and this outfit highlights them perfectly."

"Really?" Willow lifted her chin, truly looking at her reflection for the first time in years.

"Absolutely! You have such delicate features and a wonderful aura. And your eyes—I've never seen such a beautiful shade of amber before. You're gorgeous."

"Thank you," Willow said, choking up slightly. To the receptionist, it might have just been standard customer service praise, but to Willow, it meant the world. She had endured so much emotional abuse and manipulation that a single moment of genuine kindness felt incredibly precious.

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The receptionist smiled warmly.

"You're very welcome. I'm just telling the truth." Just as they were chatting, a burst of loud, familiar laughter echoed from the entrance. Before Willow could even place the voice, the group strolled into view. It was Vivienne Sinclair, flanked by two of her usual sycophants. Vivienne was dressed in a pristine white yoga set, her hair swept up into an elegant bun. She looked every bit the wealthy, sophisticated socialite. Her gaze swept over Willow, a brief flash of surprise crossing her features before she let out a disdainful scoff.

The two women trailing behind her mirrored her arrogant posture. They looked Willow up and down before one of them smirked.

"Well, this is a first. I didn't realize the economy was doing so poorly that this place started letting nobodies off the street in. Have you ever seen someone so out of shape in a place like this?" The other woman chimed in immediately.

"Right? I don't get it. If she knows she's that big, why wear blue? It just exposes all her flaws. Look at her stomach—it's bigger than someone who just gave birth. She should be embarrassed to wear something so tight."

"Don't blame the clothes," the first woman mocked.

"When you're built like that, nothing looks good. Not like our Vivienne. She's a natural beauty. Even white, which is the hardest color to pull off, makes her look like an absolute goddess."

"Exactly! That's why Julian has her wrapped around his finger. Some people really need to look in the mirror. Does she honestly think losing a few pounds here will miraculously win Julian's heart back?" Hearing this, Vivienne frowned slightly. She cast another calculating glance at Willow. For some inexplicable reason, she noticed for the very first time that Willow actually had beautiful features—especially those striking amber eyes.

"Delusional," Vivienne spat coldly, her eyes brimming with pure contempt. Willow had survived far too many of these toxic encounters to let their pathetic insults break her. She was entirely unfazed. However, the young receptionist beside her was horrified. Driven by a strong sense of justice, the girl stepped forward.

"Excuse me, but you have no right to speak to her like that. You are guests here, and so is she. Furthermore, you're completely wrong. This outfit looks fantastic on her, and she looks beautiful." The hallway fell dead silent. Willow was stunned that the girl had actually spoken up in her defense, while Vivienne and her entourage were completely paralyzed by the audacity of a simple employee challenging them. One of Vivienne's lackeys sneered, stepping aggressively into the girl's personal space.

"What did you just say? I don't think I heard you clearly. Say it again." Thinking the woman genuinely hadn't heard her, the receptionist took a breath to repeat herself. But before she could get a single word out, the lackey lunged forward and slapped her viciously across the face. The sharp crack echoed loudly. The young receptionist stumbled back, clutching her stinging cheek. Her eyes welled with tears as she stared at her attacker in disbelief.

"Why would you hit me?" The woman didn't show a single ounce of remorse. She crossed her arms and barked, "I'll hit whoever I want! You're just a pathetic worker—a dog! Know your place before you ever try to talk back to—" Before she could finish her vile sentence, two rapid, deafening slaps rang through the air.

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This time, it was Willow. She had stepped forward and delivered two brutal backhands across the lackey's face. The entire corridor plunged into a stunned silence. Everyone stared at Willow in absolute disbelief. The woman clutched her burning face, her eyes practically shooting fire.

"You psycho! You dare hit me?!"

"I just did," Willow replied with an icy, predatory gaze.

"What's the matter? Are you the only one allowed to dish it out? Can't handle it when someone hits back?" The woman opened her mouth to scream but choked on her own fury. Stomping her foot like a petulant child, she turned desperately to Vivienne.

"Vivienne! Call Julian right now! Tell him to get over here and destroy this bitch!" Willow sneered inwardly. Call Julian? How easily the title slipped from their lips. She hadn't even finalized the divorce with Julian yet, and they were already acting like Vivienne was his wife. It seemed Julian was far more impatient to end their marriage than she was. But that was fine. Willow had no desire to be tied to his toxic life anymore. Vivienne didn't move, nor did she reach for her phone.

