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

Chapter 501

But when he arrived, Willow was nowhere to be seen. Silas Thorne stood alone.

His tall, imposing frame was clad in a sharply tailored dark suit that looked entirely out of place in the rustic, dilapidated courtyard. Even standing in complete silence, he radiated a suffocating, predatory dominance.

Julian Sinclair faltered mid-step, a surge of instinctual apprehension tightening his chest.

Silas's status, ruthlessness, and sheer power easily eclipsed his own. Factoring in the ongoing collaboration between their two firms, Julian had no intention of going head-to-head with the man. Despite the fiery rage consuming him, he forced his fury down, burying his hostility beneath a veneer of polite restraint.

"Mr. Thorne," he said, giving a slight nod. "Apologies for the intrusion. I'm just looking for Willow. Could you tell me where she is? I have a few words for her."

Silas lowered his gaze, his dark eyes eerily unreadable. "If you want to get to Willow, you go through me," he stated, every word laced with quiet authority.

Without missing a beat, his gaze slid past Julian, locking onto Vivienne, who was cowering behind him. "You actually had the nerve to show your face," he drawled.

Silas had already received word that she had escaped the cave. He assumed she would lay low for a while, yet here she was, parading around without a single shred of remorse.

Vivienne violently flinched, her blood running icy in her veins. She was absolutely terrified of the man. His cold, impassive demeanor always made her feel like he could see right through her—unlike Julian, who was effortlessly manipulated.

She instinctively shrank back, hiding further behind Julian's tall frame. Gripping his sleeve with trembling hands, she lowered her head, playing the part of the fragile, traumatized victim to perfection.

She didn't dare utter a single syllable. Remaining completely silent and playing the victim was the safest card she had left to play.

Predictably, Julian's temper flared at her pitiful display. Even if he hadn't cared much before, Vivienne was still under his protection. She represented him, and Silas addressing her so disrespectfully felt like a direct slap in the face.

Besides, he hadn't originally planned to pick a fight with Silas; he had only come to confront Willow. He never expected the older man to speak up like that—effectively confessing to his involvement.

A confession that he was the mastermind behind it all, and that he stood firmly by Willow's side.

The simmering jealousy, resentment, and bitter frustration finally obliterated his last shred of sanity. A dark, suffocating hostility rolled off Julian as his jaw ticked. "Mr. Thorne, Sinclair Group has no feud with you, and Vivienne hasn't provoked anyone. Why would you go to such ruthless lengths to destroy her?"

In stark contrast to Julian's explosive rage, Silas's expression remained utterly undisturbed. He slowly lifted his heavy gaze, his lips curving into a lethal, mocking sneer. "Destroy her?"

As if she were even worth the effort. If it weren't for Willow, neither of them—not even Julian himself—would have ever warranted a second of his time.

Silas had no intention of wasting another breath on this pathetic display. He left them with four chilling words: "An eye for an eye."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode into the house, leaving the two of them standing awkwardly in the courtyard.

Julian frowned in utter confusion. "What the hell did he mean by that?"

"I have no idea," Vivienne lied smoothly. She knew exactly what he meant, but she could never admit it. "Maybe Willow fed him some lies and turned him against us."

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Glaring at Silas's retreating back, Julian felt a surge of indignity he couldn't swallow.

As the CEO of Sinclair Group, being casually dismissed in such a manner was a humiliating blow to his pride. He immediately moved to storm after him, but an arm suddenly blocked his path.

It was Arthur Vance. His tone was impeccably polite, yet firm. "Mr. Sinclair, apologies. Mr. Thorne has pressing matters to attend to. We cannot allow any further interruptions."

Already practically choking on his own rage, being physically stopped pushed Julian entirely over the edge. He glared viciously at Arthur, his mind instantly flashing to all the disgusting rumors. This was him—the man supposedly having a sordid affair with Willow. The secret paramour.

A blinding cocktail of bitterness, burning jealousy, and humiliation clouded his judgment completely.

Instead of shoving past him, Julian snapped his gaze to the tall figure just about to vanish through the doorway. His voice rang out, sharp and venomous. "Silas Thorne! Do you have any idea what your subordinate does behind your back? You've been played for a fool this entire time! Every single thing that's happened has been orchestrated by your assistant, Arthur Vance, just to get into Willow's bed!"

The heavy footsteps abruptly ceased.

Silas, who had been thoroughly indifferent and unwilling to engage, froze the moment the words echoed through the air.

He slowly turned around, his dark, bottomless eyes zeroing in on the unhinged CEO.

Beside Julian, Arthur's heart practically leaped out of his throat. A cold sweat broke out across his skin as panic gripped him.

Not this again!

This wasn't even the first time!

Julian was going to get him killed with these reckless accusations. As if he had a death wish! Did this idiot really think he'd ever have the sheer audacity to go after Willow?

Being slapped with such a ludicrous, suicidal accusation for absolutely no reason was beyond exasperating.

Terrified of inciting his boss's wrath, Arthur tensed, looking up nervously in a frantic bid to explain himself.

But before he could even part his lips, Silas shot him a fleeting, impassive glance. "No need to explain," he said evenly.

It was blindingly obvious he hadn't bought a single word of the younger man's hysterical outburst. Arthur finally let out a shaky breath of relief.

Silas shifted his attention back to Julian, a dangerously amused, mocking smile curling the edges of his lips. When he spoke, his voice was pure ice. "You actually believe Arthur is Willow's suitor?"

Julian, entirely blinded by his own jealousy, stood his ground. He wore a look of absolute, unwavering certainty. "Isn't he? First, he pulls strings to get Willow a cushy spot at Merit Biotech. Then, he arranges her mother's medical treatments. And this research trip? He only managed to set all this up for her by riding on your coattails!"

Listening to the diatribe, Arthur was paralyzed by shock. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He hadn't realized he wielded such monumental influence over the boss. Apparently, he was powerful enough to dictate executive decisions.

Silas simply found the entire display deeply amusing. Clearly, Julian wasn't just completely lacking in character—he was also staggeringly dense.

The predatory amusement in his eyes deepened. He briefly considered the best way to break the news to the fool—that from the very beginning, the man who had approached Willow, who had quietly paved her path, who protected her at every turn, and who was relentlessly pursuing her heart wasn't Arthur at all. It was him.

But just as Silas opened his mouth to shatter the illusion, the closed courtyard gate swung open.

Willow and Leo Yardley had just returned from checking on Ethan Walker. The second she stepped inside and spotted Julian and Vivienne, she knew trouble was brewing.

Refusing to give them the time of day, she walked straight past them toward Silas. Across the yard, Julian's face drained of color in sheer fury at the dismissal. Meanwhile, Vivienne glared at her arrival, her eyes flashing with a raw, ugly malice that she couldn't even bother to conceal.

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Willow strode straight past them, stopping exclusively at Silas's side. She quietly informed him that they had wrapped up the situation with Ethan and were cleared to start packing for their return to New York City. She casually chatted with him about a few mundane tasks, thoroughly treating Julian and Vivienne as if they were invisible.

Finally, Julian's patience snapped. "Willow, I have something to ask you," he demanded, his tone cold and unyielding.

Willow's first instinct was to ignore him entirely. However, Silas was standing right there. She knew whatever poison Julian was about to spew would only dirty the air, and she fiercely protected Silas from being dragged down into the mud of this petty, exhausting drama. Reluctantly, she agreed.

Silas, recognizing her need for boundaries and privacy, respected her space. He didn't press the issue. Before stepping away, he simply lowered his voice and told her, "If you need anything, call me. I'll be right next door."

Once Silas was gone, Julian ordered Vivienne to leave as well.

Vivienne bristled, utterly reluctant to walk away. She had desperately wanted to stick around and find the perfect opening to strike. But Julian had issued a command, and she didn't dare defy him. Suppressing the venom swirling in her eyes, she dragged her feet as she walked out.

In an instant, the sprawling courtyard was completely silent, leaving only Willow and Julian alone.

Willow met the gaze of the furiously brooding man across from her. Her tone was completely detached. "Spit it out," she said.

Julian hadn't entirely figured out where to begin. There was an overwhelming mountain of things he wanted to ask, but the absolute apathy in her eyes stung him deeply. Stabbing in the dark, he snapped, "Why did you have Silas arrange for people to hurt Vivienne?"

A faint, icy smirk grazed Willow's lips. Completely unfazed, she shot back, "Is that what Vivienne told you?"

True to form, Willow's priority was fiercely defending Silas. "Do you have any proof? Throwing around accusations that we attacked her—if you can't back it up, I'll sue you for slander."

"Silas already confessed to it," Julian gritted out, his blood boiling at the sight of her protecting another man.

"Did he? I must have missed it." Willow didn't buy into his manipulation for a second. Without hesitating, she laid out the cold truth. "Vivienne was the one who hired men to kidnap me. How rich that she's now playing the victim."

"Impossible." The denial tore out of Julian's throat, thick with blind, stubborn bias. "Vivienne would never do something so vile."

"Believe whatever you want." Willow was far too exhausted to argue. Breathing the same air as him felt like a chore. "I'm just giving you the facts; it's up to you if you want to stay delusional. And another thing—don't you dare harass Silas again. Keep him out of your toxic drama. He isn't like you."

Julian's temper flared violently at her defense. "What do you mean, toxic drama? And how the hell is he any different from me?"

"Everything that involves you is toxic." She didn't leave him a single shred of dignity. As for how they were different—did she really need to spell it out?

Willow gave him one last disgusted look before sharply pivoting the conversation. "Also, regarding the divorce, I'll be officially filing the second-instance appeal very soon."

That sentence ruthlessly obliterated Julian's absolute bottom line.

His face turned a dangerous shade of purple as a crazed, desperate obstinacy swirled in his eyes. "Give it up," he growled, rigid and unyielding. "I am never giving you a divorce."

He hadn't agreed to it the first time around. Now? The thought of letting her go, of handing her over to some other man on a silver platter, meant he'd rather watch the world burn than sign those papers.

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Willow ignored him completely, her tone ice-cold. "Whether we divorce or not isn't up to you anymore. I don't care what it takes, this marriage is over."

Julian let out a bitter scoff, provoked by her defiance. He took a menacing step closer, looking down at her with a critical, mocking gaze. "In such a rush to draw a line in the sand? Willing to burn it all down to get away from me? What, are you pregnant with another man's kid? Can't hide it anymore and need to make room for him?"

"Don't look at me like that. After all, this wouldn't be the first time you've done something like this."

"Oh, right. But let me remind you, you can't even get pregnant," Julian said, his eyes shifting away for a fraction of a second before hardening again. "Don't end up throwing everything away just to be left with absolutely nothing."

Willow had braced herself for his cruelty, but she still managed to underestimate how low he would sink.

She knew exactly what he was referring to. It was the deepest, most agonizing scar buried in her heart.

Three years ago, she had been framed and ended up sleeping with a stranger.

When she woke up, Julian was the one who told her the incident had left her infertile. He then used it as leverage, insisting that if she still wanted to marry him, she had to accept adopting Toby.

At the time, Willow had been blindingly in love with him. Drowning in trauma and guilt, she truly believed she had wronged him, so she agreed. But she never could have imagined that the next three years would become a living nightmare.

Accusations of having no self-respect, being infertile, and being unworthy of Julian had tormented her day in and day out.

She hadn't been able to see clearly back then, but looking back now, the pieces of the puzzle connected flawlessly—especially after discovering that Toby was actually the biological son of Julian and Vivienne.

Being set up to lose her innocence, being diagnosed as infertile, being forced to adopt Toby, and then being exiled to Seattle... it had all been a meticulously orchestrated trap. And she had been nothing but a pawn.

Willow sneered, locking eyes with him. "Are you brave enough to swear that The Incident of Three Years Ago had nothing to do with you?"

Julian froze, clearly caught off guard that she had connected the dots. The shock lasted only a second before he masked it with doubled-down aggression. "Are you really trying to shift the blame onto me now? Willow, after what you did, you actually have the nerve to question me?"

The old Willow would have panicked, scrambling to defend herself and spiraling into an endless pit of anxiety as she tried to prove her innocence.

But now, she had completely broken free from his toxic gaslighting.

However filthy he painted her, she would return it tenfold.

"When it comes to being vile, dirty, and scheming against the person sharing your bed, my past doesn't even hold a candle to yours."

Julian had intended to rile her up, but seeing her standing there so calm and entirely unaffected only fueled his own burning rage. "You have no right to compare yourself to me."

"Why not?" Willow arched an eyebrow, staring him down.

Julian couldn't voice a logical reason. In his arrogant, entitled mind, it was simply a given—he could do as he pleased, but she couldn't.

Willow scoffed. "What? Cat got your tongue? Do you seriously think you're some kind of king? The rules apply to everyone but you?"

As Willow spoke, her presence was sharp and commanding, a thin layer of fury cooling her gaze. For a fleeting second, she exuded the same intimidating aura as Silas Thorne.

Coupled with her stunningly beautiful features, it created a breathtaking, predatory contrast.

This fierce, fiercely independent version of her had completely shed the timid, subservient shell of the woman who used to cautiously trail a few steps behind him, hanging onto his every word.

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Julian stared at her, utterly mesmerized, unable to tear his eyes away. A suffocating wave of possessiveness surged through him. The mere thought of this vibrant, fiery woman being held in another man's arms—belonging to someone else—made him sick to his stomach. He couldn't accept it.

Driven by impulse, he reached out and grabbed her arm, his tone laced with arrogant condescension. "It's not too late to turn back. I can overlook everything that's happened, and you can still be the rightful Mrs. Sinclair. I'll even arrange a solid position for you. It's infinitely better than following around that older man."

His delusion was so absurd it was almost comical. "Keep dreaming. Let go of me."

Julian refused to release his grip and took another step into her personal space.

Without a second thought, Willow grabbed a glass of water from the adjacent table and threw it directly into his face. Shocked, Julian finally let go.

"If you have this much energy, save it for our second court hearing."

Julian wiped the water from his face, a dark, venomous look swirling in his eyes. He spoke in a menacing whisper. "You're so desperate to cut ties with me, but do you really think divorce will make your life a fairy tale? Take a guess—if Arthur Vance found out about your messy past, do you think he'd still want you?"

Willow didn't give a damn about his threat. To her, it was pure nonsense; Arthur Vance had absolutely nothing to do with any of this. But the mention of her past inevitably made her think of Silas.

Even though nothing was officially happening between them, he was still the first person who came to mind whenever her baggage was brought up.

Not wanting to waste another second on Julian, she opened the door and walked out. Down the corridor, she spotted a tall, imposing silhouette.

It was Silas, standing at the perfect distance away.

Not too far—close enough to protect her the moment she needed him. But not too close, maintaining a respectful boundary so she never felt crowded or pressured.

Thoughtful, restrained, and profoundly respectful.

That was Silas Thorne. He had been exactly like this from the very beginning.

Silas saw her step out and quickly closed the distance. "Are you finished? He didn't give you a hard time, did he?"

Willow shook her head slightly. "Nothing major. Just arguing in circles over divorce logistics."

She purposefully kept it light. She didn't want him to know about the humiliating past Julian loved to dredge up, the suffocating taunts, or the petty harassment.

Willow always felt that Silas was too clean, too untouched by the kind of decay that plagued her life. She didn't want her toxic baggage dragging him down. Even though her power was limited, she wanted to avoid burdening him whenever she could.

Sensing her deflection, Silas didn't push. He simply said, "Whatever happens, I'm always here."

They left the building together. The courtyard was quiet, the only sound the synchronized rhythm of their footsteps on the pavement.

Willow thought back to the cruel question Julian had thrown in her face. She hesitated, but she really needed to know.

"Silas, can I ask you something?"

She didn't call him 'Mr. Thorne' or 'Boss,' and the sound of his first name falling from her lips was like music to his ears.

He would have answered a hundred questions, a thousand, if she asked.

"Of course. Go ahead."

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Willow took a deep breath, gathering her courage. "If someone had a terrible past... if they were carrying a lot of baggage and entangled in messy situations they couldn't just walk away from. How would you view that person? Would you think... they were unworthy?"

She beat around the bush, too embarrassed to state her own insecurities outright, using a hypothetical scenario to quietly gauge his feelings.

Silas gazed down at her lowered lashes, a heavy ache settling in his chest. He knew exactly why she was asking.

Framing it so carefully, right after a confrontation with Julian—it had to be about her nightmare of a marriage.

Silas leaned in slightly, his voice dropping into a warm, gentle cadence. "I don't care about the past. Those chapters are already closed. They don't define the present, and they certainly don't define the future."

His eyes were entirely earnest, every word anchored in absolute certainty. "If I were ever to meet someone like that, my only thought would be a deep regret that I hadn't shown up in her life sooner, to spare her from suffering so much."

At his words, Willow's head snapped up. A lump formed in her throat, and she stared at him, utterly captivated.

She had never imagined a man like him existed. He was so incredibly good—so perfect it felt surreal. But it was exactly because he was so good that she refused to drag him into her mess.

Perhaps wanting to reassure her that he meant what he said, Silas added softly, "Have you forgotten? The woman I have feelings for is currently married."

He paused, adding, "But that's alright. Soon enough, she won't be."

Those two sentences yanked Willow sharply back to reality. She finally snapped out of her daze. How could she have forgotten?

Right, he already had someone in his heart. And the way his face softened with affection when he mentioned this mysterious woman made it entirely clear.

Unable to formulate a response, Willow simply gave a stiff nod.

Seeing her close off, Silas assumed he had come on too strong and pressured her, so he let it drop. Seamlessly, he pivoted the conversation. "Since the work here is wrapped up, should we start planning our flight back to New York?"

"Yeah," Willow said, recovering her composure. "Whenever you're ready. I just need to say goodbye to Ethan before we leave."

"Alright. I'll make the arrangements."

Meanwhile, Julian had finally emerged from the room, his expression stormy. His clothes were damp, a clear indicator he had just had a drink thrown in his face.

Vivienne rushed over with a handful of tissues. "Julian, what happened? Why are you soaking wet? Here, wipe your face."

Julian didn't take the tissues. He swatted her hand away. Looking down at her, his eyes were predatory and dark, sharp enough to pierce through her innocent facade and dig into her darkest secrets.

Vivienne felt a chill run down her spine under his scrutiny. "Why are you looking at me like that? What happened in there?"

Julian didn't sugarcoat it. "Willow said you were the one who hired those men to kidnap her. Is it true?"

All the blood drained from Vivienne's face. Her gentle, concerned smile vanished instantly, leaving her stunning features pale and rigid.

The exact scenario she had dreaded the most had just exploded in her face.

She had been a nervous wreck the moment Julian pulled Willow aside to talk, terrified that Willow would use the opportunity to expose her. And clearly, she had.