She was calculating. In Julian's eyes, she had always been the gentle, innocent, and elegant goddess. It was that exact crafted persona that made him adore her. If she dragged him into a petty physical brawl at a gym, it would ruin her carefully curated image. Besides, she wasn't the one who got slapped. Changing her tune, Vivienne surprisingly didn't press the issue. She offered her humiliated friend a few fake words of comfort and declared she was going to her workout session.

The slapped woman was furious at being dismissed so easily, but another friend quickly pulled her away.

"Just wait," the friend hissed at Willow over her shoulder.

"We have places to be today, but we aren't done with you. You're going to pay for this." Once the toxic entourage was gone, Willow quickly grabbed an ice pack from the front desk and pressed it to the receptionist's swollen cheek.

"Thank you for defending me," Willow said softly.

"But please, don't ever put yourself in danger like that again." The girl looked confused. Willow didn't elaborate. Some things were better left unsaid. She gently pulled her hand back, letting the girl hold the ice.

"I'll write a glowing commendation for you today, but if I come back, you don't need to serve me anymore." The receptionist tried to argue, but Willow stopped her.

"Just remember, the next time you want to be a hero, make sure you're safe first." The girl nodded slowly, and Willow gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder before heading to the weights. Two hours later, Willow wrapped up her grueling session and walked out of the fitness center. The moment she stepped through the glass doors, she spotted a sleek Rolls-Royce Cullinan parked right out front. Julian was leaning effortlessly against the hood, a cigarette pinched between his fingers, clearly waiting for Vivienne.

His imposing presence and the luxury car had drawn a crowd of whispering, starry-eyed women. A moment later, Vivienne glided out of the building. Basking in the envious stares, she smiled radiantly and threw herself into Julian's arms. As she turned, she locked eyes with Willow. Smirking, Vivienne planted a deliberate, lingering kiss on Julian's cheek, flashing Willow a triumphant glare. Willow didn't even break her stride. Acting as if they were entirely invisible, she walked right past the spectacle and disappeared down the street.

Inside the luxurious cabin of the SUV, Vivienne kept her voice breathy and sweet as she recounted her workout to Julian, bragging about the new poses she learned and how much the instructor praised her. Julian listened with an affectionate smile.

"Is that right?" he murmured, raising a brow.

"Then I suppose I'll just have to inspect those new moves for myself tonight."

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"Oh really? And how exactly do you plan on inspecting them?" Vivienne teased.

"Take a wild guess," he replied, his voice dropping an octave.

"You're terrible," Vivienne giggled, feigning a blush as she playfully slapped his chest.

"What? You don't like it?"

"I love it." Julian let out a low, satisfied laugh. Sensing he was in a generous mood, Vivienne carefully steered the conversation.

"You know, I actually bumped into Willow at the gym earlier." The moment her name hung in the air, the warmth vanished from Julian's face.

"What the hell was she doing there?"

"I have no idea," Vivienne lied smoothly, playing the innocent card.

"I assume she was trying to work out. I just don't understand how she could possibly afford a place like that. Do you think she..." She let the sentence trail off, watching the irritation harden Julian's jaw. Deciding it was too risky to push that angle, she swiftly pivoted.

"I bet she's doing all of this just for you. She's desperate for your attention. Julian, if she actually manages to get in shape, would you ever change your mind about her?"

"I knew it. She's absolutely relentless," Julian scoffed coldly.

"Do you honestly think I would?" Vivienne lowered her head, looking perfectly submissive and quiet. It was her signature move, guaranteed to trigger his protective instincts. Right on cue, Julian's expression softened. He reached over and gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Relax. You know exactly how I feel about you. Besides, I know exactly who she is. I've seen her at her absolute worst." He stopped the car at a red light and turned to look Vivienne deep in the eyes.

"I despise the way she constantly hovers around me, always so pathetic and timid. I barely have to look at her, and she looks terrified. She creeps around trying to memorize everything I like, hoarding my old belongings like some kind of psycho. I could live a thousand lifetimes and never want a woman like that." He leaned in, his gaze tracing Vivienne's face.

"I like my women exactly like you. Elegant, sophisticated, and pure." He kissed her softly.

"Are we clear?"

"Yes. I love you too," she whispered, returning the kiss with practiced enthusiasm.

"Where are we heading now? Out for dinner?"

"We're eating at home. My parents are coming over."

"Perfect. Things have been so crazy lately, I've missed seeing them." The Cullinan cruised smoothly toward Emerald Heights, arriving at the sprawling estate thirty minutes later. The second they walked through the grand double doors, Toby sprinted across the marble foyer and threw himself into Vivienne's arms.

"Mommy!" he cheered. Vivienne caught him, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek.

"Toby, what did I tell you? You have to call me Aunt Vivienne, remember?" Toby pouted, kicking his legs in frustration.

"But I want to call you Mommy! You are my real mommy!"

"I know, sweetheart, but—" "But nothing," a sharp voice interrupted from the sweeping staircase. It was Susannah Sinclair, descending with regal authority.

"If my grandson wants to call you his mother, let him. There are no outsiders here."

"I know, Mom, I'm just worried about the staff hearing and starting rumors," Vivienne explained meekly.

"Let them talk. Toby is a Sinclair by blood. We might have to keep things quiet for now, but claiming his rightful place in this family is inevitable." Dismissing the conversation, Susannah waved the boy over.

"Come here, darling. Come see what Nana brought you." Toby, always eager to be spoiled, immediately abandoned Vivienne and ran to the older woman.

"Nana!"

"There's my good boy." Susannah opened a ventilated designer carrier and pulled out a small puppy. It was the exact same breed as Willow's dog, Cooper. Seeing the puppy, Toby shrieked with joy.

"A dog! I love him! Thank you, Nana!"

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Susannah handed the trembling puppy over to Toby.

"Be a good boy and go play in the corner." Toby grabbed the dog roughly and ran off, entirely thrilled. This new puppy looked disturbingly identical to Willow's beloved Cooper. From the shade of its fur to the color of its eyes, right down to the specific birthmark on its belly, it was a flawless carbon copy. Even Vivienne was taken aback.

"Mom, how on earth did you find a dog that looks exactly like hers?" Susannah scoffed dismissively.

"With enough money, there isn't a problem in the world you can't solve. Honestly, you and Julian need to step up. You couldn't even fulfill one tiny request for your own child." She was referring to the time Julian had demanded Willow hand over Cooper, only to be rejected. Toby had thrown several massive tantrums over it, but Julian hadn't forced the issue, and Vivienne hadn't dared to act on her own. The moment Susannah heard about her precious grandson being denied, she instantly bought a replica.

"It's just an animal. If the boy wants one, he can have a hundred. He can do whatever he wants, however he wants to do it. A child of the Sinclair family is born to be at the top of the food chain. His life is meant for enjoyment, not following rules." Julian walked into the living room just then. He glanced at the puppy in Toby's arms but didn't say a word about it, merely telling his son to eat dinner before playing. Seeing Julian's total indifference, Vivienne let out a breath of relief.

She wrapped her arms around Susannah's waist, leaning into her like a devoted daughter.

"You are the absolute best. I wouldn't know what to do without you." Susannah ate up the flattery, patting Vivienne's shoulder affectionately.

"You grew up under my roof. You are no different from my own flesh and blood. Of course I'm going to spoil you. Even though the truth about you and Julian shocked me at first, you're still my child. I will always take your side. Besides, with Julian's medical condition, it's a miracle you managed to conceive at all. Giving us Toby and securing the Sinclair bloodline was the greatest gift you could have ever given this family." At the mention of the pregnancy, Vivienne's spine went rigidly stiff.

Mistaking her reaction for lingering grievance, Susannah quickly offered more comfort.

"I know playing the role of the adopted sister is hard on you right now, but look at the life you're living. You have Julian, you have Toby, and you hold all the power. You are infinitely better off than that pathetic Willow. Just be patient. Once that miserable old woman finally kicks the bucket, we'll rearrange everything. You'll be able to marry Julian publicly and take your rightful place." Vivienne swallowed the flash of panic that had gripped her chest and forced a sickeningly sweet smile.

"Thank you, Mom. I love you so much." Some dark secrets needed to stay buried forever. After dinner, Susannah and Zachary lingered for a while before finally preparing to leave. Vivienne dragged Toby to the front door to say goodbye. The boy was still clutching the

puppy. In just a few short hours, the dog was completely unrecognizable. It was trembling violently, its eyes glassy and unfocused, and clumps of its fur had been ripped out. Yet, not a single adult in the grand foyer batted an eye.