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A tidal wave of venomous hatred crashed through Vivienne. She cursed Willow a thousand times over in her head. She called her a despicable wretch, furious at how cunning Willow truly was—acting so high and mighty in public, only to stab her in the back when no one was looking.

But her panic only lasted a split second.

Years of calculated manipulation allowed Vivienne to regain her composure instantly. She took a deep breath, swallowing the panic and malice in her eyes. "Julian, do you honestly believe a word she says? Think about it. She has always been incredibly manipulative and calculating. Is she really trustworthy?"

"Just look at the project for a start. You know better than anyone how elite Mr. Smith's team is. Yet somehow, she accomplished what the entire Sinclair Group couldn't. Doesn't that tell you she's using underhanded, dirty tactics to get her way?"

"She would spin any lie to win, to crush me, and to drive a wedge between us. She's fabricating this kidnapping story because she wants to ruin my life!"

Vivienne's defense was perfectly structured—logical, aggrieved, and dripping with the heartbreak of a true victim.

But Julian's expression remained detached. A flicker of doubt lingered in his eyes; he clearly wasn't entirely sold.

Sensing that her words weren't enough, Vivienne knew she had to deliver the ultimate performance to eradicate his suspicions.

She pushed forward. "Let's take a step back. Even if you don't believe me, where is the evidence? Where is the proof that I hired anyone to kidnap her? You just saw her. You

were standing inches away from her. Did you see a single scratch on her body? Any sign that she had been restrained or abused?"

As she spoke, Vivienne aggressively pulled down her collar and rolled up her sleeves, exposing the raw bruises and cuts on her neck and arms. "Does she look like this? Did she suffer like I did?"

She wiped away a trickle of blood from a fresh cut, her voice trembling. "No, right? From start to finish, I was the one covered in injuries, terrified out of my mind, and truly victimized. And yet, you choose to doubt me based on someone else's venomous lies."

Right on cue, two perfect tears spilled down her cheeks.

Julian hesitated. He genuinely hadn't seen any marks on Willow, and he still believed Willow was playing Arthur and Silas like a fiddle to get what she wanted.

He finally relented. "I was just asking a question. Why are you overreacting?"

Hearing this, Vivienne knew her gamble had paid off. A vicious gleam flashed in her eyes. She had won this round.

She had been bold enough to call Willow's bluff for two reasons: First, she had explicitly instructed the thugs to avoid leaving visible marks on Willow's face or arms. Second, she had hired absolute professionals. She was confident they hadn't left a single trace leading back to her.

As long as she denied it to her dying breath, no one could touch her.

Even though Julian's suspicions were quelled, his attitude toward her remained frosty. They eventually made their way down the mountain, locked in a cold, suffocating silence.

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Once they reached the town, Vivienne worried Julian might discover another clue, so she quickly suggested they head back to New York.

"Julian, my head is throbbing, and my chest hurts. I'm worried I might have internal bleeding. Let's not wait around anymore. Can we please just fly back to New York so I can get a full workup? I'm scared something is really wrong."

Julian's gaze landed on her, dark and unreadable. He had been quiet the entire trek down, appearing calm, but a lingering doubt still gnawed at the back of his mind.

Something about the whole situation felt entirely off. If Willow truly had orchestrated a kidnapping against her, Julian didn't believe for a second that Vivienne would let it slide so easily.

Just as Julian opened his mouth to press her further, his phone buzzed in his pocket. The screen flashed the name 'Susannah Sinclair.'

He didn't want to answer, but his mother was calling relentlessly. Left with no choice, he picked up.

Instantly, Susannah's frantic voice blasted through the speaker. "Julian! Have you found Vivienne yet? What are you waiting for? Bring her home immediately!"

She held the phone out, and Toby's hysterical wailing echoed through the line.

Susannah demanded, "Do you hear Toby crying? Stop dragging your feet and get back here today!"

Julian rubbed his temples, profoundly irritated but unable to argue. He forced down his frustration and replied coldly, "I got it."

He hung up and shot a glacial glare at Vivienne. "How did Mom know I found you?"

He hadn't told anyone in the family since locating her, and her own phone was destroyed. So how did Susannah find out?

Knowing she was caught, Vivienne played the innocent card. "While you were talking to Willow, I missed Toby so much I borrowed a villager's phone to call Mom."

The truth was, missing Toby was just an excuse. She had intentionally used Susannah to force Julian to take her home.

Julian was livid, but he had to keep it bottled up.

Toby was his son—or so he believed. Even if he couldn't stand Vivienne right now, he had to prioritize the boy.

He bit his tongue, his face a mask of fury as he gave the order. "Prep the jet for New York."

Vivienne secretly let out a massive sigh of relief. Once she was back on her home turf in New York, everything would be manageable. If she had to, she would play the tragic, apologetic mother and use Toby as a shield. Over time, Julian's doubts would fade.

Julian and Vivienne flew back to New York that very afternoon.

Willow and her team departed a little later. Before leaving, she made a point to visit Ethan.

After spending the past few weeks under proper care, Ethan no longer carried the heavy burden of his former insecurities. His complexion was healthy, his posture relaxed, and his bright, clear eyes sparkled with life. A small smile played on his lips constantly. He looked vibrant and full of hope.

Willow crouched down so they were eye-to-eye. "Ethan, we're heading back to New York today. I want you to focus purely on resting and getting better. Don't worry about anything else. Merit Biotech is going to cover all your bandage changes, medications, check-ups, and treatments moving forward."

Ethan's eyes widened in sheer disbelief.

He knew exactly how devastating his illness was. The endless bandage changes, the hospital visits, and the exorbitant cost of specialized supplies had crushed his family financially. Was this man he had barely met really going to pay for it all?

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He couldn't believe it. "Willow, are you serious?"

"Of course," Willow smiled, reaching out to gently ruffle his hair. "And I have even better news. A new targeted therapy for EB is already in clinical trials. As soon as the drug hits the market, Merit will coordinate your care immediately and get you on the best possible treatment plan. We won't let you miss a single chance at a cure."

If Ethan had been surprised before, he was absolutely dumbstruck now. He just stared at her, totally overwhelmed, until his parents beside him began weeping and thanking Willow profusely, which finally snapped him back to reality.

He pressed his lips together hard, fighting the tears pooling in his eyes. "Thank you, Willow! I won't forget what you said! I promise I'll rest and do exactly what the doctors tell me. Once I'm stronger, I'm going to come to New York to find you, so I can see the outside world you talked about."

"That sounds perfect. We'll be waiting for you in New York," Willow assured him. She then stepped slightly to the side. "But you shouldn't be thanking me for this. None of this financial support or medical coordination was my call. The person you really need to thank is him."

She gestured to Silas, who was standing quietly behind her. "He's the one in charge of everything. He orchestrated your treatment plan and set up the funding. So, he's the one who truly deserves your thanks."

Silas had specifically told Willow to pass the credit to him beforehand; otherwise, she wouldn't have felt it was her place to say it.

Hearing this, Ethan immediately sat up straighter, wiped his face, and spoke with solemn, respectful gratitude. "Thank you, Mr. Thorne."

The formal title hung in the air for a second.

Then, the usually silent Silas finally parted his lips, his deep, magnetic voice filling the room. "You don't need to call me Mr. Thorne. Silas is fine."

The room went completely quiet as everyone turned to look at him.

Willow blinked in surprise, glancing up at the imposing man beside her. He actually cared about what a kid called him? She thought he would be above that.

Ethan was a smart, polite boy, and he immediately adjusted. "Thank you, Silas."

"You're welcome," Silas replied, his tone noticeably warmer than before. "Focus on getting better. We'll see you in New York."

Ethan nodded enthusiastically. "I promise! I'll do everything you say."

Before they left, Ethan gathered his courage to ask Silas one last thing. "Silas, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"We don't even know each other. Why are you spending so much money and going to so much trouble to help me?"

The real reason, of course, was Willow. She cared about the boy, which meant Silas cared.

But looking down at the earnest, innocent kid, Silas chose a different route. Sometimes, a white lie was exactly what was needed.

Silas looked at him with gentle, unwavering certainty. "Because you're worth it. I saw your grit and your refusal to let your circumstances beat you. You are just as capable as anyone else; you just haven't been given a fair shot. I believe that with the right platform and the right opportunity, you'll achieve incredible things. I have a lot of faith in you."

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On the way back, Willow couldn't help but ask Silas exactly what he had said to Ethan. After they had spoken, she noticed Ethan's eyes practically glowing with renewed determination.

Silas recounted the conversation word for word, including his encouragement and validation of the boy's potential.

Willow was stunned. Knowing Silas as she did, he was an incredibly guarded man who rarely let people in. The idea of him actively comforting and inspiring a child was entirely unexpected.

"I had no idea you had such a soft side," Willow remarked, genuinely impressed.

Silas frowned slightly, as if evaluating himself. "Are you saying I usually come across as cold?"

"No, of course not," Willow deflected, suddenly feeling awkward. He was definitely cold, at least to people he didn't know well.

That was why Silas bonding so quickly with Ethan had been such a surprise. "It seems you and Ethan really hit it off."

"I suppose so," Silas replied simply, omitting the fact that it was entirely because she cared about the boy.

"Then why did you make such a big deal out of what he called you?" Willow asked, recalling his insistence on dropping the formal 'Mr. Thorne.' No matter how she looked at it, Silas didn't seem like the type to get petty with a child over a title.

"Because I didn't want him making me sound like I'm a generation older than you," Silas answered honestly. He wouldn't accept that distance, not even in the eyes of a child.

He wanted to be on her level, standing right beside her as her equal, without any artificial barriers of age or status between them.

Willow assumed he was just sensitive about his age and didn't press the issue further. After all, nobody liked feeling older than they were.

She smoothly transitioned to other topics as they traveled from the mountain town back to New York.

Silas had arranged a private jet, turning what would have been an exhausting journey into a swift, comfortable trip. Willow even managed to get some solid sleep on the plane, looking completely refreshed by the time they landed.

It was late spring in New York, brushing against the edge of summer. The crisp chill had faded, but the sweltering heat hadn't yet arrived. The evening breeze was gentle, carrying the fresh scent of greenery, wrapping around them in a soothing embrace.

After being away for so long, Willow's only thought was of her mother. The moment her feet hit the tarmac, she requested to go straight to the hospital.

While she had been away, she had texted Martha every day, keeping tabs on her condition. But digital check-ins were no substitute for seeing her mother's health with her own eyes.

She had intended to go alone, but Silas insisted on joining her, claiming he hadn't seen Martha in a while and wanted to pay his respects.

Martha was thrilled to see them both walk into the room, and she immediately hit them with fantastic news. The doctors had declared her stem cell transplant a complete success, and she would be released from the sterile isolation ward in a few days.

Hearing that, the massive weight that had been crushing Willow's chest finally evaporated. The anxiety that had plagued her for months dissolved into thin air, and her eyes crinkled into a brilliant, radiant smile.

She hurried to the bedside. "That's incredible news! We have everything ready at home. We're just waiting for you."

Martha beamed and asked how the business trip had gone.

Not wanting to worry her, Willow only shared the positive highlights.

Noticing the women had a lot of catching up to do, Silas quietly excused himself, stepping out and closing the door to give them privacy.

The moment he left, Martha turned her focus squarely onto Willow. "Willow, work is important, but you can't bury yourself in it completely. You have to think about your personal life, too. Where do things stand with your divorce from Julian?"

Martha had asked this a few times before, and Willow had always brushed it off with vague reassurances to spare her any stress. But today, Martha wasn't taking a half-answer. Reluctantly, Willow offered a few more details. "It's almost done. The second hearing is coming up soon. The legal process is a bit tedious, but everything is moving in the right direction. Don't worry about it."

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Chapter 511

Martha trusted her daughter completely. She had always known Willow was responsible and handled her own battles without ever asking for help. But her independence only made Martha's heart ache more. Unable to physically assist with the divorce, Martha could only offer guidance based on what she observed.

"And what are your plans once the divorce with Julian is finalized?"

Willow instinctively shied away from the question. She honestly hadn't thought that far ahead. Silas was in love with someone else, and based on his own words, it sounded like he'd be with that woman very soon.

Even though there were no crossed lines between her and Silas right now, she knew she would eventually need to establish boundaries. "I'll just keep doing what I'm doing. Focusing on my career."

Willow tried to play it cool, but Martha saw right through her. "I think Silas is a wonderful man," she stated bluntly. "While you were out of town, he regularly had fresh flowers and premium supplements sent to my room—all specifically tailored for my post-op recovery. On top of that, he checked in on me constantly via text, asking about my vitals, my appetite, and my sleep. He is incredibly thoughtful and leaves no detail overlooked."

Willow was totally floored. She had absolutely no idea. Silas hadn't mentioned a word of this to her, and she didn't even know when he had added her mother's number.

"I didn't know... he never told me he was doing all that."

Seeing her daughter's shocked expression, Martha offered a soft, knowing sigh. "Silly girl, he didn't tell you because he wasn't looking for a reward. He is genuinely looking out for you and taking care of the people you love."

"I've lived a long time, and I know how to read people. That man is grounded, reliable, attentive, and deeply ambitious. He truly cares about you. He is the exact opposite of a selfish, cold-blooded man like Julian."

Willow lowered her gaze, her long lashes trembling slightly as they masked the storm of conflicting emotions in her eyes.

She didn't deny a single word Martha said. In her eyes, Silas possessed a million more virtues than her mother had even listed. The painful reality was that his heart belonged to someone else. No matter how perfect he was, he wasn't hers.

Willow couldn't help but fantasize about the woman who held his affection. She had to be someone from a flawless background, incredibly beautiful, with a pristine history. Unlike Willow, she wouldn't be dragging herself out of the mud.

As for everything else, his generosity and gentlemanly nature were simply part of who he was.

"Mom," Willow sighed, her voice heavy. "Did you forget what I told you? He already has someone he likes."

Martha remembered, of course, but she simply couldn't accept it. What if it was all a big misunderstanding? "Why don't you just ask him? From what I can see, he..."

"Mom, please. Let's not talk about this anymore," Willow interrupted, feeling utterly defeated. "I really can't handle having my heart broken a second time right now."

If she kept things exactly as they were, she could at least continue working by his side. But if she confronted him and heard the rejection out loud, she wouldn't know how to look him in the eye again. She was entirely drained; she refused to put herself on that emotional rollercoaster ever again.

She spoke in veiled terms, but Martha immediately understood. Willow had never confessed the gritty details, but it was obvious that her marriage to Julian had nearly destroyed her.

Martha nodded gently. "I understand. You do whatever makes you comfortable."

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Chapter 512

Although Julian and Vivienne had left the mountain much earlier, commercial flight schedules meant they actually touched down in New York slightly after Willow's private jet.

Stepping off the plane, both of them were preoccupied with their own simmering frustrations, their expressions sour.

Needing Julian's leverage, Vivienne swallowed her pride and spoke first. "Julian, I need to go to the hospital for a check-up. Will you come with me? I'm scared to go alone."

Julian kept walking at a brisk pace, not even sparing her a glance. "Scared of what? You survived the mountain, the drive, and a cross-country flight just fine. You're overthinking it. Besides, I have a critical meeting I cannot miss."

Vivienne's fingernails dug into her palms. She pushed back, unwilling to let it go. "Can't you push the meeting back just a little? I'm genuinely in pain. I kept it to myself on the way back because I didn't want you to worry."

"I'm not a doctor. If you're in pain, go to the hospital," Julian replied, his tone as solid as a brick wall. "If there's an actual problem, call Mom and Dad. They have more free time than I do."

"Fine." Realizing it was a lost cause, Vivienne had no choice but to drop it. A toxic brew of resentment and bitterness boiled in her chest, but she had to force it down.

Since the hospital was owned by the Sinclair Group, Vivienne was treated like royalty. The specialists gave her a comprehensive workup and confirmed there was no major internal damage. However, when the doctors requested she undress for a more thorough examination to check for deep-tissue trauma, Vivienne vehemently refused. "That's not necessary. Skip it."

Her entire body tensed, and panic bled into her voice as she instinctively shrank back into the examination chair.

Her 'injuries' were a carefully crafted illusion. If the specialists looked too closely, her lies would shatter instantly. She couldn't let them find out the truth, and she certainly couldn't risk Julian finding out.

Noticing her erratic reaction, the lead doctor looked confused and tried to reason with her gently. "Ms. Sinclair, while your surface wounds aren't critical, the bruising pattern is quite erratic, suggesting a significant physical struggle. We cannot rule out hidden trauma. We strongly advise a full physical examination to ensure there are no long-term complications."

"I said no," Vivienne snapped, her voice turning hostile as she wrestled her panic under control. She threw out an excuse. "It's just from falling against some rocks. I know my own body. Don't waste my time."

But the doctor held firm. The staff worked for the Sinclair family, and if they missed something serious, they would be immediately fired. "Please cooperate, Ms. Sinclair. If a complication arises later, it jeopardizes both your health and our jobs."

Vivienne's face turned ice-cold. "Say one more word, and I'll have your job right now."

Terrified, the doctor immediately silenced himself.

Annoyed by their presence, Vivienne ordered the entire medical team out of the room. She needed silence to think. Yes, she was back in New York, but her problems were piling up.

Her calculated act playing the victim hadn't fully convinced Julian. On top of that, by leaving the conference early, she had completely lost her shot at re-entering Mr. Smith's core project team. And then there was Willow—she had no idea if Willow was going to keep coming for her, especially now that Willow clearly had powerful backing...

Nothing was resolved. Her entire life felt like a tangled mess.

Just as she was spiraling, the door swung open. Vivienne's heart leapt, hoping Julian had changed his mind and come back for her. But her excitement died the moment she saw Susannah walking in, holding Toby by the hand. A wave of exhaustion and disgust hit her. She had a mountain of crises to solve, and now she had to deal with this.

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Chapter 513

Toby was still just a little boy. After not seeing Vivienne for so long, the sight of her lying in a hospital bed covered in bruises shattered his composure. Tears instantly flooded his face. "Mommy, why are you hurt? Does it hurt a lot? You were gone so long, I missed you so much!"

He sobbed uncontrollably, wiping his snot and tears all over Vivienne's clothes.

Vivienne initially tensed, worried about him calling her 'Mommy' right in front of Susannah, but when she glanced up and saw Susannah didn't seem to care, she relaxed.

"Nana," Vivienne greeted her politely.

Susannah walked closer. "How did you get so banged up? Weren't you just on a business trip? What exactly happened out there?"

Susannah's concern was real, but Vivienne knew perfectly well that compared to Julian's standing and the Sinclair Group's reputation, her well-being was insignificant to the matriarch.

Vivienne understood exactly why Susannah had defended her over the years. It wasn't just because she was the family's ward; it was primarily because she had provided the Sinclair family with an heir—Toby.

Or, at least, that was what they all believed.

Julian's Secret Infertility was never spoken of aloud, but everyone in the inner circle knew the truth. That was precisely why the family spoiled Toby rotten and, by extension, tolerated Vivienne's presence.