It was as if the suffering creature simply didn't exist. Before stepping out the door, Susannah beamed at Toby.

"Whatever you want, darling, just tell Nana. I'll always give it to you." That same evening, back in Willow's quiet apartment, Cooper suddenly began barking uncontrollably. He paced frantically, gnawing destructively on nearby clothes, overwhelmed by an intense, terrifying bout of anxiety. Willow was deeply alarmed. Ever since she had brought Cooper home, he had occasionally whined from a lack of security, but he had never acted this violently frantic.

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Fearing the worst, Willow immediately called her vet. The doctor explained that Cooper was likely experiencing a severe trauma trigger, violently flashing back to the abuse he had suffered. He recommended administering a mild canine sedative if the panic attack didn't subside. Willow had some leftover medication from a previous visit, so she carefully gave Cooper the prescribed dose. Gradually, the frantic pacing stopped, his breathing leveled out, and he fell into a heavy, exhausted sleep.

Once Cooper was settled, Willow dialed Jade for a video call. Since Jade had left for her business trip, they checked in with each other every few days. Jade looked exhausted; her eyes were heavily bloodshot, and her hair was pinned up haphazardly with a ballpoint pen. Willow recounted the dramatic events at the gym.

"How was the actual facility?" Jade asked, rubbing her eyes.

"Incredible. The equipment is top-tier, and the space is immaculate."

"If you like it, you should go as often as you can. It doesn't even have to be about losing weight. Just getting out and moving is great for your mental health."

"I plan to," Willow promised. She was determined to stick with the gym. That was just how Willow was wired. She could easily walk away from things she didn't care about, but once she set a goal, she poured one hundred percent of her soul into achieving it. Assuming Willow was suddenly embracing an active lifestyle, Jade offered another idea.

"Hey, a client gave me some VIP tickets for the Silver Run Resort this Saturday. There's no way I'll be back in time to use them. I'll transfer them to your phone. You should go hit the slopes, breathe some mountain air."

"But I don't know how to ski at all."

"Who cares? Just go enjoy the lodge, watch the snow, and maybe take a beginner's lesson." When Saturday arrived, Willow took a car up to the Silver Run Resort. She had done a quick search beforehand and knew it was one of the most prestigious and historic ski resorts outside New York City. It boasted massive slopes and luxury amenities, drawing thousands of winter sports enthusiasts every season. She had expected a crowd, but when she arrived, she was genuinely overwhelmed by the sea of people.

Fans were everywhere, sporting face paint, carrying signs, and waving banners. After asking around, she learned the resort was hosting a major freestyle skiing competition today, and the mountain was swarming with fan clubs. Seeing Willow looking slightly lost, a bubbly young woman struck up a conversation. She enthusiastically explained that she was here to support her 'Goddess.' According to the girl, this Goddess was flawless—a high-powered career woman, breathtakingly beautiful, and a frequent gold medalist in competitive skiing.

Half the crowd at the resort was exclusively there to cheer for her. As her excitement peaked, the girl tried to shove her phone into Willow's face to show off photos of her idol, but Willow politely declined. She had no interest in celebrity worship or extreme sports; she was just trying to find a quiet place to learn the basics. Because of the main event, the resort was bottlenecked. Despite her best efforts to steer clear of the chaos, Willow was physically swept up by the surging crowd and deposited right at the edge of the competition course.

The athletes were already at the starting gates, prepping their gear. The overly friendly girl popped up beside Willow again, bouncing on her toes.

"Look! The one in the center, that's my Goddess! Isn't she gorgeous? Look at that aura!" Willow gave a passing glance. The skier was buried under a bulky snowsuit, helmet, and mirrored goggles, leaving only the lower half of her face visible. It was impossible to make out any real features, but a creeping sense of familiarity washed over Willow. That feeling lingered uncomfortably until the announcer's voice boomed over the loudspeakers a second later.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our next competitor, Vivienne Sinclair! Ms. Sinclair is a master of freestyle, holding past championship titles in the halfpipe, aerials, moguls, and ski cross! She is undeniably the crowd favorite today!" As the announcer's voice echoed across the snow, Vivienne raised a gloved hand and blew a theatrical kiss to the roaring crowd. The spectators lost their minds. The girl standing next to Willow screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Goddess! Goddess!" Not content to just scream, the girl aggressively shoved a pair of binoculars toward Willow's chest.

"Look! She's blowing kisses! She's so beautiful! What an absolute queen!"

"Thanks, but I'm good," Willow said, gently pushing the binoculars away. She had suffered through enough of Vivienne's true nature behind closed doors; she certainly didn't need a magnified view of her public performance. Willow sighed, irritated by the cruel irony of running into her here. As the starting whistle pierced the air, Vivienne launched herself down the steep incline. She hit the first jump with explosive speed, executed a flawless series of mid-air spins, and landed with perfect precision.

The entire mountain erupted into deafening applause. The announcer's voice cracked with adrenaline.

"Ninety-six points! An absolute record-breaker! Vivienne Sinclair just made history! She is our undisputed champion!" Her spectacular run sent the crowd into an absolute frenzy. These people had traveled solely for her, and seeing their idol crush the competition injected them with pure adrenaline. Their chants echoed violently through the valley.

"Vivienne! Vivienne!"

"Goddess! Goddess!" The overly enthusiastic girl decided she needed an autograph and tried to drag Willow along with her. Willow firmly planted her feet. The only reason she had stayed this long was because she was trapped by the mob. Now that the crowd was swarming the finish line, a clear path opened up behind them. Willow slipped away instantly. She rented her gear, trudged over to the beginner's bunny slope, and started familiarizing herself with the equipment.

She was determined not to let Jade's gift go to waste. But just as she clicked into her skis, a shadow fell over her. She looked up and froze. Julian was striding directly toward her. He was holding Toby's hand, with Seth Sterling and Lucas Lane trailing closely behind. Hugo Harrington brought up the rear. Of course they were here. It was Vivienne's big moment; her dedicated entourage would never miss a chance to worship her. Willow immediately dropped her gaze, pretending she hadn't seen them, but they had no intention of letting her peace last.

Seth stepped directly onto the tips of her skis, blocking her path with a nasty sneer.

"I have to hand it to you, Willow. You are like a cockroach. No matter where Julian goes, you manage to crawl right out of the woodwork. Coming here, putting on this pathetic little beginner act—do you really think looking like an idiot is going to get his attention?" He let out a condescending laugh.

"Though I guess you really miscalculated today. Did you honestly not know how good Vivienne is? Coming to a ski resort to pull your little stunts while she's setting records? You really have no shame."

"Look at you, you can't even stand up straight. Save yourself the humiliation and go home. If anyone puts you next to Vivienne, you'll be laughed off the mountain."

"Yeah!" Toby chimed in from behind Julian's leg, pointing a tiny, accusing finger.

"You don't even know how to ski! I'm way better than you! Dummy! Dummy! Go away!" Lucas stood silently, originally intending to throw in a few sharp insults of his own to defend Vivienne, whom he treated like a cherished younger sister. But the moment Willow looked up, those striking amber eyes completely derailed his train of thought. Under Seth's expectant gaze, Lucas just gave a dismissive scoff and looked away.

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Willow had zero interest in engaging. Their petty, high-school bullying tactics meant absolutely nothing to her anymore. Annoyed by her total lack of a reaction, Seth decided to escalate. He aggressively thrust his leg forward, aiming to trip her skis and send her sprawling face-first into the snow, hoping to humiliate her just like he did in the lobby. But Willow was entirely prepared this time. The moment he lunged, she effortlessly shifted her weight, side-stepped his leg, and swept her ski right behind his boots.

With a loud, echoing crash, Seth ate snow. He hit the ice hard, instantly rolling around and shouting a string of vicious curses.

Willow stared down at him with an icy, indifferent expression, looking as though he had simply slipped on his own incompetence.

Seeing Seth thrashing in the snow, Toby shrieked and scrambled to hide completely behind Julian's legs. Lucas quickly rushed over, grabbing Seth by the jacket and dragging him to the side to check his injuries. Once they were out of the way, Julian fixed Willow with a chilling, predatory gaze.

"You need to figure out exactly where you stand, and fast. Drop this pathetic, delusional act. Sweating in a gym, pretending to learn how to ski—none of these staged little encounters will work on me. Trying to change yourself to win me back is the definition of pathetic."

For a second, Willow genuinely didn't comprehend what he was saying. When it finally clicked, a wave of disgust hit her. He seriously believed she was doing all of this for him? That she was orchestrating elaborate schemes just to cross his path? "Julian, your ego is absolutely staggering." Julian, convinced she was just playing hard to get, continued in a menacingly low tone.