Knowing this, Vivienne gave a vague, sanitized answer. "It was unavoidable. We were out in a rural area, the roads were practically non-existent, and the mountains were treacherous. I slipped a few times on a hike and got pretty scraped up. It looks worse than it is, really. I'm fine."

Satisfied, Susannah didn't press further. She told Vivienne to prioritize her recovery and take an extended leave from work before throwing herself back into the office. She then announced she had errands to run, leaving Toby behind in the hospital room.

The second the door clicked shut behind Susannah, Vivienne's mask shattered. The fragile, sweet, and victimized persona vanished instantly, replaced by sheer exhaustion, irritability, and absolute coldness.

Clueless to the shift in her mood, Toby kept clinging to her arm. "Mommy, will you play with me? I want to..."

"I'm exhausted," Vivienne snapped, cutting him off. "Go play by yourself over there."

But Toby refused to listen, whining and tugging at her sleeve. His relentless nagging completely drained whatever sliver of patience Vivienne had left.

Her brow furrowed deeply, a flash of malicious annoyance burning in her eyes. She turned her head toward the nightstand, spotting the potent sleeping pills the doctor had just prescribed. Without a second thought, she popped a pill out, crushed it into powder with her bare fingers, and swirled it into a glass of warm water.

"Be a good boy, Toby. Drink some water first."

Toby didn't suspect a thing. "If I drink it, will you play with me, Mommy?"

"Yes. Drink it, and I'll play with you."

"Okay! I'll drink it right now," Toby said with a bright smile, obediently gulping down the spiked water.

True to her word, Vivienne entertained him for a few minutes, but the heavy sedatives kicked in rapidly. His eyelids began to droop, and within moments, he slumped against the edge of the bed, falling into a dead, unnatural sleep. He went completely limp.

Disgusted by his presence, Vivienne waved a dismissive hand at the nanny. "Take him away."

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Chapter 514

On the other end of town, Julian's so-called "important meeting" was nothing more than an excuse. His real motive for rushing back to Sinclair Group headquarters was to see Mr. Smith. He still harbored doubts about Vivienne's story and desperately needed an objective third party to verify the truth.

The moment he stepped into his office, Julian issued a curt order to his assistant. "Get in touch with Mr. Smith. Tell him I need him in my office to discuss the research project in person."

Ten minutes later, the office doors swung open. But instead of the distinguished, steadfast Professor Smith, a younger man walked in. He wore a crisp white dress shirt, his features sharp but unassuming, a polite and humble smile playing on his lips. Julian recognized the face from previous meetings but couldn't quite place the name.

Julian eyed him, his gaze heavy with scrutiny. "Why are you here? Where's Mr. Smith?"

The man stepped forward unhurriedly, giving a slight, respectful nod before introducing himself. "Hello, Mr. Sinclair. I'm Jayden Chase, a core member of Professor Smith's team."

He then offered an explanation. "The Professor is currently spearheading a critical pharmacological experiment. The data is highly sensitive, and he can't leave his post. He couldn't step away, so he specifically sent me to brief you."

"Mr. Sinclair, you can rest assured. I have been deeply involved in this research project from day one. I am intimately familiar with every detail and the entire sequence of events. Whatever you need to know, you can ask me."

Julian stared at his calm, unreadable face, sizing him up for several long seconds.

He was still suspicious, but he knew Professor Smith ran a tight ship. His team members wouldn't just randomly step in to hijack a meeting. If this man had followed the project from the start, he likely knew the inside story. And the fact that he was here meant Smith had authorized it.

Pushing down his guard, Julian asked coolly, "Your name is Jayden?"

"Yes, sir," Jayden replied, his demeanor growing even more deferential.

"Then tell me exactly what happened with this research project," Julian cut straight to the chase, his tone stern. "I heard Willow Horgan swooped in and hijacked it halfway through. Was Vivienne on the verge of closing the deal? Is that true?"

A fleeting, sinister shadow crossed Jayden's eyes, so fast it was impossible to catch. His expression remained one of objective indifference. "Yes, everyone on our internal team saw it happen. When we first started coordinating with the local director, Ms. Sinclair was incredibly professional and efficient. Almost all the details of the collaboration were locked in. But everything changed the moment Ms. Horgan showed up."

He deliberately shifted his tone, feigning a sense of helpless frustration. "I don't know what kind of connections or tactics Ms. Horgan used, but within just a few days, the entire tide of the negotiations turned. The local director abruptly made the decision to solely partner with her."

It was a flawless answer—elevating Vivienne's hard work while subtly smearing Willow's methods.

Julian's brow furrowed, his fingers curling into a tight fist as he pressed on to his deepest concern. "Let me ask you this. Did Vivienne secretly kidnap and detain Willow recently?"

This was his biggest point of suspicion, the heaviest thorn lodged in his chest.

At those words, Jayden immediately feigned a look of sheer shock before quickly schooling his features into a neutral, objective mask.

"Mr. Sinclair, we haven't heard a single thing about that. It must be a baseless rumor. Our team has worked with Ms. Sinclair for a long time. She has always been gentle, modest, and incredibly polite and considerate to our staff. There is no way she is capable of doing something so extremely vicious."

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Chapter 515

Silence settled over the office as Jayden finished speaking.

Julian lowered his gaze, lost in thought. The heavy doubts that had been gnawing at him began to dissipate.

He reasoned it out carefully. Jayden Chase had no personal ties to Vivienne. Their interactions were strictly professional. The researcher had no motive to deliberately cover for her, and certainly no reason to lie to the CEO of Sinclair Group on her behalf.

It seemed he had simply overthought things. He had misunderstood Vivienne.

With that realization, the tight lines around Julian's eyes finally smoothed out. He waved a hand dismissively. "I understand. Thank you for making the trip. You can head back now."

"Right away, Mr. Sinclair," Jayden answered smoothly.

He offered a deferential nod, maintaining his perfectly humble facade as he turned and exited the office.

But the moment the door clicked shut behind him, every trace of that polite smile vanished. The mask of submission ripped away, replaced by a chilling glare of pure, greedy malice. He lowered his eyes, his lips curling into a ruthless, calculating smirk. His gaze gleamed with the triumph of a successful scheme.

He strolled leisurely toward the elevators, leaned against the cold wall, and pulled out his phone, expertly dialing Vivienne's number.

At that moment, Vivienne was lying in her hospital bed, consumed by frustration and despair. Her current mess was unresolved, and she had no clear path forward. She felt like an ant on a hot skillet.

When her phone rang abruptly and she saw Jayden's name flash on the screen, her irritation flared. Annoyed, she instantly rejected the call.

She wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone, let alone play nice with this snake.

Being hung up on didn't spark an ounce of anger in Jayden. Instead, his smile widened, his eyes swirling with dark amusement.

He had fully expected this reaction. It was exactly how she had been treating him lately.

Taking his time, he typed out a short, precise text message that struck right at Vivienne's Achilles' heel: [Julian Sinclair just came looking for me. It's about you.]

Sure enough, not even a second later, his phone rang. It was Vivienne.

Her voice was sharp with impatience and anxiety. "Why did he come looking for you? What did he say?"

Hearing her panic, Jayden chuckled softly. He deliberately dragged out his words, his tone lazy and teasing. "Oh, so Ms. Sinclair knows how to be anxious now? Weren't you just hanging up on me?"

"Jayden!" Vivienne's voice turned instantly icy, barely suppressing her rage. "What was our agreement? Don't forget our deal! You took my money, now you work for me!"

She was seething with anxiety and anger, but she was utterly powerless against him.

This Jayden had been trouble from the moment they struck their bargain. Every time they met privately, his eyes roamed all over her. His words and actions constantly crossed the line, laced with subtle disrespect and malicious intent.

But they were tethered to the same sinking ship now. She had no choice but to swallow her disgust and play along, too terrified to tear up the alliance.

"Money?" Jayden scoffed coldly. "You didn't honestly think that little payout was enough, did you?"

Vivienne refused to get dragged into this argument. She only cared about one thing right now. "We'll talk about that later. Just tell me why Julian went to see you today!"

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Chapter 516

Seeing that the tension was just right, Jayden finally spoke, leisurely repeating every single word he had exchanged with Julian in the office.

When he finished, he made sure to add, "Now, tell me, Ms. Sinclair. Do you still think I've forgotten our agreement?"

"If I had forgotten, I wouldn't have taken such a massive risk to cover for you in front of Julian Sinclair. Do you think he's easy to fool? I had to weigh every single syllable. One wrong move, and we both would have gone down."

Hearing this, Vivienne finally let out a heavy sigh of relief. Regardless of his attitude, he really had saved her skin today.

But she also knew Julian's suspicions were only temporarily pacified. If he was already making moves like this, he would undoubtedly keep digging in the future.

Vivienne forced out a reluctant "Thank you," before quickly adding, "Since the issue is handled, let's leave it at that."

"Leave it at that?" Jayden interrupted her. "Are you planning to hang up on me again? Because I'm not finished."

Vivienne frowned, her patience wearing paper-thin. "What else do you want?"

Jayden traced the edge of his phone, his eyes brimming with undisguised greed. "Our original agreement was mutually beneficial, right? I cover up your scandal, clean up your reputation, stabilize things with Julian, and shield you from all the fallout. Right now, you're the only one reaping the rewards. So, what about me?"

Vivienne's temper flared instantly. "I already wired the money on time! I didn't short you a single cent. What more do you want?"

"Money?" Jayden sneered, completely shedding his polite disguise to reveal the treacherous predator beneath. "That pocket change? That was barely enough to cover my time. Ms. Sinclair, you have the entire Sinclair Group backing you. Your net worth is astronomical. That payout was a drop in the bucket for you."

Vivienne had reached her breaking point, but she couldn't afford to burn this bridge. She was isolated and vulnerable, and she knew she would need him again. Suppressing her fury, she gritted out, "How much more do you want? Name your price."

At that, Jayden let out a low laugh. "I don't want money this time. I want something else."

He lowered his voice and murmured a few explicit sentences into the receiver.

Before he could even finish, Vivienne spat back, "Who the hell do you think you are? How dare you even suggest that?! I'd rather sever this partnership than ever agree to that!"

Jayden wasn't rattled in the slightest. His smile remained intact. "Don't be so quick to turn me down. I'll give you some time to think it over. You can give me your answer later."

He ended the call. Blind with rage, Vivienne swept everything off her bedside table, sending it all crashing to the floor. She cursed Jayden's name over and over in her head.

How dare he? To actually think he could get his hands on her... he must have a death wish!

Amidst the blinding fury, a sharp pang of regret pierced through her.

She had been too hasty.

Desperate to secure a spot on Mr. Smith's team, she had rushed into an alliance without seeing through his vile, greedy facade. Now, she had given him the perfect opportunity to turn around and blackmail her.

But thankfully, this wasn't an impossible situation. She and Jayden were bound together now. They were on the same boat.

He could use his leverage to threaten her, but she also held his darkest secrets. She could destroy him just as easily.

It was a game of mutual assured destruction. If he pushed her too far, she would drag him down with her. Knowing that, she figured he wouldn't dare make any drastic moves in the short term.

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Chapter 517

With that realization, the rigid tension in Vivienne's spine finally eased.

For the next two days, Vivienne stayed obediently in her hospital bed to recover from her injuries. She had planned to use this time to properly rest and figure out her next move.

But she never could have anticipated that before she could even draft a solid strategy, a devastating piece of news would drop on her head—one that would entirely derail all her plans.

She was being permanently kicked out of the Merit Project Core Team.

The Merit Project was the most colossal, resource-rich, and boundlessly promising initiative she had ever touched. She had been banking on this project to stage a spectacular comeback and make Julian look at her with newfound respect!

Now? If she was thrown off the team, all her previous sacrifices would be rendered entirely meaningless. Worse, she would completely lose her voice within Sinclair Group, destroying any remaining chance of winning back Julian's attention!

She would be reduced to an absolute nobody.

She couldn't let that happen.

Ignoring the lingering pain in her body, Vivienne threw herself out of bed, grabbed a cab, and sped straight to Sinclair Group headquarters.

When she marched into the office, the staff stared at her in shock, but knowing she had just been ousted from the project, their surprise quickly morphed into pity.

Vivienne despised that look. Who did these people think they were? Did they really think they had the right to pity her?

They had no right. In the past, they had all kissed the ground she walked on, scrambling to flatter her and follow her every command. Even if she was facing a temporary setback, it wasn't their place to look down on her.

Besides, the decision wasn't even finalized yet.

Vivienne glared at them, her eyes flashing with their usual vicious arrogance. "What are you all staring at? Don't you have jobs to do?"

Startled by her sudden outburst, the employees quickly averted their eyes, burying their heads in their work. No one dared to look at her again.

Vivienne didn't spare them a second glance. Straightening her posture, she marched directly into the elevator.

It took her straight up to Julian's office.

Julian was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, one hand tucked into his pocket, the other holding an unlit cigarette. The sharp lines of his profile were rigid, an inescapable aura of suffocating frustration radiating off him.

He had just wrapped up a meeting with Merit Biotech. Silas Thorne hadn't even bothered to show up, sending Arthur Vance in his place.

During the meeting, Merit had relentlessly reiterated their demand to remove Vivienne from the project team, and this time, they gave a strict deadline. Sinclair Group had forty-eight hours to strip Vivienne of all her duties related to the joint venture and completely remove her from the core team. If they failed to comply, Merit Biotech would unilaterally sever all ties and terminate every ongoing project with Sinclair Group.

The ultimatum hung over Julian's head like a guillotine, backing him completely into a corner.

The Merit collaboration was Sinclair Group's most critical core initiative of the year. They had already poured astronomical amounts of capital and manpower into it, advancing it to a pivotal phase. If the project stalled now, Merit, with its deep pockets, would easily absorb the loss. But Sinclair Group wouldn't be so lucky. The resulting shockwave would severely cripple them, likely crashing their stock prices and triggering a massive corporate crisis.

Julian was suffocating with indignation. Merit was directly dictating personnel changes in his own company without his consent—a clear sign they had zero respect for his authority.

But his hands were tied. Yes, he was the CEO of Sinclair Group, but he still had to answer to the board of directors and the older generation. If the company went under, Susannah would be the first one to demand his head.

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Chapter 518

Just then, a sharp knock echoed from the door before it was pushed open from the outside. It was Vivienne.

She hurried in, her face a mask of frantic disbelief as she looked at Julian. "Julian, is the news out there true?"

Julian turned to face her, his eyes clouded with obvious irritation. He offered no defense, no comfort—he simply stared at her.

In that single heartbeat, Vivienne understood. She had harbored a desperate glimmer of hope that the rumors were false, or at the very least, that Julian would stand his ground and refuse the demand. But in that instant, all her hopes and delusions violently crumbled.

Whether it was pure hatred for Merit or crushing disappointment in Julian, she glared at him, her voice trembling with intense bitterness and accusation. For the first time, she completely lost her composure in front of him. "Why? I'm the victim here! From start to finish, I did absolutely nothing wrong! Why am I the one being thrown to the wolves?"

Julian was already stressed, and her screeching only obliterated whatever patience he had left. But noting the hospital gown she was still wearing, he forced himself to answer

steadily. "It was Silas Thorne's direct order. He mandated it personally. There is no room for negotiation."

"So what if it's Silas Thorne's order? Who gave him the right to play god?" Vivienne had grown up swathed in luxury, forever the center of everyone's universe. When had she ever been subjected to such humiliation? And the fact that this was all tied to Willow Horgan only made it infinitely worse.

"Sinclair Group isn't some no-name startup! We have deep roots in New York City! Besides, we signed a legally binding contract with them for this project. He thinks he can just swap people out and fire whoever he wants? Why should we let him bully us?"

Her chest heaved violently. Her tone was desperate and stubborn, carrying the reckless energy of someone willing to burn everything down. "Let's just take them to court! Even if the project completely stalls and both sides take a massive hit, I absolutely will not step down!"

Vivienne was running purely on adrenaline and emotion, but her logic was twisted. She would rather sacrifice the entire company's future and drag everyone down with her than suffer the humiliation of being publicly ousted.

This was a direct, targeted attack on her. It was a blatant insult!

But Julian completely ignored her outburst. Or rather, in his eyes, she wasn't even a fraction as important as the Sinclair Group.

"Do you honestly think a lawsuit or halting the project is that simple? Sinclair Group cannot survive a hit like this. The livelihoods of thousands of employees, the blood and sweat of the entire project team, the company's entire strategic layout for the year—none of it is worth risking on a gamble."

Vivienne stared at his cold, detached expression, the last shred of her hope shattering into a million pieces. A freezing chill seeped into her bones.

She should have known. In Julian's eyes, the only thing that mattered was the bottom line. The second her existence threatened the company's interests, he wouldn't hesitate to discard her.

A person's true nature never changes. She used to watch him treat Willow exactly like this, never imagining that one day, she would be on the receiving end of the exact same cruelty.

After a brief moment of shock, Vivienne desperately tried to suppress the raging storm in her chest, pivoting to a different tactic. Her tone softened just a fraction, laced with a final, stubborn plea. "But I built this project from the ground up! The early negotiations, the mid-stage execution, every single operational detail—I smoothed it all out personally.

If you swap me out at the eleventh hour, things will inevitably fall through the cracks. It will hurt the company."

Julian's expression remained entirely unmoved. He replied coldly, "You don't need to worry about that. Mr. Smith can take over. He has the capability and the experience, and he's been deeply involved recently. He is more than qualified to handle it."

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Chapter 519

Vivienne refused to back down. Forcing two tears to spill down her cheeks, she pleaded, "But I've poured my heart and soul into this project. It means everything to me. I just want to see it through to the end."

Faced with her final, desperate struggle, Julian's stance remained unyielding, his tone so flat it bordered on cruel. "Internal project reassignments are standard procedure. If you can't work on this one, you can take over another. The end result is exactly the same."

With one breezy sentence, he mercilessly severed her final lifeline. It was clear his decision was set in stone.

An icy chill washed over Vivienne from head to toe.

All her fighting, all her arguments—it was completely useless.

Seeing her devastated look, Julian offered a rare word of comfort. "Go back to the hospital and focus on your recovery. Get your mind right. I'll arrange another project for you later. It won't be any less prestigious than the Merit deal."

It was over. The verdict was final. From Julian's tone, Vivienne knew there wouldn't be a single millimeter of leeway.

She walked out of the building like a hollowed-out shell. Downstairs, the driver Julian had arranged for her was already waiting. Vivienne ignored him entirely, flagging down a passing cab and sliding into the backseat.

She didn't want to go back to the hospital, and she certainly had no intention of resting.

Her chest was a chaotic vortex of bitter resentment and fury, twisting around her organs so tightly she could barely breathe.

She was going to find Silas Thorne. She had to demand answers to his face.