"I'm only going to say this once. If you insist on stalking me and pulling these stunts, I will stop holding back." He took a menacing step closer, dropping his voice to a dark warning.

"And another thing. I don't know where you suddenly got the cash for luxury gyms and VIP ski passes, and frankly, I don't care.

But let me remind you of one undeniable fact: you are still legally bound to the Sinclair name.

If you have no self-respect, at least pretend to have some for my family. Don't you dare do anything disgusting to fund this new lifestyle."

"Excuse me? What exactly are you insinuating?" Willow snapped, her blood boiling.

"Take it literally."

A perfect, ruthless dismissal. He wasn't just suffocating her; he was openly assassinating her character. Willow forced a sharp, bitter laugh.

"Julian, you have absolutely no idea that I'm about to—"

Before she could drop the reality of the signed divorce papers on him, Toby yanked hard on Julian's sleeve.

"Daddy, let's go! I think Mom—"

Toby caught himself, shooting Willow a look of pure venom.

"I think Aunt Vivienne is done! Let's go find her!"

Julian didn't hesitate. He scooped Toby into his arms, turned his back on Willow, and walked away without another word.

It was always exactly like this. Zero respect.

Zero care.

He didn't even possess the basic human decency to let her finish a single sentence.

Willow let out a hollow laugh. It was a good thing Toby had interrupted her.

Julian had likely already given the divorce papers to his corporate lawyers to dismantle her life. Trying to threaten him with it now wouldn't give her leverage; it would only make her look weaker.

As his entourage disappeared into the lodge, the noise around her faded. Willow took a deep breath, resetting her nerves, and prepared to tackle the slopes again.

But as she turned, she nearly jumped. Standing just a few feet away, entirely silent, was the imposing figure of Hugo Harrington.

Out of Julian's entire inner circle, Hugo was always the anomaly. He rarely spoke, and unlike Seth or Lucas, he never went out of his way to torment her.

As a result, Willow usually forgot he was even in the room.

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Willow looked away, focusing on her stance, when a low voice broke her concentration. "First time skiing?"

Hugo took two steps toward her.

Willow had no bad blood with him. In fact, he had stepped in to help her out of several tight spots. She didn't dislike him, but the situation felt awkward. After all, he was Julian's close friend.

"Yeah," she replied simply, ready to ski away.

"I can teach you," Hugo said before she could turn.

Willow paused, eyeing him in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"I said, I can teach you how to ski," Hugo repeated, his expression deadpan. "Free of charge."

She turned to face him fully, realizing he wasn't joking. His rugged features were set in a serious, almost solemn expression. Hugo was a man of few words, the kind whose thoughts were impossible to read.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"We were college classmates, weren't we? Helping out an old friend is no big deal."

He was right. They had gone to the same university. Back then, he and Julian were always together, the two most sought-after guys on campus. But Willow had been so blindly fixated on Julian that Hugo had barely registered on her radar.

"Aren't you worried Julian won't like you helping me?"

"His reach doesn't extend to the slopes."

His straightforwardness left her without an argument. She genuinely needed an instructor, and if she didn't have to pay for one, all the better.

"I'm a total beginner," she warned him. "Never touched a pair of skis in my life."

"Everyone starts somewhere."

"I'm a bit timid. I might be a slow learner."

"Then we'll take it slow."

Willow looked up at him. The only issue left was the unspoken debt. "I really can't pay you right now. But I owe you a favor. If you ever need help with anything, just let me know."

"I told you, it's free," Hugo replied. "But since you mentioned it, let's exchange numbers."

He pulled out his phone, screen unlocked and ready.

Willow hadn't planned on exchanging contacts with anyone from Julian's circle. But refusing now would make her look petty and ungrateful. She pulled out her phone and added his number.

Hugo was a man of action. When he said he would teach her, he meant it. He guided her with the precision and patience of a professional instructor. Soon enough, Willow was gliding down the gentle slope at a snail's pace. Hugo skied parallel to her, ready to catch her whenever she wobbled.

They had no idea that their every move was being watched by Vivienne from a distance.

After finishing her interview and claiming her trophy, Vivienne had noticed Hugo was missing from the group. Aside from Julian, Hugo's opinion was the only one she cared about. His wealth and striking looks rivaled Julian's, and virtually every woman who met him was captivated. Vivienne was no exception.