What exactly had she done to offend him so deeply? Why was he so utterly merciless, cutting off every single escape route and leaving her without a shred of hope?

But before she confronted him, she had a pit stop to make.

Vivienne ordered the cab to the nearest high-end mall. She swiftly purchased a new outfit, shedding the glaring hospital gown that screamed weakness and defeat. Then, she marched to a luxury beauty counter, meticulously having her makeup done to mask her pale complexion and breathe life back into her features.

She was deeply confident in her stunning looks. If she was going to see him, she was going to look her absolute best.

Half an hour later, Vivienne arrived at Merit Biotech headquarters.

Unsurprisingly, getting to Silas was impossible. The receptionist offered a perfectly polite smile, but her tone was a solid wall of ice. "Ms. Sinclair, Mr. Thorne's schedule is entirely booked for the day. He does not take unannounced meetings. Please leave."

But Vivienne wasn't the type to give up easily. She had made the trip, and she was going to see Silas Thorne before she left, no matter what.

She headed straight for the underground VIP parking garage. He had to leave work eventually.

She waited for three agonizing hours. Finally, his towering, imposing silhouette appeared. Vivienne immediately rushed forward. "Mr. Thorne, can I please have a few minutes of your time? I need to speak with you."

Silas glanced at her once, then immediately looked away, treating her like thin air. He clearly had zero interest in acknowledging her.

Stung by his dismissive glare, Vivienne blurted out, "Mr. Thorne, if you refuse to hear me out, I'll have no choice but to go straight to Arthur Vance and Willow."

That finally got a reaction. Silas stopped in his tracks and turned, his gaze sweeping over her with a crushing, predatory weight.

Meeting his eyes, Vivienne's breath hitched. She had to admit—Silas Thorne was breathtakingly handsome.

He wore a flawlessly tailored black bespoke suit that accentuated his broad shoulders and commanding presence. The dim garage lighting caught the sharp, rugged lines of his profile—his piercing eyes, a striking nose, and thin lips naturally set into an

unapproachable line. He exuded a bone-chilling aura of supreme power, a silent warning that demanded everyone keep their distance.

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Yet Vivienne stepped forward, instinctively fixing her hair. She slipped right into the routine she perfected with Julian—softening her voice and looking up with wide, tear-filled eyes. "Mr. Thorne, why do you insist on throwing me off the project team? I haven't done anything wrong. Please, I'm begging you, just give me one more chance. I promise I'll exceed your expectations and push this project forward flawlessly."

She laid it on thick, utterly convinced no man alive could resist a gorgeous woman looking so fragile and desperate.

Julian, Seth Sterling, and even that creep Jayden Chase—while some of them meant nothing to her, they all proved one universal truth: her beauty was an absolute weapon.

But the hesitation and pity she expected never came.

An awkward silence stretched between them. Vivienne finally looked up, only to find the man's expression entirely unchanged. His dark, fathomless eyes were as dead and frozen as a millennia-old glacier, failing to reflect a single ounce of her calculated vulnerability.

Silas's lips parted, his voice a low, freezing baritone devoid of any emotion. "The decision to remove you was my personal order."

And he wasn't finished. With absolute finality, he added, "And it's not just this project. From this day forward, you are permanently blacklisted from every property, division, and venture under Merit Biotech. You will never set foot inside Merit again."

With a single sentence, he had incinerated every last bridge.

Before she could even process the shock, his voice dropped again, carrying an oppressive, tyrannical weight. "Did I make myself perfectly clear?"

Those few words held no anger, no expression—only a merciless interrogation radiating absolute authority.

A violent chill ripped down Vivienne's spine, freezing her blood. But terror was quickly overshadowed by white-hot rage.

She had grown up at the absolute pinnacle of high society, worshipped by everyone around her. Today, she had swallowed her pride and degraded herself to beg him, only for this man to refuse her even a shred of basic dignity?

It defied all logic.

Unable to comprehend where she went wrong, she tried to explain herself again, but Silas was already turning his back to leave. Humiliation and fury erupted in her chest, and she screamed after him, "What did I ever do to you?! Why are you targeting me like this? Since we partnered with Merit, I have poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this! And about that research trip—I've said it a million times, I never tried to hurt Willow! Why won't you believe me? Without a single shred of evidence, what right do you have to treat me like this?!"

Faced with her hysterical demands, Silas merely lowered his gaze, his lips curving into a faint, bone-chilling sneer. "Evidence? You think I, Silas Thorne, need evidence to do anything?"

Vivienne recoiled, genuinely terrified by the sheer force of his presence. His quiet demeanor since arriving in New York City had almost made her forget he was known as "The Cold King" for a reason.

Still, she stubbornly held her ground, fueled by her own twisted logic. "You're only doing this to avenge Willow for the sake of Arthur Vance, aren't you? But think about it—is it really worth burning a major partnership to the ground just to protect some subordinate's girlfriend?"

She threw the words like a grenade, hoping to provoke him. If things went her way, maybe she could drive a wedge between him and Arthur. Once Arthur lost Silas's backing, Willow would lose her safety net and crash back down to reality.

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But instead of getting angry, Silas let out a rare laugh. It was a faint sound, laced with the kind of mocking amusement one reserved for watching an absolute fool.

"Do you honestly think Arthur Vance is the one pursuing Willow?"

The sudden twist in his words hit Vivienne like a physical blow.

Her mind flatlined. "Isn't he?" she blurted out. "That's what everyone says."

Silas didn't answer. The smile on his lips merely deepened into something lethal.

A sickening dread crawled up Vivienne's throat. Something was terribly wrong.

Her mind began racing through every recent event. When Willow was kicked to the curb by Sinclair Group, Merit immediately threw her a lifeline. Then they arranged the best hospital care for her mother. And now, during this crisis, Silas Thorne orchestrated a massive corporate war overnight, perfectly willing to sever ties with Sinclair Group just to shield Willow...

All these isolated incidents, things Vivienne had casually dismissed, violently snapped together like puzzle pieces, revealing a truth so horrifying her blood ran ice cold.

Could it be... the person who had been obsessively guarding Willow, shielding her from every shadow... was never Arthur Vance? Was it...?

Vivienne stood paralyzed, her limbs locking up in sheer disbelief.

Impossible!

Who was Silas Thorne?

He was the absolute sovereign of Seattle's elite, the man standing at the very apex of the corporate pyramid, wielding earth-shattering power. He was the untouchable god that countless heiresses in high society fought tooth and nail just to stand near.

He was notoriously aloof, utterly devoid of worldly desires, practically untouched by human emotion.

How could a man so unimaginably supreme, so unreachable, ever look twice at someone like Willow Horgan?

Not only was Willow still legally married, but she used to be an overweight, utterly forgettable nobody! Even Vivienne used to look at her with outright disgust. Why would Silas, a man kissed by the gods, ever lower himself to desire a woman like that?

She couldn't accept it. She refused to believe it.

But just as her mind spun into a chaotic frenzy, the towering, imposing man standing before her spoke again. Every single word was a meticulously aimed bullet, shattering her final delusions.

"From the very beginning, the one pursuing Willow wasn't Arthur. It was me."

Crack.

Vivienne swore she could hear the sound of her world shattering into a million jagged pieces.

For a split second, she felt like the sky had crashed down on her.

She stood completely frozen, every ounce of strength violently siphoned from her body. Her fingertips trembled uncontrollably.

If Arthur Vance was the one who wanted Willow, she still had a fighting chance. But if it was Silas Thorne... she didn't have a single prayer of winning.

A suffocating wave of despair and immense inferiority crashed over her. The light in Vivienne's eyes died, replaced by pure, unadulterated madness. "You actually like her? What could you possibly see in her?!"

Silas stared at her coldly, his eyes devoid of anything resembling humanity. "Do I need to report my reasons to you?"

He wasn't telling her this to explain himself. He was giving her a definitive, lethal warning.

He was telling her that from now on, Willow was entirely under his protection. If she had any brain cells left, she would stay as far away from Willow as humanly possible, or he would tear her apart.

But Vivienne's twisted mind outright rejected reality. She frantically clawed through her memories, searching for a weapon to strike back with.

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Suddenly, it hit her. Her eyes sparked with the manic thrill of victory as she lashed out, "Silas, I'm telling you, she's playing you! Have you even bothered to look into her past? She hasn't even finalized her divorce with Julian yet, and her marriage is a total trainwreck! And way before she even married Julian, she was already dirty. I bet you had no idea she had such a filthy past, did you?"

"Oh?" Silas's voice was a low, lazy drawl, perfectly masking any hint of emotion. "How exactly do you know all this?"

Believing he had swallowed the bait, Vivienne felt a violent surge of triumph. She eagerly pressed her advantage. "Don't forget, my last name is Sinclair. I grew up in that house. There isn't a single dirty secret about her that I don't know! Don't let her play you for a fool. Besides, she didn't even used to look like this."

Silas listened to her frantic rambling in total silence. His expression hadn't shifted a fraction of an inch from the start. But when he finally spoke, his words dripped with absolute venom.

"Whatever you think you know, you will swallow it right back down into your throat. If I ever find out a single other soul has heard this garbage, I will personally hold you responsible for every last word."

Vivienne, who had been riding the high of a perceived victory just a second ago, had her reality shattered once again. The color drained from her face, leaving her looking deathly ill. What shocked her even more was the fact that Silas didn't seem angry at Willow at all.

She couldn't process it.

What man wouldn't completely lose his mind after finding out the woman he loved had that kind of past? Anyone else would be utterly repulsed, yet Silas didn't show an ounce of fury. If anything, he was defending her fiercely!

"You... you're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?" Silas fired back, his tone freezing. "I already knew."

And he didn't just know about it—he was the very man Willow had been with that night.

Years ago, caught in a vicious corporate war, Silas had been ambushed and drugged by his rivals. Half-conscious and trapped in his hotel room, a girl had accidentally stumbled in. Afterward, he tracked down every detail of what happened and realized it had been Willow. He planned to clean up his corporate mess and then officially pursue her in the light of day.

But by the time he surfaced, she was already married to Julian Sinclair. Word on the street was that Julian was the love of her life. Having lost any right to interfere, Silas stepped back into the shadows, silently guarding her from afar.

It was only recently, when Willow hit rock bottom, that he finally stepped into the light.

Vivienne was still reeling from his words, her mind unable to compute the information. "Then... then why did you just ask me how I knew?"

"Just a test," Silas said, looking down at her as if she were a piece of trash stuck to his shoe. "And it seems you truly have no bottom line."

The realization crashed down on Vivienne, entirely annihilating everything she thought she knew.

She stood paralyzed, her face as white as a sheet, and it took her a long moment just to find her voice. "Impossible! You're lying to me, aren't you?!"

Silas liking Willow was already unfathomable. But for him to know about her darkest secret and just accept it? Vivienne's mind violently rejected the concept.

An intense wave of regret washed over her for ever seeking him out today. It felt like the entire universe was playing a sick joke on her.

Driven to the brink of panic, she lost all rationality, her eyes twisting with demonic jealousy. "It's Willow! She threw herself at you, didn't she?! She completely manipulated you! She's a manipulative tramp, just acting pitiful to reel you in!"

That sentence struck Silas's absolute final nerve. Any trace of restraint he held onto evaporated instantly. A torrential inferno ignited in his eyes, and the temperature in the garage plummeted to absolute zero. "Watch your mouth, and watch your tone."

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He delivered his final ultimatum, his voice deadly soft. "Right now, you've only been erased from Merit. But if you ever dare to slander Willow again, I will not hesitate to erase you from New York City entirely."

"As for whatever twisted drama is happening between you and your precious Julian, I couldn't care less. But engrave this into your memory: if anyone, or anything, dares to involve Willow, or makes her suffer so much as a single grievance, I, Silas Thorne, will rain hell down upon them."

Vivienne stumbled out of Merit Biotech in a total daze. Her immediate instinct was to call Julian. She wanted to scream into the phone that it wasn't Arthur Vance—it had been Silas Thorne obsessing over Willow this entire time!

They had all been played!

She wanted to tell him exactly what kind of cheating tramp Willow truly was—how she was already lining up her next billionaire before the ink on their divorce papers was even drawn. She was nothing but a manipulative fraud with zero morals!

But as she pulled out her phone and hovered over his name, she froze.

If she told Julian, wouldn't that just tie him back to Willow again? That was her biggest fear. It was better to keep Willow's name entirely out of Julian's orbit.

Besides, Julian was already dragging his feet on the divorce. If she triggered his ruthless competitive streak by revealing Silas was in the picture, it would utterly backfire.

The more men fought over Willow, the more Julian would care. He wouldn't let go; his ego would demand a war.

Realizing this, Vivienne slowly lowered her phone.

Of course, she didn't take Silas's warning to heart either. Did he really think a few threats would force her to retreat and hand over a total victory to Willow?

Hilarious.

His violent protectiveness only fueled her absolute hatred for Willow. She wouldn't stop; she would just change tactics. She would hide her fangs, act more meticulously, and strike from the shadows with a far deadlier, flawless plan.

Meanwhile, on his drive home, Silas casually stopped to pick up some groceries.

Once in his kitchen, he prepped the ingredients while shooting a text to Willow, telling her to come over for dinner. He used to cook for her all the time, and now, with her recovering from her injuries, he had the ultimate excuse. He didn't even need to ask—he just told her to come over.

He kept the menu light and healthy to help her wounds heal, but with his elite culinary skills, every single dish tasted phenomenal.

As they ate and chatted, the conversation naturally drifted toward Vivienne's sudden expulsion from the project.

"I saw the internal memo," Willow said, looking up at him. "Did you really completely remove Vivienne from the core team?"

Silas hadn't formally told her yet, but he figured she would see the paperwork.

He smoothly served her a bowl of soup, his expression entirely unreadable, though his hand paused for a fraction of a second. "Yeah. What do you think? Was I too harsh?"

"Of course not," Willow immediately shook her head. "Merit is your company. Personnel shifts and enforcing the rules are entirely within your rights. Whatever decision you make is perfectly justified."

Silas handed her the bowl, waiting. That wasn't what he wanted to hear.

Catching his gaze, Willow offered a soft smile and added, "Besides, I know you did it to protect me. I'm not foolish enough to feel sorry for someone who tried to destroy me."

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Silas smiled. She knew exactly what she was doing.

That was good. It meant his efforts hadn't been in vain.

The topic shifted quickly. They never had a habit of discussing other people during meals anyway, and it had just come up in passing. Soon enough, the conversation circled back to Willow.

Silas looked at her. "What are your plans now? Do you want to pause your current projects and take a proper break for a while?"

He knew better than anyone just how much of a toll the Appalachian trip had taken on her, and he felt the ache of it in his own chest. Her injuries hadn't fully healed either. Even though they were hidden, he noticed every flinch whenever it was time to apply her ointment.

Working hard and chasing her dreams was fine—he would never hold her back—but it all had to be built on the foundation of her physical health.

To his surprise, Willow shook her head. "No, I've been busy with Ethan's case recently. We still had a lot of follow-up records and nursing files left pending when we left. The team has been sending me the data over the past few days, and I need to verify and organize everything."

"If I wrap up these loose ends early, it'll be easier to track his recovery. I just want to help him as much as I can."

Silas frowned the moment he heard that. "That’s the People & Culture Department and R&D’s job, not yours. It seems Arthur hasn't been delegating properly. I'll have another word with him later."

Sensing his darkening mood, Willow quickly set down her fork and explained in a soft, soothing tone. "I haven't spent that much time on it. I just take a little time each day to review everyone's summaries and check the details. It really doesn't take much effort."

Afraid he would actually lose his temper and take it out on her colleagues, she hurriedly added, "Plus, Leo has been helping. He's been keeping an eye on the progress and handling most of the tedious work. I'm just doing the final checks. I promise I'm not overworking myself."

But even as she finished, his expression didn't soften. Willow grabbed her phone, pulled up her chat with Leo, and slid it across the table. "Look at my messages with Leo if you don't believe me. I really haven't done much. He's handling almost all of it."

Strangely, Silas maintained his icy facade. His lips were pressed into a tight, humorless line. The suffocating tension around him lingered, making him look like he was still deeply displeased.

Willow was at a complete loss.

Silas had never treated her like this before. Even on the rare occasions when he frowned in displeasure, he had never directed that coldness at her, let alone subjected her to this kind of silent, calculated indifference.

Seeing her look so helpless made Silas's heart ache. He was just putting on an act; he could never bear to actually be mad at her. Yet, he held back from breaking character because he had his own agenda.

He was doing this on purpose. First, he wanted to make it absolutely clear that he cared about this and would not allow her to neglect her own health.

Second, he harbored a childish urge to test her—something he wouldn't even admit to himself. He wanted to see how Willow would react when he was upset, to see if she actually cared about him.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Just as Silas was about to cave, unable to bear her anxious expression any longer, Willow beat him to the punch.

"Are you mad at me?"

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Her voice was naturally soft and sweet. Lowering her tone on purpose, her words ended in a fragile, breathy whisper that brushed against his heart like a feather. The tenderness of it was intoxicating.

Silas shifted his gaze, deliberately avoiding her clear eyes to hide his softening resolve. His voice remained flat. "No."

But as Willow looked at him, she knew exactly what he was doing. He was saying one thing and meaning another. Though, to be fair, he didn't look entirely angry.

Back when she tried to communicate with Julian, she had grown entirely too used to what his anger looked like. It was always a display of raw hostility and glaring eyes, a naked impatience and disgust swirling in his gaze, as if he wished she would disappear on the spot. He had always made her feel like even breathing in his presence was a burden.

But Silas wasn't like that.

He didn't offer a cold scolding, nor did he use his gaze to pressure her. His features were simply composed, carrying a quiet, solemn aura. Like a sudden cool evening breeze through the mountains, it didn't hurt, but it made one thing perfectly clear—he was unhappy.

Willow lowered her gaze, her long, thick lashes trembling slightly, feeling a wave of uncertainty.

Her world had always been simple, and her romantic experience was painfully limited. She had rarely encountered a situation like this, so she had no idea how to handle it. Racking her brain, she could only think of how Silas had comforted her in similar situations.

So, she decided to take a page out of his playbook. After all, every time Silas did these things for her, her mood always improved.

Willow glanced at the soup bowl sitting beside him. Reaching over, she gently ladled a serving and offered it to him.

Silas took it, genuinely flattered. "Is this for me?"

"Yes. The soup is delicious, you should try it," Willow said, mimicking the gentle way he usually spoke to her. "It has dates, longan, and yam, with a bit of ginger to balance it out. The lotus seeds tone down the sweetness. It really is quite good."

As she spoke, Silas kept his eyes fixed on her. His gaze was deep and unreadable, leaving Willow guessing at his thoughts.

She had been wondering what was running through his mind, but as her words faded, a sudden realization hit her. Silas had been the one to simmer this soup from start to finish. Did she really think he didn't know the ingredients?

She was essentially lecturing a master chef on his own recipe. It was mortifying. She couldn't even copy his moves right.

Willow pursed her lips awkwardly, about to say something to cover up her embarrassment. But to her surprise, Silas simply took the bowl without a single teasing remark or hint of displeasure. He took a sip and graciously said, "It tastes incredible, especially since you served it for me."

"Really?" Hearing that, Willow's mood instantly brightened. She knew he was probably just humoring her—how could the same pot of soup taste better just because someone else served it?

But she was still thrilled. At the very least, his mood had improved, proving she was headed in the right direction.

Encouraged, she tried to brainstorm along the same lines. Aside from cooking and serving her meals, Silas had also given her plenty of gifts.

Buying something new right now was impossible, but Willow suddenly remembered the night light she had bought a while ago. She had intended to use it for reading in bed, and it was still unopened. It would have to do in a pinch.

She hurried back to her room and quickly returned, presenting him with the freshly unwrapped gift box. "Here, this is for you."

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Silas hadn't expected a gift at all. The situation had already escalated far beyond his expectations; the truth was, any lingering annoyance had vanished the moment Willow served him the soup.

He reached out and took the box, his voice trembling slightly. "What is this?"

"It's a night light I bought a while ago. The light is super soft, not glaring at all. It's perfect for leaving on overnight or when you need to get up. It's very soothing, ideal for bedtime."

Willow looked a bit sheepish. "I know I should have gotten you a new, much better gift, but there wasn't enough time. I had to make do with this. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't," Silas replied instantly. He was too thrilled to even consider minding. Honestly, he had never expected her to give him a gift in the first place, and the fact that it was something so personal made him even happier.

He gripped the box tightly, half afraid she might change her mind and ask for it back.

He thought to himself that this was enough.

Silas's trivial bout of displeasure was completely gone. His little test on Willow had yielded the exact answer he wanted.

She definitely cared about him. She cared about his feelings and his thoughts, and that was all that mattered. As for why she cared or how long it would last, Silas didn't want to overthink it right now.

They had plenty of time. He could afford to wait, to slowly prove his devotion, and gently coax her until he was the only man in her heart.

Pushing aside his racing thoughts, he looked up at her gentle features, ready to tell her everything was fine.

But before he could speak, Willow suddenly took a half-step forward, closing the distance between them in an instant.

Her slender figure leaned in slightly, her delicate face tilted up. Her eyes, shining and clear as morning dew, gazed at him. She looked like a docile kitten trying to please its owner, filled with a cautious, soft-spoken hope.

"So, can you not be mad anymore?"

In that instant, the last thread of Silas's restraint shattered completely. His heart melted into a puddle, and every ounce of pretense evaporated, leaving behind nothing but overwhelming adoration and affection.

Powerless against her, he told the truth. "I was never actually mad."

Willow looked confused and pressed the issue. "Then why did you give me the silent treatment?"

Silas choked on his words. He could hardly admit that he had been deliberately acting cold just to mess with her. Flustered, he averted his gaze and cleared his throat to change the subject. "It was nothing. I'm going to the kitchen to wash some fruit."

As he walked away, Willow watched his retreating back. Even though she didn't quite understand his sudden shift in mood, she figured she was on the right track today. At the very least, he wasn't upset anymore.

—

Meanwhile, after leaving Merit Biotech, Vivienne went straight back to the hospital. This time, Julian didn't have to force her; she returned obediently on her own because it was the only place she could catch her breath.

She had hit a massive brick wall with Silas, but there was nothing she could do. He was Silas Thorne, a man no one in their circles dared to provoke. Not even the Sinclair Group could rival him. When dealing with a man like that, she could only swallow her grievances whole, terrified of showing even a hint of displeasure.

Over the next few days, Vivienne stayed cooped up in the hospital. She told everyone she was recovering from an illness and needed rest, but in reality, she was just hiding from the world. Having been kicked off the Merit project, she dreaded hearing what the people at the firm were saying about her.

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She had always been a deeply prideful person, incapable of tolerating anyone viewing her as anything less than perfect. Her solution was to simply vanish and keep out of sight.

Naturally, during her time at the hospital, almost no one came to visit her. Aside from Toby dropping by occasionally with the nanny, she was entirely alone. Julian certainly hadn't shown up. He hadn't even bothered with a perfunctory text or a routine phone call.

Vivienne spent her days steeped in anxiety, terrified that Julian's resentment toward her was growing, making her situation even more unsalvageable. Consequently, she was constantly in a foul mood.

On the fourth day, someone finally arrived. Vivienne briefly fantasized it might be Julian, but the moment the door swung open, her heart plummeted. It was the absolute last person she wanted to see: Jayden Chase.

Already depressed, his appearance tipped her into pure irritation. She had shut herself in to avoid drama, yet here was an uninvited guest, going out of his way to ruin her day.

Jayden seemed completely unbothered by her icy reception. Moving with a relaxed familiarity, he carried an elegant fruit basket and a bouquet of blooming champagne roses. He strolled up to the bed, set the items on the nightstand, and flashed a lazy grin. "What's the matter? Aren't you happy to see me? You don't look so good."

Vivienne lazily lifted her eyelids, her tone distant and detached. "I'm doing perfectly fine. No need to trouble yourself."

Acting as if he didn't sense her repulsion, Jayden pulled up a chair and sat down. Taking his time, he began rambling about the latest gossip at the firm, gleefully filling her in on every excruciating detail of the Merit project's recent developments.

He talked about how Mr. Smith had taken over her position, negotiated a new partnership plan, and how pleased Merit was with him. The summit was proceeding exactly as scheduled, and so on...

Every word was a surgical strike at Vivienne's most humiliating, vulnerable wounds.

Her temples throbbed as the irritation and hostility piled up, layer upon layer, until she couldn't suppress it anymore. Cutting him off abruptly, her voice was stripped of all warmth. "Are you done?"

Jayden paused and looked up at her.

"If there's nothing else, get out," Vivienne demanded. "The doctor ordered me to get some rest. I don't have time to listen to your pointless gossip."

Instead of leaving, Jayden let out a low chuckle.

The smile didn't reach his eyes. Instead, it masked a dark, calculating intent, mixed with the smug confidence of someone holding all the cards. "You don't seriously think I came all this way just to share gossip, do you?"

Vivienne scoffed coldly. "Isn't that exactly what you're doing?"

Jayden observed the suppressed bitterness in her eyes and curled his lips into a meaningful smirk. He enunciated every word. "I'm here to offer you a way out. Do you want to win back Mr. Smith's favor?"

Vivienne felt a jolt in her chest. She snapped her eyes up to meet his gaze.

She was cornered on all fronts. She had been permanently ousted from the Merit project and had thoroughly offended Silas. Julian's trust in her had shattered, and that wasn't going to be repaired anytime soon.

Mr. Smith was the only lifeline she had left. He was her only ticket to turning the tables and reclaiming her status.

A spark of hope ignited in her eyes. Forcing down her desperation, she cautiously pressed him. "What do you mean by that? You have a way to make Mr. Smith value me again?"

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"Of course I do," Jayden said, a half-smile playing on his lips. "Why else do you think I went through all this trouble to see you today?"

With that, he took a slow, measured step toward the bed.

A strange, suffocating presence instantly invaded the air, breaching Vivienne's personal space and making her chest tight. She instinctively shrank back, pressing her spine against the cold headboard as a wave of physical revulsion crawled up her spine.

But Vivienne also knew all too well that she was surrounded by enemies. Without any better options, she had no choice but to endure it.

Ignoring the blatant disgust in her eyes, Jayden casually turned and parked himself right on the edge of her mattress.

That was the final straw for Vivienne. "Just spit it out. I don't have time to play games with you. You know exactly what kind of situation I'm in right now. Wasting my time won't do you any good either."

"What's the rush?" Jayden chuckled softly. "It's rare I get a chance to be this close to you. Let me get a good look first."

Before Vivienne could react, he reached out and locked a firm grip around her wrist.

Vivienne wasn't having it. She immediately raised her other hand to strike him, but right before her palm connected, Jayden spoke. "Have you forgotten? Mr. Smith came to the States this time for the Sinclair project, yes, but he also has another, more crucial mission. That matter is his true priority, and it's the only bargaining chip you have left."

Hearing this, Vivienne's raised hand froze mid-air.

Now that he mentioned it, she did recall something along those lines. When Mr. Smith first arrived, he had told her he was looking for someone and hoped she could assist him.

Vivienne had readily agreed at the time, but she had long since forgotten about it. To be precise, she never bothered to remember. She only cared about her own agenda and couldn't be bothered with anyone else's problems.

Taking advantage of her distraction, Jayden lifted his other hand. His fingers slowly trailed up her forearm until, with a subtle flick of his wrist, he quietly slipped his hand beneath the blankets.

Vivienne jolted. A bone-deep wave of disgust and humiliation instantly overpowered her rationality. She violently wrenched herself free and slapped him hard across the face. "Jayden, don't push it! If you want to talk, then talk. But if you touch me again, this conversation is over!"

Jayden didn't get angry. Instead, his smile widened. "I just have one question. Do you still want to make a comeback?"

That was her fatal weakness. Left with no alternative, Vivienne hissed through her teeth. "Spit it out before I change my mind!"

Growing even bolder, Jayden leaned forward, lowering his voice right next to her ear. "He came here to find someone who goes by the alias 'WH'."

"WH?" Vivienne repeated. It was coming back to her now; that was exactly what Mr. Smith had said. He had emphasized how important this person was and how desperately he needed to find her.

But Vivienne quickly furrowed her brows. "What does that have to do with me? I don't know anyone named WH, and I certainly don't know where she is. Are you just trying to mess with me?"

Jayden raised an eyebrow. "Of course you don't know her, and you don't need to. But I have a way for you to find her."

Vivienne looked at him like he was an idiot and sneered. "If you actually had a way to find this person and get into Mr. Smith's good graces, you would have claimed the credit yourself. You wouldn't come running here to hand me the opportunity."

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Jayden genuinely appreciated her sharp mind. "You're absolutely right. If I could pull this off myself, I wouldn't have come looking for you."

He paused, his gaze openly appraising her face with a mix of calculation, weighing the odds, and unmasked conspiracy. "But I can't do it, because I'm not a woman. Mr. Smith doesn't know who this WH is, but he is absolutely certain of one thing: she is female."

Vivienne was losing her patience. "What exactly are you getting at?"

"It's simple," Jayden said, slowly straightening up. His tone was as casual as a chat over coffee, but his words were chillingly ruthless. "If you want to find someone without searching through a sea of faces, the best, most direct, and easiest method... is to become that person."

For a moment, Vivienne froze, fully grasping his implication.

He didn't want her to find the real person. He wanted her to impersonate WH. Only someone like him could concoct such a scheme.

It was absurd, venomous, and entirely devoid of morals—the ultimate high-wire act of deception.

Yet, Vivienne didn't feel a shred of fear. Instead, an icy wave of adrenaline rushed through her veins.

She quickly regained her composure, her meticulous mind racing as she immediately spotted the flaw in the plan. "That's easy to say, but I know nothing about this WH. How am I supposed to impersonate her?"

Jayden brushed off her concern entirely. "The internet leaves a trail for everything these days. As long as she's left a digital footprint, we can find it. You still have connections, right? Just hire a few people to dig into her background, her research, and her mannerisms. Is that really so hard?"

"As for Mr. Smith, I'll handle him for you."

Put that way, it did sound like it was worth a shot. Vivienne didn't argue further, her mind already shifting to the logistics of pulling it off.

While she was lost in thought, Jayden quickly planted a kiss on her cheek. Although she looked haggard and still bore the faint scars of her recent ordeal, the undeniable grace of a woman raised in high society and pampered with wealth remained intact. Her stunning curves and refined aura were unmistakable.

Compared to the cheap flings he usually dealt with, she was in a completely different league.

Vivienne snapped back to reality, glaring at him fiercely before snatching a wet wipe from the nightstand and scrubbing her face aggressively.

Jayden couldn't care less about her reaction. In fact, the more stubborn she acted, the more entertaining he found it. Right now, she needed him. One day, she would be the one begging for his help. When those roles reversed, he'd make sure she cried for it.

Jayden didn't stay at the hospital much longer. He left quickly, partly because he didn't want to draw attention by overstaying, and partly because he had a lot of preparations to make. Despite acting so confident and assured in front of Vivienne, the truth was, he wasn't entirely certain this would work.

Mr. Smith was a stubborn and cautious man who rarely spoke about his personal affairs. Plus, as a foreigner among the research team, Jayden wasn't highly regarded, making it incredibly difficult for him to dig up more intel. But for the sake of his own ambitions—and to keep Vivienne on the hook—Jayden was willing to risk it all.

Remembering the soft feel of her skin against his fingertips, his smile widened. He was already looking forward to their next encounter.

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The moment Jayden left, Vivienne sprinted into the bathroom.

That suffocating, nauseating sensation felt like slime glued to her skin, seeping through her clothes. She twisted the faucet as far as it would go, the roar of the water echoing through the tiled room.

Vivienne hastily tore off her clothes. Scalding water mixed with thick white steam poured over her, turning her skin raw and red, but she felt entirely numb to the heat.

She gripped a rough loofah and scrubbed her neck, arms, and wrists with a punishing, repetitive force. The pressure bordered on self-mutilation. She didn't stop even when her skin burned, turned crimson, and throbbed with pain.

The memory of Jayden's oppressive proximity and his vile touch replayed in her mind in vivid detail. It acted like a jagged needle, violently bursting the seal on the nightmares she had tried so desperately to lock away.

Shadow Creek Grotto... the freezing wind... the desolate mountain wilderness... and those two repulsive strangers...

The humiliation and terror she had fought so hard to bury—pretending none of it had ever happened—surged back to the surface. It coiled around her limbs, suffocating her and sending a violent churn of nausea through her stomach.

She had spent the last few weeks trying with all her might to act normal, forcing herself to block out the memory. But Jayden's unannounced visit had completely shattered her fragile illusion of peace.

She had already fallen so far, and yet these men still felt they could trample all over her.

Vivienne's head pounded mercilessly. Her grievances, her disgrace, her fury, and her despair all twisted together into a pure, concentrated hatred directed at one single person—Willow.

It was Willow. It was all that despicable woman's fault!

If it weren't for her, Silas would never have resorted to such ruthless measures. He would never have thrown her into that abyssal cave and scarred her for life.

Moreover, if it weren't for Willow, she would never have been booted from the Merit project, nor reduced to a pawn subjected to Jayden's blackmail.

She swore to herself that, one day, she would make Willow pay the price.

It was a long time before Vivienne finally stepped out of the bathroom. The moment she did, she found Susannah walking in with Toby.

They spotted Vivienne freshly out of the shower, and Susannah looked puzzled. "What on earth are you doing showering in the middle of the day? It's not muggy out, the temperature is perfectly mild."

Vivienne's heart skipped a beat. She swiftly masked the lingering darkness in her eyes, forcing her voice into a soft, gentle register. "I did a little light exercise earlier and worked up a sweat. I felt sticky and uncomfortable, so I just took a quick shower."

Susannah didn't pick up on the lie. Still playing the concerned elder, she fussed, "You're not fully recovered yet. You shouldn't risk catching a draft. Go dry your hair."

"Okay."

After Vivienne finished drying her hair, Susannah spoke up again. "When I was coming up, I saw the front desk log. They said a man came up here to see you earlier? Is that true?"

Vivienne's fingers stiffened, a sharp spike of panic hitting her chest. "Oh, yes. Just a regular coworker. He dropped off some case files and left immediately."

"You're in the hospital. Why are you even looking at case files?" Susannah's face turned stern. She reached out and patted Vivienne's arm, her tone heavy with unspoken meaning. "Your health is what matters most. Julian is holding down the Sinclair Group, so you don't need to exhaust yourself. Just focus on managing the household. Besides, as a woman staying here alone, it's inappropriate to have a male colleague visiting you. You're simple, kind, and pure-hearted. You don't understand how complicated people out there can be. Don't let yourself get dragged down by the wrong crowd."

"I shouldn't have to spell this out, but I assume you understand," Susannah continued. "No matter what happens, you and Julian are going to spend the rest of your lives together. Even if he doesn't say it out loud, you need to be mindful. No man likes it when his wife gets too close to other men."

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Worried she was being too harsh, Susannah quickly softened her approach. "Julian is my only biological child, and Toby is his only son. As long as the two of you live well, everything the Sinclair Group owns will be yours in the future."

Vivienne knew Susannah was issuing a subtle warning, and her chest tightened. Though no one knew about her past escapades abroad, she couldn't help but feel a lingering paranoia.

Burdened by a guilty conscience, she was terrified Susannah's sharp eyes might catch the flush of panic on her ears or the guilt written across her face. Worse, she feared Susannah might see the filthy reality of what had just happened in this very room, or the dark, twisted schemes brewing in her mind.

Quietly, Vivienne tugged at her loose clothing, making sure every inch of skin on her neck and wrists was firmly hidden from view.

Once she was covered, she banished the anxiety from her eyes, looking up with the perfect mask of a submissive, obedient daughter. "I know, Mom. Don't worry. I'll definitely keep

my boundaries in check. I won't let anyone lead me astray, and I won't give you any reason to worry."

She lowered her gaze, the picture of devotion. "I'm still the same Vivienne. I haven't changed a bit. I'll always be your and Dad's most dutiful daughter, Julian's biggest supporter, and the mother Toby trusts most."

Seeing her like this, the sternness melted from Susannah's face, replaced by a warm, satisfied glow. Her mind at ease, she leaned down, handed Toby over to Vivienne, and prepared to leave.

This had been the routine for days now. Susannah would drop Toby off in the mornings and pick him up at night.

Right before walking out the door, she mentioned offhandedly, "Come to think of it, I've been meaning to ask. Toby has been unusually lethargic lately."

Vivienne's heart leaped into her throat. Her fingers curled into tight fists, though she fought to keep her expression perfectly neutral.

Oblivious to Vivienne's panic, Susannah kept talking. "Especially whenever he comes back from visiting you, he's just so sleepy. He stays groggy all day, like he can never get enough rest. Even when he's awake, he has zero energy."

Vivienne forced an awkward laugh and quickly covered her tracks. "It's probably just a growth spurt taking a lot out of him. You know how little boys are—they burn through their energy fast. They need more sleep, and when they play hard, they crash hard. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, Mom. Don't overthink it."

But the truth was a secret only Vivienne knew. Toby's abnormal lethargy had absolutely nothing to do with a growth spurt. It was the direct result of the micro-doses of sedatives she slipped him every day, keeping him docile so she could secure the room and handle her shady business without interruptions.

Susannah didn't press the issue. "I suppose you're right, growing boys do need their sleep. It's getting late and I have a few errands to run, so I'll leave Toby with you."

"Okay, don't worry about a thing. I'll take good care of him."

The moment Susannah left, Toby rushed over and clung to Vivienne's leg. Vivienne stared down at him, her eyes brimming with impatience. She thought the boy was pathetically clingy. She treated him so poorly and rarely gave him a shred of affection, yet he still wouldn't let go of her. If she didn't need to keep him firmly under her control as a bargaining chip, she wouldn't waste a single word on him.

"Mommy, can I have some soda today?" Toby looked up at her with hopeful eyes.

The 'soda' he was asking for was Cola laced with sleeping pills. She used to put it in his water, but when he started refusing to drink it, she had to switch tactics.

Susannah had just given her a warning. There was no way Vivienne was going to sedate him again today.

Without a second thought, Vivienne shoved his clinging arms away and tossed an iPad into his hands. "Go play by yourself."

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Two days later, Vivienne received a message from Jayden Chase. It contained a link to a site called GeneEdit Nexus, along with a dense file of information regarding "WH."

She masked her casual demeanor instantly, her gaze sharpening. Without hesitation, her fingers flew across the screen, taking screenshots and archiving the data. She dialed a number, her voice flat and strictly professional. "Look into a website called GeneEdit Nexus. I need a deep dive into its academic circles, anonymous posting rules, and absolutely every digital footprint left by the user WH. The more detailed, the better. Get it to me ASAP."

Hanging up, a satisfied smirk played on her lips. She had expected this to take weeks; she hadn't realized Jayden actually knew what he was doing.

She had no intention of replying to him. That was simply how she operated—extracting what she needed and never wasting an ounce of energy on useless pleasantries.

But the moment she set her phone down, the screen lit up with a barrage of notifications.

Jayden had dropped his professional facade. The screen was flooded with crude, explicit text messages. They were laced with naked propositions, disgusting flirtations, and a forced, sickening intimacy that made her skin crawl.

Vivienne stiffened, a layer of cold disgust settling over her eyes. She hadn't even bothered to thank him for the crucial intel, and now these vile messages weren't even worth a second glance.

She locked the screen with an impassive expression, tossed the phone onto the desk, and ignored it entirely.

She assumed her icy silence would force him to take a hint. She was wrong. A second later, her ringtone shattered the quiet.

Vivienne glanced at the caller ID and rejected it without a second thought.

Two seconds later, it rang again.

Once, twice, three times...

The relentless bombardment carried a psychotic obsession. He wasn't going to stop until she picked up.

Vivienne’s fingers curled into a fist, her knuckles turning white. She didn't dare block him or power off the device. From their brief interactions, she knew this man had zero boundaries and possessed a terrifying cunning. She was genuinely afraid the lunatic would show up at her front door if she pushed him too far.

Left with no other option, she took a deep breath, swallowed down the rising bile, and forced herself to answer the call.

The moment the phone touched her ear, Jayden’s mocking, arrogant voice poured through the speaker. "Wow, Ms. Sinclair. You take my premium intel and then play dead? You really love burning bridges, don't you? Use 'em and lose 'em. You're ruthlessly cold, Vivienne."

Vivienne was sick of his voice. "Spit it out. Stop talking in circles."

"I love it when you're direct," Jayden chuckled low, his earlier manic energy vanishing into a sleazy, triumphant purr. "Simple. I did you a massive favor. I handed you the keys to the kingdom. I deserve a little compensation, don't I?"

He paused, letting the silence stretch. "I'm free tomorrow. I'll come see you at the hospital."

"Don't," Vivienne snapped, rejecting the idea instantly. "I don't need a visitor."

But Jayden was far more stubborn and deranged than she anticipated. "Too bad. I'm coming." He lowered his voice into a dangerous threat. "If you still want my help digging into WH and securing Professor Smith's favor, you better drop the attitude."

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His threat struck a lethal nerve. Vivienne’s heart skipped a beat, and she fell dead silent.

She couldn't afford a head-on collision with him right now. But recalling Susannah's recent warnings, she knew letting him anywhere near the hospital was out of the question.

Weighing her options, she violently suppressed her revulsion and offered a compromise. "Not the hospital. We'll meet outside. I'll send you the location later."

Hearing her yield, Jayden let out a satisfied laugh. "Good girl. I'll follow your lead."

Vivienne hung up, her complexion ashen. She deeply regretted ever crossing paths with Jayden Chase. If she had known he was a rabid dog, she never would have partnered with him. But now, they were in the same boat, and there was no turning back.

The next day, after relentless badgering from Jayden, she finally texted him the address.

It was a secluded, dimly lit speakeasy.

She had chosen it for its privacy. The booths were deeply recessed, the lighting was atmospheric and dark, and the chances of running into anyone she knew were practically zero.

Yet, the moment Jayden pushed through the doors and slid into the booth opposite her, the air grew thick and suffocating.

He didn't bother discussing their actual plans. He spent the entire time repeating, "I did you a huge favor, you owe me," weaponizing the GeneEdit Nexus and WH intel to hold her hostage.

Vivienne was nauseated, rolling her eyes right to his face without bothering to hide her disdain.

"Come on, admit it. Haven't I been good to you? I dug all this up in record time. I put your needs above everything else," Jayden crooned, launching into another self-congratulatory speech.

And as he spoke, he completely disregarded her personal space.

It started with him pretending to brush a stray lock of hair behind her ear, the gesture painfully contrived and overly familiar. When she gritted her teeth and didn't pull away, he grew bolder. His fingertips grazed the shell of her ear before dropping casually to her shoulder, feigning the need to adjust her collar. His palm was uncomfortably hot and clammy, lingering and rubbing against the fabric of her blouse.

The invasive, sickening touches escalated. Every brush of his skin felt like roaches crawling over her flesh, making every hair on her body stand on end.

Rage and revulsion clawed at her throat, threatening to shatter her composure, but she forced her expression to remain a blank, stoic mask. She didn't fight back. She didn't scream.

She couldn't afford to cause a scene. She didn't dare.

The hour-long meeting was sheer, unadulterated torture—a humiliating violation of her boundaries.

It wasn't until Jayden finally felt satisfied and sauntered out of the bar that Vivienne felt the crushing weight lift from her chest. Her energy drained instantly.

She navigated her way home like a walking corpse. The second she stepped through the door, she marched straight into the bathroom and cranked the shower to the hottest setting.

Scalding water poured over her, instantly fogging the glass with thick steam.

She scrubbed her skin until it was raw, but no amount of boiling water could wash away the lingering grime and humiliation staining her soul.

Vivienne stood with her head bowed, her wet eyelashes trembling violently. A predatory, lethal glint flared in the depths of her eyes. For every ounce of suffering and degradation she swallowed today, she swore she would make him pay tenfold.

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Driven by a deep, agonizing resentment, Vivienne’s determination hit a fever pitch. She relentlessly pressured her contacts, and surprisingly, they delivered.

Her team notified her that they had successfully extracted the backend data. They handed over the login credentials and the entire history of the WH account. Vivienne didn't waste a second; she logged in immediately.

GeneEdit Nexus prided itself on ultimate privacy. It required no identity verification, relying solely on email bindings. There was zero traceability, making it impossible to

uncover the user's real identity. Because of this, Vivienne slipped right into WH's profile without setting off any alarms.

A clean, minimalist interface loaded onto her screen.

The profile was entirely barren—no bio, no avatar, no personal updates. It was a ghost town. The account's activity was equally sparse. There were barely eight responses in total. Yet, those few sparse posts dominated the forum's trending charts, permanently pinned to the top of the page.

Scrolling through, Vivienne realized every single answer was a masterclass in flawless logic and hyper-advanced foresight, perfectly dissecting the most complex bottlenecks in molecular gene editing. Even after all this time, leading scholars were still bookmarking the posts and debating the theories.

Vivienne leaned closer to the monitor, stripping away her usual lazy arrogance. Her gaze turned laser-focused, scanning every inch of the text. She filtered out the Q&As directly involving Mr. Smith and began tearing them apart, studying every syllable.

She was entirely consumed. Deep down, she realized she had never worked this hard in her life—not even when cramming for her most brutal university exams. She never thought she had this kind of relentless grind in her.

But if it meant earning Smith's total trust and flipping the board on her enemies, the grueling effort was worth it. Vivienne's mind raced with the possibilities. She was going to devour WH’s entire academic persona, mirror her thought process perfectly, and usurp her throne.

"No wonder Smith is so obsessed," she muttered to herself as she read. "This is genius-level processing."

But if she pushed hard enough and mimicked the style flawlessly, that genius halo would belong to her.

Meanwhile, across town at Merit Biotech, Willow Horgan sat sharply dressed in a tailored suit, presiding over a conference room.

Today's meeting centered around experimental data analysis, requiring Willow's full attention.

Midway through the presentation, her phone, lying face-down on the table, buzzed faintly. The screen lit up with a brief email notification: [Your GeneEdit Nexus password has been successfully changed. If this was not you, please verify your account immediately.]

Willow caught the notification out of the corner of her eye. A flicker of confusion crossed her face, and she froze for a fraction of a second.

GeneEdit Nexus?

It took her a moment to dig up the memory. She vaguely recalled registering an account on that site a long time ago.

It had been a spontaneous decision after wrapping up a grueling, high-stakes experiment. Bored and killing time, she had created the profile and casually fired off answers to a few forum questions.

She never anticipated that within days, the account would go viral. Her inbox had exploded with an avalanche of likes, comments, and private messages. The phone vibrated continuously for twenty-four hours a day, the endless notifications completely derailing her daily routine and research rhythm.

Willow preferred silence and deeply hated the chaotic intrusion. Annoyed, she had simply deleted the app from her phone and never logged back in. Over time, the account had slipped completely from her memory.

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It was undeniably strange for her password to be changed after such a long hiatus.

But the meeting had just hit a critical juncture, and the entire room was waiting to debate the next phase of their strategy. She simply didn't have the luxury to get distracted by personal errands.

Willow gave the phone a dismissive glance, flipped it back over, and decided to deal with it later.

The second the meeting adjourned and Willow reached for her phone, an emergency alert blared from the lab. A catastrophic anomaly had struck the live experiment. An untraceable loophole had corrupted the data link, and the entire team had failed multiple debugging attempts. Out of the entire research division, Willow was the only one who had navigated this specific experiment enough times to possess the veteran instincts required to salvage the situation.

She immediately sprinted to the lab. The compromised password was instantly pushed to the back of her mind.

Over the next few days, Vivienne poured every waking second into dissecting WH's academic philosophy and writing cadence.

Her natural talent had hard limits. No matter how many times she read the dense, cutting-edge biological principles, precise data models, and complex logic trees, they remained an incomprehensible blur. But she was smart enough to play to her strengths. She abandoned the deep science and obsessively drilled the foundational theories, the rhetorical logic, and the exact phrasing WH used.

Through sheer mimicry, memorization, and relentless rehearsal, she absorbed the superficial layers of WH's public persona. Within days, she could seamlessly weave WH's rhetoric into her own speech. Every gesture and spoken sentence held an uncanny resemblance to the real deal—enough to easily pass as the authentic genius.

Bolstered by her rapid progress, Vivienne couldn't wait any longer. She needed to put on a show for Smith, secure his validation, and claim what was rightfully hers.

She reached out and extended an invitation to Mr. Smith. She used the ultimate bait, explicitly stating that she was the "WH" he had been desperately searching for.

Naturally, Smith accepted without hesitation. Finding WH was a massive part of why he had traveled to New York City in the first place. Now that he finally had a solid lead, he cleared his entire schedule to make the meeting his top priority.

But when he arrived at the rendezvous point, there was no mysterious "WH" waiting for him. There was only Vivienne, meticulously styled and sitting alone in the room.

Smith was instantly furious. He felt played. His face darkened into a stormy scowl, and without a single word, he spun on his heel to leave.

Before he could reach the door, Vivienne's voice rang out. "Professor Smith, please wait."

Smith ignored her.

Vivienne hurried forward, blocking his path. "Don't leave yet. Let me explain."

"Explain what? The person who invited me was WH. Are you seriously trying to tell me you're her?" Smith snapped, his patience obliterated. He had canceled crucial meetings for this, and finding a socialite playing games was beyond infuriating.

Vivienne met his gaze, her tone soothing. "Please, don't be angry. I had my reasons for keeping it a secret."

Smith wasn't buying a word of it.

Sensing the critical moment had arrived, Vivienne arranged her features into a mask of reluctance and sighed heavily. "The truth is... I am the WH you've been looking for."

The words dropped like a bomb, freezing Smith in his tracks.

He whipped around, his piercing blue eyes wide with absolute disbelief and shock as he stared at Vivienne. "What did you just say?"

"I said, I am the WH you've been searching for," Vivienne repeated, projecting an air of unshakeable resolve. "So please, sit down and let me explain."

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Smith stared at her, paralyzed for a solid ten seconds as his brain tried to process the claim.

WH.

It was a name he had chased for years across the global biotech landscape, scouring academic hubs and elite forums for the elusive genius. Relying entirely on anonymous posts, WH had provided cutting-edge theories and unorthodox experimental tweaks that accurately predicted major industry shifts. WH had even pinpointed fatal flaws in Smith's own core projects. Yet, the mastermind remained hidden, refusing to show their face or engage in private messages.

He had envisioned WH as a reclusive academic titan or a grizzled veteran researcher. Not once had he connected that brilliant mind to the polished, youthful Vivienne standing before him.

When Smith finally spoke, his voice was dangerously low, laced with extreme caution and heavy skepticism. "You're claiming you are WH?"

There was no awe. No joy. Only raw suspicion.

Vivienne met his piercing stare, feigning perfect serenity. She gave a slight nod. "I am."

With practiced grace, she picked up the French press and poured him a fresh cup of coffee, sliding it gently across the table. "Professor, please, have a seat and drink some coffee."

She executed the entire sequence flawlessly, radiating calm confidence without a trace of panic.

Smith raised a hand, rejecting the peace offering with blunt force. "Save it. I don't care about your hospitality. I only care about the truth."

He locked eyes with her, demanding answers. "If you're WH, why the hell didn't you say so from the beginning? Why wait until now?"

He had been in New York City for a while, and she was the very first person he had met. She had possessed countless opportunities to reveal herself. Waiting until she was backed into a corner and professionally isolated made her motives painfully obvious.

It gave him every reason to believe this was nothing but a desperate power play to salvage her ruined reputation.

The question was lethal, striking directly at the gaping hole in her story. But Vivienne had rehearsed for this exact moment.

She sidestepped the accusation with smooth deflection. "Professor, I never intended to hide it forever. My original plan was to wait until our collaborative project successfully launched and concluded. Then, I would have gladly revealed my identity."

She looked up, her eyes wide with manufactured sincerity, delivering the script she had polished to perfection. "To me, the WH persona is a pure academic sanctuary, completely divorced from commercial interests. I know how toxic the politics in our industry can be, and I know how vital our current project is. I was terrified that revealing my identity too early would taint your professional judgment with personal bias or an 'identity filter.' I didn't want to disrupt the integrity of our collaboration. I just wanted the science to speak for itself."

Having established her noble intentions, she smoothly transitioned into playing the victim. "But I never anticipated being dragged into this nightmare. I was maliciously framed, my reputation smeared in the shadows, and now the projects I bleed for are on the verge of collapse. I had no other choice but to step into the light and fight for a fair chance to clear my name."

Her logic was airtight, blending emotional appeal with rational justification. It perfectly excused her suspicious silence, leaving almost no room for attack.

But Smith was a man who lived and died by hard data. He never drew conclusions from pretty speeches.

His gaze remained razor-sharp, his defenses fully raised. "Your explanation sounds plausible. But words are cheap. Half the industry would kill to claim the title of WH. I'm not going to believe you just because you spun a good story."

"I know you value empirical evidence. You never accept empty claims," Vivienne replied smoothly. She didn't flinch, welcoming his scrutiny. "Test me. Ask me anything. I can answer every single detail that only the real WH would know."

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"Oh? Is that so?" Smith arched an eyebrow, a spark of genuine intrigue cutting through his skepticism. "Then why don't you go ahead and prove it to me?"

Vivienne took a steadying breath. Drawing on the sleepless nights she spent memorizing WH's entire digital footprint, she launched into her prepared evidence. "Let's start with the core thesis from the Global Bio-Innovation Summit. In the third quarter of last year, your team hit a massive wall regarding the targeted vector penetration rate. WH posted a short, anonymous critique on the forum. I didn't write a long thesis. I just pointed out a niche modification: ditching the traditional single-layer liposomes and utilizing bidirectional block copolymers for the modification."

She paused, ensuring Smith was following her logic before driving the point home. "At the time, I was the only person on the entire forum to propose that concept. No one agreed with me because it was considered far too radical. But your team tested it privately, verified the results, and sent a direct message thanking me. That exchange has zero public record. It is completely impossible for an outsider to know about it."

Hearing this, Smith's pupils contracted. His posture shifted, growing distinctly more serious.

The detail was hyper-classified. It had never been published. The only people who possessed that knowledge were the ones directly involved.

"That did happen," he admitted bluntly.

Riding the momentum, Vivienne pushed harder. She was basically plagiarizing, but she had the lines down cold. "Next is my rhetorical style. Whenever WH posts anonymously, I never use the vague, standard industry jargon. I strictly use precise, operational phrasing like 'pre-calibration of variable thresholds' and 'gradient compression of control groups.' And at the end of every single critique, I instinctively add a very specific disclaimer: 'Only based on in vitro data, not applicable to in vivo clinical scenarios.'"

These weren't things someone could just Google. It was the distinct fingerprint of someone who lived and breathed the work, a habit only the original author could wield so naturally.

She knew Smith would recognize the truth in that.

Finally, Vivienne dropped the ultimate, undeniable bombshell. "And the most crucial piece of evidence. Do you remember last winter, when you privately messaged me regarding the gene adaptation protocols? In my reply, I explicitly corrected a decimal error in your parameters. That exact modification, accurate to the fourth decimal place, only existed in that single, fleeting exchange. No one screenshotted it. No one archived it. Surely, you can't still doubt me after that?"

She sat back, brimming with absolute confidence, waiting for his defense to crumble.

The rapid-fire barrage of intimate, surgically precise, and unforgeable data shattered the bulk of Smith's reservations.

The deep suspicion etched into his features began to dissolve, replaced by profound shock and hesitation.

Every single metric aligned. The writing habits, the classified DMs, the exclusive theories—they were all flawless matches.

And yet, a microscopic sliver of dissonance lingered in Smith's gut. The woman sitting across from him—her aura, her cadence—felt just slightly out of sync with the cold, fiercely stoic, and borderline unapproachable WH he had built in his mind.

Smith sat in heavy silence for a long time before finally speaking. "I'm not making a final ruling today. Everything you've stated checks out. I can't deny that. But I still need to go back and cross-reference the server archives to verify the timeline."

"As you should," Vivienne smiled gracefully. Internally, she was seething with frustration, but she kept her mask firmly in place. "Take all the time you need. I have nothing to hide."

Smith gave her one last, penetrating look, then turned and strode out of the room without another word.

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The second Smith was out of sight, the polite, radiant smile vanished from Vivienne’s face. Glaring at the empty doorway, she hissed a vicious curse. "That stubborn old fool. He's a nightmare to manipulate."

She had orchestrated that conversation flawlessly. She had balanced humility with assertive confidence, laying out the WH narrative with absolute perfection. Every syllable, every micro-expression had been fiercely calculated. She had been so certain she had him cornered. To think the old man still refused to fully capitulate was infuriating.

Taking a deep breath to smother the raging fire in her chest, Vivienne whipped out her phone and dialed Jayden.

The instant the call connected, her suppressed rage exploded. Her voice was shrill and frantic. "I sat there and played him perfectly! I fed him every detail, I hit every emotional beat, and I acted my heart out! And you know what? That paranoid bastard still doesn't believe me!"

Jayden seemed to be in a place where he couldn't speak freely. After a long pause, he finally answered. "What exactly happened?"

"What do you think happened?" Vivienne snarled, teetering on the edge of hysteria. "He's too damn suspicious! No matter how seamlessly I spun the web, he kept his guard up. He won't admit I'm WH. You need to fix this right now. I am out of time!"

Her frantic demands grated on Jayden's nerves, but remembering the massive payout waiting at the finish line, he forced himself to remain patient. "I get it. He's naturally paranoid. Leave the rest to me. I'll handle it."

Hanging up the phone, the polite warmth in Jayden's eyes bled away, replaced by a dark, calculating shadow.

It looked like he was going to have to get his hands dirty.

To avoid arousing suspicion, he intentionally waited a few days before making his move on Smith.

That afternoon, the lab's break area was deathly quiet. Sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting a warm, lazy glow across the tables.

Smith sat alone by the glass, his laptop open. His brows were deeply knitted in frustration, completely absorbed in whatever puzzle was tormenting him.

Jayden timed his approach perfectly, strolling over with an easy, professional smile. "Professor, the latest research report just came in. I thought you'd want to take a look."

He used the paperwork as his Trojan horse.

Smith, entirely consumed by the WH dilemma, barely glanced up. "Just leave it on the table. I'll review it later."

"Understood," Jayden said, setting the folder down. Instead of walking away, he lingered, pretending to accidentally catch a glimpse of Smith's screen. "Professor Smith, are you diving into the WH archives too?"

Smith looked up, adjusting his glasses, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "You're familiar with WH?"

"Of course," Jayden chuckled smoothly, pulling out a chair and making himself comfortable, projecting the aura of a casual colleague making small talk. "WH isn't exactly a mainstream celebrity, but anyone who truly grinds in this field has heard the name. It's just that the author is notoriously reclusive. Zero public appearances, insanely low-key. Practically no one has a read on their actual background."

Smith's interest was instantly piqued. He leaned forward slightly. "How much do you know about her? I've been digging through the files, but the footprint is agonizingly small. I just can't seem to get a clear picture."

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This was exactly the opening Jayden wanted.

A flash of predatory calculation sparked in his eyes, but his face remained a portrait of earnest academic curiosity. "I'm probably in the same boat as you—mostly tracking the GeneEdit Nexus posts. But I actually stumbled onto a very interesting theory recently."

"What theory?" Smith asked, thoroughly hooked.

"I found someone who mirrors her flawlessly."

"Who?"

"Vivienne Sinclair."

A heavy silence crashed over the table. Jayden held Smith's gaze, maintaining his effortless composure. Finally, Smith spoke. "Explain."

Jayden internally let out a breath of relief and launched into the script he had meticulously crafted with Vivienne. "I honestly didn't make the connection at first. But a while back, Vivienne and I were debating a protocol, and it just clicked. Her research methodologies, her underlying philosophies, even the angles she uses to attack industry bottlenecks—they are practically carbon copies of WH's signature style. Especially regarding a few incredibly niche theories. Stuff that ninety-nine percent of the industry wouldn't even touch. Her framework aligns perfectly with WH's."

"Take the recent lab error with the dressing ratios, for example. The entire team missed the flaw. She took one look and instantly identified the core vulnerability. And her proposed fix? It was an exact replica of the anonymous optimization strategy WH posted on the forum. I brushed it off as a fluke initially, but looking back, it wasn't a coincidence. It's just how her brain is wired."

Jayden then pivoted, dropping heavier technical bait. "Then there are her lab habits. I've observed Vivienne on the floor. Standard protocol dictates building the entire experimental framework first, and then calibrating the variable thresholds based on data deviation. But that leaves a massive margin for error, and the fluctuations are a nightmare to control. Vivienne doesn't do that. She locks in the upper and lower thresholds for every critical variable before she even builds the framework, killing the deviation at the source. It's an incredibly rare technique."

Smith listened in absolute silence, his expression locked in intense concentration.

Sensing the hook was set deep enough, Jayden smoothly reeled it in, knowing when to pull back. "But, of course, this is all just my personal observation. You're the authority here, Professor. You'll have to draw your own conclusions."

He delivered the line with supreme confidence. Combined with Vivienne's flawless performance the other day, these targeted third-party validations should absolutely obliterate the last of Smith's defenses.

Sure enough, when he checked Smith's face, the hard lines of skepticism had softened dramatically, melting into deep contemplation and inner conflict.

Vivienne was right—the old man was a tough nut to crack. But the fortress was finally crumbling. That was a massive win.

Jayden didn't overstay his welcome. Feigning an urgent task, he excused himself and walked away.

The second he stepped out of the building, his phone buzzed. It was Vivienne. She had been hounding him daily for updates. The past few days, he had nothing to report, so he kept her at bay. But today, he had all the leverage in the world.

Slipping back into his sleazy, manipulative persona, he informed her that he required a substantial reward before he'd spill the details.

Vivienne was already numb to his extortion, so she grit her teeth and accepted.

But then, Jayden changed the rules. He demanded they meet at a hotel room.

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"Don't even think about it!" Vivienne rejected the demand instantly, her voice vicious and trembling with naked disgust.

"Jayden, you are crossing a massive line!" she spat, launching into a furious tirade. "I put up with the dinners. I put up with the bar. You couldn't keep your hands to yourself, taking advantage of the situation, and I swallowed it. I let it slide. But do not push your luck! You need to know when to stop. You don't get to trample my boundaries like this!"

Despite her explosive rage, Jayden didn't show a flicker of anger on the other end of the line. Instead, he leaned back into his sofa, completely relaxed, a cold, dominating smirk playing on his lips.

He knew Vivienne inside and out.

She loved to preach about her principles, but at her core, she was utterly ruthless and driven entirely by self-interest. If a move advanced her agenda, she would eventually submit to it. All this screaming, all this resistance—it was nothing but a theatrical display of dying pride.

Listening to her rant, Jayden felt like a spider watching a gorgeous, frantic prey thrashing in his web. She looked fierce, but her fate was entirely locked in his grasp. In the end, she would always surrender.

He let the silence stretch after she finally ran out of breath. "Done yelling? You don't have to put on this whole act. We both know you're going to say yes eventually. Who are you even performing for?"

"You..."

Before Vivienne could launch another attack, Jayden cut her off, driving straight to the kill. "I had a very productive chat with Smith today. If you want to know what was said, and how well it worked, you're going to have to come to the hotel to find out."

"Oh, and by the way, in three days, New York City is hosting The Global Precision Genomics Summit. It's the undisputed crown jewel of the international biotech community."

He paused, letting the weight of the name settle. "I'm sure someone of your ambition knows exactly what that is?"

Of course she knew. The summit was held once every three years, spearheaded by the Global Genomics Association. Every elite lab and Ivy League research team on the planet would be there. It was the only high-level forum that allowed young researchers to bypass the red tape and directly network with massive foreign capital. The absolute titans of the industry and billionaire investors would gather to debate the commercialization of rare disease gene therapies.

Her silence was all the confirmation he needed. Jayden gave a low, knowing chuckle. "I'll take that as a yes. Dr. Smith is the keynote speaker for the entire event. He's presenting the latest cross-border research reports and leading the core roundtable. Imagine what would happen to your career if you got a seat at that table and voiced your brilliant insights."

He dropped his final, brutal ultimatum. "Think about whether you want me to arrange that for you. It's your call."

Every single syllable he spoke twisted the knife directly into her deepest, most desperate ambitions.

When he finished, the only sound over the line was Vivienne's ragged, suffocating breaths.

A long moment passed. Vivienne clenched her jaw so hard her teeth ached. She practically tore the words from her throat. "I'll be there."

Hearing her break, a sinister, victorious grin spread across Jayden's face. "I knew you were a smart girl. You always know exactly what needs to be done."

The day of the meeting arrived quickly. Jayden texted her the room number first thing in the morning, but Vivienne was paralyzed by dread. She stalled at her house until the absolute last possible second before finally forcing herself out the door.

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She had barely reached the foyer when Susannah Sinclair’s voice stopped her cold. "Vivienne, are you heading out?"

Vivienne’s nerves were already frayed, and the sudden question made her jump. Terrified of looking suspicious, she quickly smoothed her expression. "Yeah, a friend needs my help with something. I'll be back later."

Susannah’s face instantly soured. "A friend? At a time like this? How can any friend be more important than Toby?"

Ever since Vivienne had returned, Toby had developed a fierce, obsessive attachment to her. If she wasn't in the room, he threw massive tantrums, and absolutely no one else could calm him down. Frankly, Vivienne was sick to death of dealing with him.

When Vivienne didn't immediately turn around, Susannah stepped closer, her tone dripping with reprimand. "Vivienne, you need to get your priorities straight. Toby is the most precious thing in the Sinclair family. He is your ultimate safety net, your guarantee of a lifetime of luxury. You stay by his side, you take perfect care of him, and one day, the entire Sinclair empire will answer to you. Isn't that infinitely better than running errands for some random friend?"

Every word was a suffocating reminder that Toby Sinclair was her only lifeline. As long as she clung to him, she would never have to worry about a thing.

Did Vivienne understand that simple logic? Of course she did.

But that entire fantasy hinged on one fatal prerequisite: Toby had to be an actual Sinclair. And she knew the terrifying truth—he wasn't.

The clock was ticking. Before Toby's true bloodline was exposed and the entire empire came crashing down on her head, she had to build her own kingdom. She needed her own leverage, her own capital, and her own unshakeable power. That was the only way she would survive the fallout without being left with nothing and butchered by her enemies.

Ignoring Susannah’s glaring disapproval, she offered no further explanation. "I really have to go." With that, she pushed the door open and walked out.

Her car sped through the city, eventually pulling up to the luxury hotel.

Following Jayden’s text, she rode the private elevator up to the penthouse level.

Standing outside the door, Vivienne took a deep, shuddering breath before swiping the keycard and pushing it open.

Inside the sprawling presidential suite, the dim, warm lighting cast a lazy, seductive glow over the room. But to Vivienne, the entire atmosphere felt intensely filthy and repulsive.

Jayden had been waiting for a while. To save time, he had already prepped for the occasion.

He had just stepped out of the shower. A single white towel was slung dangerously low on his hips, his damp, black hair dripping water down the taut muscles of his neck and chest. He stood with the effortless, dominating posture of a predator waiting for his prey to walk directly into his jaws.

Seeing Vivienne frozen in the doorway, her face as pale as a ghost, a knowing, sadistic smirk curled Jayden's lips.

Vivienne’s feet felt cemented to the floor. A violent wave of nausea hit her, and her first instinct was to turn around and sprint back to the elevator.

"What? Getting cold feet?" Jayden taunted, stepping into her path, his eyes raking over her body. "You're already here. You're not seriously going to tell me you want to leave now."

He saw right through her pathetic struggle, his voice dripping with absolute authority, cutting off any chance of escape. "Drop the innocent, resistant act. It's boring. Be a good girl, cooperate, and when we're done, I'll give you every single detail of my chat with Smith. Plus, the VIP access codes and the backdoor entry to the Summit. Every last piece."

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The air conditioning blasted through the hotel room, but it did nothing to dispel the deep, churning waves of disgust rolling through Vivienne's bones.

The entire encounter had been hasty and humiliating, devoid of a single shred of tenderness, leaving only a suffocating sense of degradation in its wake. She bit her lower lip hard, her fingertips gripping the bedsheets beneath her tightly enough to wrinkle the expensive fabric.

She had remained as stiff as a soulless puppet from start to finish. Every passing second had been sheer torture, and the overwhelming shame and revulsion in her heart threatened to swallow her whole.

Left with no other choice, Vivienne had simply closed her eyes, forcing her mind to go blank as she prayed for this filthy transaction to end quickly.

The man beside her, Jay, hadn't exactly enjoyed himself either. Having hurriedly found his release, he was left feeling entirely unsatisfied.

He casually grabbed his shirt and tossed it on, leaning back lazily against the headboard. His gaze swept over the woman beside him, who was trying desperately to maintain a facade of calm. In his eyes, the proud and haughty Sinclair socialite was nothing special, no different from the countless other women he had engaged in casual flings with. In fact, compared to women who actually knew how to please a man and play along, her rigid resistance and sheer reluctance made the whole experience incredibly dull.

Yet, ironically, he found himself somewhat captivated by it.

This was a wealthy socialite who had grown up surrounded by adoration, someone who was always proud, arrogant, and aloof, someone who usually couldn't even be bothered to glance his way. But now, for the sake of a project, a single opportunity, she had been forced to lower her proud head. She had been forced to endure his touch, her eyes brimming with defiance, yet still obediently compromising and submitting.

This extreme contrast fiercely satisfied his twisted desire for conquest. Watching Vivienne suppress her nausea and endure the humiliation, Jay felt a sickeningly triumphant surge of satisfaction. It was exhilarating.

He scoffed, slowly lighting a cigarette. "Don't look at me like you've been so terribly wronged. It was a transaction. We both agreed to this."

Vivienne didn't want to hear his voice. Every word he spoke made her feel sick to her stomach, so she had absolutely no intention of acknowledging him.

She slowly opened her eyes. Her voice was dry, hoarse, and carried a faint, barely detectable tremor as she asked, "The thing you promised me. When can you get it done?"

"Relax. I'm a man who plays by the rules. You paid the price, and you definitely delivered the goods, so I'll handle my end." Jay blew a smoke ring, his tone frivolous yet confident. "I've been singing your praises to Professor Smith lately. I've hyped up your talent, your potential, and your unique professional insights. I've been firmly planting the idea in his head that you are the real WH."

He paused, his eyes playfully studying her tense expression before continuing. "You know how Smith is. He's stubborn, rigid, and incredibly suspicious. He's not exactly easy to sway. He hasn't explicitly stated his stance yet, but I can tell his resolve is crumbling. He should be completely convinced soon."

Hearing this, the heavy burden that had been weighing on Vivienne's heart finally lifted slightly, though she still didn't dare let her guard down. "What about the summit in three days?"

"You don't need to worry about that either," Jay assured her. "I've already got it all arranged for you. The internal schedule, the core discussion topics, and a few niche subjects they plan to focus on—I'll send you all the exclusive insider info beforehand."

"You just need to memorize it all in advance. When the time comes, take the initiative to speak up at the summit and deliver those points flawlessly. As long as your performance is brilliant enough to blow Smith away, he'll naturally trust you completely. He'll believe without a doubt that you are WH."

His voice faded, and a heavy silence settled over the room. Neither of them spoke another word.

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It had been a dirty transaction from the start, simply two people getting what they needed from each other.

Jay quickly got out of bed and was the first to leave. Vivienne, on the other hand, waited a full half-hour after his departure before finally getting up. She scrubbed herself clean in the shower before heading out.

But as luck would have it, she ran into Julian shortly after stepping out of the hotel.

Julian was clearly surprised to see her. "Why aren't you at home resting at this hour? What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

Vivienne had absolutely not expected to run into him here, especially not right after what had just happened. Terrified that he might figure out the truth, she forced a casual tone and replied, "It's nothing. I just came out to meet a friend and go for a walk."

"Meet a friend?" Julian raised an eyebrow, his sharp gaze locking onto her evasive eyes. He clearly didn't buy her excuse. "Which friend?"

The panic in Vivienne's chest intensified, and a thin layer of cold sweat began to form on her back. She feigned composure, keeping her voice as breezy as possible. "Just a friend I met recently. You don't know them. We just chatted for a bit, that's all."

As soon as she finished speaking, Julian pressed further. "It wasn't Jay, was it? I saw him around here earlier."

He had been in the area meeting a client, so he had been around for a while. He had indeed spotted Jay nearby just a short time ago.

Julian's voice was calm, but his words carried a piercing intensity that slammed into Vivienne's chest, making her scalp tingle and her heart skip a beat.

In that terrifying split second, she felt like she was suffocating.

Acting almost on pure instinct, she began shaking her head, her tone laced with a deliberate, urgent denial. "No, of course not. Why would it be him? We're not close at all, and we never interact outside of work. Why would I meet him in private?"

Her exaggerated reaction only made Julian more suspicious. "I was just asking a simple question. Why are you overreacting? Didn't the two of you just go on a business trip together?"

Mentioning the trip reminded Julian of something else. "He actually said quite a few good things about you to me. He seems to know you pretty well."

Hearing this only made Vivienne more terrified. She fought to control her racing heartbeat and forced herself to speak evenly. "That was probably just casual concern between colleagues. Like I said, I don't know him well. We have no personal relationship whatsoever."

Julian still felt something was off about her behavior, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. Lacking the patience to interrogate her further, he simply brushed the topic aside. "Alright, I won't ask any more questions. Just behave yourself for the time being. Stay home, focus on your recovery, and stop running around. Just take good care of Toby."

The suffocating tension finally eased, and Vivienne let out a quiet breath of relief. Desperate to know his plans for her, she carefully tested the waters. "Don't worry, I know. I'm practically fully recovered now anyway. But I was wondering, when will you assign me to the company's other research projects?"

"There's no rush for that. We'll wait and see. We can talk about it later when things settle down," Julian brushed her off casually.

Vivienne lowered her eyes, her long lashes hiding the storm of emotions swirling in her gaze. She nodded obediently. "Okay, I understand."

At that exact moment, absolute clarity washed over her.

She could never rely on Julian or the Sinclair family. They would never truly have her back.

The only person she could count on was herself.

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To her surprise, Jay actually delivered on his promise regarding the summit.

On the day of the event, Vivienne dressed impeccably in a high-end beige suit and rode to the venue alongside Smith and his team.

However, during the ride, she tried to strike up a conversation with Smith multiple times, only to be met with indifferent, lukewarm responses. It bothered her, but she didn't dwell on it too much. She knew full well that Smith still didn't completely trust her.

And that was exactly the case. Smith hadn't agreed to bring her along because he believed in her abilities. On the contrary, he still harbored deep suspicions. He intended to use this highly public summit as a testing ground, giving her a stage to showcase her expertise and allowing him to evaluate her true foundational knowledge and scientific acumen. It was the only way to determine if her previous claims held any water.

They soon arrived at the venue. As a premier international event, the setup was incredibly grand. Gilded lighting washed over the grand ballroom of the international conference center, and the floor-to-ceiling windows offered a breathtaking view of the dazzling New York City skyline.

The atmosphere inside was impeccably organized. Top-tier researchers and university scholars from dozens of countries were gathered, all dressed in sharply tailored formal wear, with exquisite, exclusive attendee badges pinned to their lapels.

Taking in the magnificent scene, Vivienne instantly felt that her dirty deal with Jay had been entirely worth it. If it hadn't been for him, she would probably still be stuck at home dealing with a crying Toby. Besides, it wasn't exactly the first time she had done something like that.

She lifted her chin slightly, her mind already drifting into fantasies of her impending moment of glory. Later, when she took the stage and presented her groundbreaking, cutting-edge academic theories, she would absolutely stun every domestic and international expert in the room.

After that, everyone would remember her name, and Smith would be completely convinced that she was WH. From then on, her reputation, resources, and status in the industry would skyrocket, allowing her to leave all her peers eating her dust.

Just as she was completely immersed in her beautiful daydream, her gaze swept across the crowd and landed on a familiar figure. Her smile instantly froze.

Willow?

What was she doing here?

This was a top-tier academic summit, gathering the absolute best minds from around the globe and representing the highest echelon of the industry. What right did Willow have to even step foot in this room?

But on second thought, Vivienne could somewhat understand. After all, Willow had Silas backing her now. With a powerhouse like him supporting her, what kind of resources couldn't she get her hands on?

Just the thought of it made Vivienne grind her teeth in hatred, her face twisting with resentment.

Willow was supposed to have been utterly defeated, completely ruined for the rest of her life. Who could have predicted that she would suddenly hook up with Silas, instantly placing herself on equal footing with the Sinclairs—or perhaps even surpassing them?

How could anyone swallow that?

Still, it was probably for the best that Willow had shown up today. Vivienne had been agonizing over finding a proper opportunity to completely crush her. Today, she would make sure Willow witnessed what true talent looked like, and exactly how insurmountable the gap between them truly was.

The summit officially commenced shortly after.

During the Q&A session, Vivienne seized the perfect opening and quickly stood up.

She first posed a compelling question, and then seamlessly transitioned into providing a brilliant answer to an issue raised by another attendee.

"Fellow academicians and esteemed seniors, hello. Regarding the previous question, I would like to step outside the industry's current standard mindset of 'broad-spectrum gene editing correction' and share my latest research regarding 'Targeted Micro-dosage Cleavage Technology.'"

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By dropping her most innovative and impactful concept right out of the gate, she instantly captured the entire room's attention.

She then elaborated smoothly, "Traditional broad-spectrum editing pursues efficiency by performing large-scale excision and replacement of diseased gene segments, which is the core reason for the persistently high off-target rates. The concept I am proposing today posits that the core of precise editing is never 'large-scale repair,' but rather 'micro-targeted fine-tuning.'"

"For single-base genetic diseases and fragment micro-variant conditions, there is no need to sever the entire abnormal gene chain. We simply need to lock onto the core pathogenic locus and perform a 0.3-level micro-targeted cleavage. When combined with autologous gene-induced repair technology, this can not only correct the pathogenic defect with one hundred percent accuracy but also reduce the off-target risk to infinitely near zero, while maximizing the preservation of the human body's native gene sequence."

"Furthermore, regarding the issue of embryonic gene editing rejection—which remains the most difficult clinical hurdle today—I suggest utilizing Cryo-Pre-adaptation Incubation Technology to optimize the affinity of the editing vector beforehand. This could reduce the natural rejection rate after early embryonic editing by 92.7 percent, significantly boosting the success rate and safety of clinical applications."

Sentence after sentence of visionary, hyper-precise, and highly practical academic theories flowed from her lips. From theoretical innovation and experimental principles to data support and clinical application scenarios, all the way to the feasibility of future industrialization, Vivienne covered every single angle flawlessly. Her viewpoints were remarkably novel and advanced, completely breaking free from the industry's current research limitations.

Of course, all of this information had been dug up from the account belonging to WH. Some of the concepts had already been published, while others had merely been brief, unpublished musings. She had simply synthesized them all into today's comprehensive presentation.

As her voice faded, a profound silence fell over the entire hall.

These concepts accurately struck at the two most critical bottlenecks in the global gene-editing field, offering a complete, viable, and data-backed set of brand-new solutions!

No one could quite believe that such revolutionary ideas were being presented by a woman so incredibly young. A flurry of whispered conversations instantly swept through the audience.

"This approach is incredibly innovative. It completely circumvents the research traps the industry has been stuck in for years!"

"Micro-targeted fine-tuning? I never even considered taking such an unconventional route. This is a game-changer!"

"The concept is absolutely brilliant. Zero off-target risk and an extremely low rejection rate—this represents a massive breakthrough for clinical applications!"

"Simply incredible. To be this young and yet possess an understanding of precision gene editing that far surpasses many veteran researchers!"

The entire room was utterly astounded. The crowd was buzzing in an uproar of pure shock.

Every face in the audience was painted with awe, their eyes shining with unconcealed approval and admiration. They were completely won over by Vivienne's sheer professional prowess.

Even Smith, seated in the center of the main panel, experienced a shift in expression. His initial critical demeanor had faded, replaced by genuine, undeniable approval.

Only Willow, seated quietly in the audience, was staring at Vivienne with a solemn, contemplative expression.

Vivienne stared straight back at her, her eyes brimming with the arrogant, triumphant pride of a victor. It was a naked, completely unvarnished display of provocation and boasting.

Her expression made her message crystal clear: Look closely. This is my level. This is my talent. This is a stage you will never, ever reach.

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Having finished her response, Vivienne strutted off the stage in her high heels, chest puffed out like a victorious rooster. Her gaze intentionally lingered on Willow, clearly trying to pick a fight. Seeing this, Leo immediately started tearing into her.

"Look at her getting so carried away. She's practically floating on air. You'd think this top-tier biotech summit was thrown just for her."

"How long has it been since she actually acted normal? Here she goes, openly making a scene again. Does she really think everyone in New York City is just going to put up with her arrogant nonsense?"

Leo had known Vivienne for years and was fully aware of her true character and actual capabilities. He was absolutely certain that something incredibly shady was going on.

"I know her far too well. With her half-baked professional skills, there is zero chance she came up with those deeply logical, highly practical frontier theories on her own." He scoffed, his tone filled with absolute certainty. "I don't even need to think about it. She definitely exploited some hardworking employee at her company, stole the research they sacrificed sleep and bled for, and slapped her own name on it just to make herself look like a genius."

After his passionate rant, Leo finally felt a little better. Afraid that Willow might be upset or feeling wronged, he quickly softened his voice and tried to comfort her. "Please don't let her showing off and trying to provoke you get under your skin. It's not worth it. Let her jump around like an idiot. Just treat it like a stray dog barking on the side of the road. We don't need to let it ruin our mood and lower ourselves to her level."

Willow nodded slightly. Her expression remained calm and collected, without a single trace of anger on her face.

She honestly didn't care about Vivienne's flashy, provocative display. What truly lingered in her mind was an overwhelming sense of familiarity.

Every single core theory and research approach Vivienne had just confidently presented on stage, right down to the niche experimental deduction pathways and data argumentation angles—they were all things Willow was intimately familiar with.

Some of the content consisted of excerpts from papers and research notes that Willow had publicly posted on major academic websites and research forums during her free time over the years. However, some of the more novel concepts and unpolished research ideas were things she had only ever recorded in her private documents, never having published them anywhere.

Vivienne's speech was almost an exact match to her personal research trajectory.

But since a significant portion of it was already public knowledge, readily accessible through open academic channels, Willow had no concrete proof. She had no way to definitively prove whether Vivienne had genuinely conducted her own dedicated research and coincidentally arrived at the same conclusions, or if she had utilized some underhanded method to steal and piece together those findings.

It was a question she couldn't answer right away.

As the summit progressed, it became glaringly obvious that the event had turned into Vivienne's personal stage, with almost all the focus shifting to her. Leo couldn't stand watching it any longer, so as soon as the meeting concluded, he urged Willow to leave with him.

Before they left, Willow headed to the restroom.

She freshened up, but just as she was about to step out into the hall, she heard a sudden commotion coming from the nearby fire escape.

At first, it was just intermittent, heavily hushed whispering mixed with the faint sound of scuffling. The noise gradually escalated into what sounded like two people arguing. One voice was intentionally kept low, laced with suppressed fury, while the other was small, timid, and filled with panicked refusal.

Willow had no interest in this whatsoever and hated prying into other people's privacy. She was just about to walk away, but before she could even take a step, the heavy door suddenly swung open from the inside.

A figure came stumbling out into the hallway. It was Vivienne.

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She looked completely different from the smug, endlessly glorious woman she had been on stage just moments ago.

Her exquisite makeup was slightly smudged. Her lips were a sickly, bloodless white, yet the tips of her ears were flushed bright red with panic. Her meticulously styled curls were tangled, the collar of her gorgeous champagne-colored gown was crooked and wrinkled, and there were faint, messy marks visible on her exposed neck. She looked completely disheveled and frantic.

Taking in the scene, it really wasn't hard for Willow to guess what had just transpired. But she couldn't be bothered to ask, nor did she care to get involved. Whatever happened to Vivienne was none of her business.

She turned to leave as planned, but to her surprise, Vivienne blocked her path.

Vivienne was currently in a state of extreme panic. She hadn't expected to run into Willow here of all places, let alone have her see her in such a pathetic state. She had no idea if Willow had overheard their conversation either.

Just a few minutes prior, she had been in the banquet hall networking with the attendees when a message from Jay popped up on her phone. His tone was brutal and domineering, ordering her to meet him alone in the fire escape immediately. If she didn't show up, he wouldn't hesitate to make things ugly.

Though Vivienne had cursed him under her breath, she hadn't dared to refuse. Jay truly did possess the evidence needed to ruin her completely.

She had finally managed to turn the tide and step into the spotlight in front of everyone. She absolutely refused to let her dreams shatter and lose everything right when she had finally grasped it.

Vivienne had gone with immense reluctance, assuming Jay merely wanted to exchange a few words. To her horror, he had acted like a complete madman today. The second he saw her, he completely lost control and started putting his hands all over her.

He claimed that seeing her looking so radiant on stage had been entirely too seductive, making it impossible for him to hold back. He had tried to force her into submitting to him right then and there.

Terrified and utterly disgusted, Vivienne's heart had been filled with nothing but nausea and resistance, but she also hadn't dared to offend him entirely. They had struggled back and forth until she finally promised to sleep with him another time, allowing her to temporarily escape his grasp.

Yet, the moment she stepped out, she ran directly into the one person she never wanted to see.

She stared intensely at Willow's calm, indifferent face, completely unable to decipher how much she had seen, or worse, how much she had heard.

In her panic, she blurted out, "What are you doing here?"

Willow's expression remained perfectly serene. She met Vivienne's gaze without flinching and asked coolly, "Why wouldn't I be here?"

That single sentence left Vivienne utterly speechless, a knot of frustration tightening in her chest. She steadied herself, suppressing her panic, and pressed, "How long have you been standing here?"

"Do I have any obligation to tell you?" Willow's tone was distant, completely unyielding.

Vivienne's eyes darted around as she rapidly calculated the situation. This spot was a blind spot for the security cameras. Besides, even if Willow had heard the voices, she definitely couldn't have seen who was talking to her. Therefore, as long as she flat-out denied it, Willow wouldn't have a shred of proof.

With that realization, all the panic vanished from Vivienne's heart, replaced by a sudden surge of false bravado. A mocking smirk curled her lips. "I really didn't expect this from you. Since when did you pick up the nasty habit of eavesdropping?"

Willow's expression didn't change as she replied sharply, "You don't need to use that sarcastic tone with me. If you have something to say, just spit it out. And let me make this perfectly clear—yes, I did hear you."

In truth, Willow hadn't actually heard a thing. She had been standing too far away and naturally tuned out the background noise, so she had no idea what they had been discussing. But looking at Vivienne's expression now, combined with her earlier state of sheer panic, it was obvious that something incredibly damning had happened.

Willow scoffed deliberately. "Shouldn't you be worrying about how you're going to explain this to Julian? Why are you wasting time arguing with me?"

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The moment Julian's name was mentioned, warning bells blared in Vivienne's mind.

The thing she feared more than anything else was Julian finding out about this. That was exactly why she had been so terrified just moments ago.

She knew Julian intimately. The man was an absolute egocentric, possessing an obsessively sick need for control woven right into his DNA. He was the king of double standards—he could do whatever he pleased, but he would absolutely never tolerate his partner crossing the line even slightly.

If he found out about this, given his ruthless and obsessive nature, he would never let her off easily. After all, she had witnessed firsthand exactly how he had treated Willow in the past.

But after a brief second of sheer panic, Vivienne rapidly shoved down the rising terror in her chest and forced herself to stay calm. Since there was no concrete proof anyway, there was no reason to be afraid. "Go ahead and tell Julian. It's nothing but baseless lies anyway. I doubt he'll believe a word you say."

Willow lowered her eyes, her gaze icy and detached, not a single ripple of emotion on her face.

She genuinely couldn't care less about getting involved in Vivienne and Julian's toxic, messy drama. The two of them were completely scheming, filthy, and petty. Just looking at them made her stomach churn, let alone wasting the energy to tattle or stir up trouble.

The only reason she had even said that was to provoke Vivienne into backing off so she could finally leave in peace.

Looking at it now, arguing with garbage was simply the most useless waste of time.

Unwilling to waste another breath, Willow shot her a cold look, turned on her heel, and prepared to leave. But surprisingly, Vivienne became even more aggressive and started acting high and mighty. "I wasn't finished talking. Why are you in such a rush to leave? What, feeling guilty?"

Willow stopped in her tracks and turned back, frowning at her.

Vivienne's mocking words rained down on her like a barrage. "You have the nerve to threaten me with something like that? Aren't you the one who specializes in playing ambiguous games and stringing multiple men along, Willow?"

"You're not even divorced yet, but you've already hooked up with someone else. You're really living the high life, aren't you?" She glared at Willow's stunning, aloof features, her eyes practically overflowing with bitter resentment and jealousy. "I really just can't figure it out. What exactly does Silas see in you?"

She muttered the last sentence incredibly softly, but Willow still caught it—mainly because it included Silas's name.

She was highly sensitive to these things, especially when Silas was being dragged into the mess.

Willow's previously calm and relaxed demeanor instantly turned frigid. "What does this have to do with Silas? Keep his name out of your mouth."

Vivienne sneered. "What does it have to do with him? What do you think it has to do with him?"

She had initially assumed Willow was just showing off and was preparing to throw a few more insults her way, but Willow's genuinely confused expression made her pause.

Suddenly, an absurd, audacious thought slammed into Vivienne's mind. "Don't tell me you have absolutely no idea how he feels about you..."

"Feels about me what?" Willow had lost all her patience. If it hadn't been for Silas's name being mentioned, she would have walked away ages ago.

Those few simple words instantly confirmed everything.

Vivienne's chest tightened violently as she stood rooted to the spot, completely dumbfounded.

It seemed she really didn't know.

But that day, Silas had stood right in front of her, his tone calm and deadly serious. He had made it abundantly clear, word for word, that he was the one actively pursuing Willow.

So why was Willow completely in the dark?

After a moment of thought, Vivienne arrived at a seemingly impossible conclusion: Silas harbored a secret crush and had never actually confessed to Willow.

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The very second that thought popped into her head, Vivienne almost couldn't stop herself from laughing out loud.

It was absolutely absurd.

He was the man in charge of Merit Biotech, standing at the absolute peak of wealth and status, holding unimaginable power in the palm of his hand. What kind of woman couldn't he have? Why on earth would someone of his monumental stature resort to the tactics of commoners—hiding his feelings and nursing a secret crush?

Was he just stupid, or just terribly repressed?

But her amusement was painfully short-lived. The smile barely touched the corners of her lips before it completely died, refusing to reach her eyes. She couldn't laugh anymore, because she had suddenly realized the underlying truth.

For an untouchable man like Silas to willingly hide his edge, quietly waiting in the wings, never uttering a word of his desires, and willingly maintaining a secret crush... there could only be one reason. He wasn't just playing around. He genuinely loved Willow.

It was clearly a love so profound, so intensely deep, that he was too careful to even risk startling her.

This realization felt like a bucket of ice water being dumped over Vivienne's head, instantly freezing whatever fleeting good mood she had managed to scrape together.

Looking at Willow standing before her, still looking aloof and clearly entirely oblivious to everything, a tidal wave of crushing bitterness and jealousy rose in Vivienne's chest.

Why?

Why did Willow get to stay out of it, completely ignorant, while being cherished and silently adored by a man of such top-tier excellence?

Willow had no idea about the chaotic thoughts spiraling in Vivienne's head. She only cared about what Vivienne had just said regarding Silas, so she pressed, "What were you just saying about him?"

By now, Vivienne fully understood what was going on, which meant she had absolutely no intention of telling Willow. In fact, she hoped Willow would remain ignorant forever, hoping that Silas would quickly lose interest and eventually just kick her to the curb.

"Nothing," Vivienne said, giving her a cold look. "Aren't you being a bit too sensitive? Besides, why do you care so much about Silas anyway?"

She scoffed and continued, "I highly recommend that before you get any big ideas, you take a good hard look at your own status. What is his status, and what is yours? He's the man who holds the reins of Merit Biotech, a titan standing at the very top of the pyramid. And you? You're just another completely ordinary employee working for him, someone who was literally thrown out like trash by Sinclair Group just a few months ago. You don't honestly believe that just because you work at Merit now, something might actually happen between the two of you, do you?"

Vivienne gained momentum the more she spoke. "I'm just giving you a friendly warning. The most valuable trait a person can have is knowing their place. Keep your head down

and do your job. Stop daydreaming and clinging to these unrealistic fantasies, or you'll just end up with absolutely nothing, making a total joke of yourself."

But no matter what she said, Willow maintained an attitude of complete indifference, treating her as if she didn't even exist. Vivienne eventually ran out of tactics, forced to grit her teeth and spit out one last venomous curse. "Wipe that arrogant look off your face. Do you really think latching onto Silas makes you someone special? You're nothing but cheap goods. Even after everything you did to push me down, haven't I managed to climb right back to the top? Men like him will help you today, and help someone else tomorrow. When he inevitably gets bored of you, you'll be the one crying."

"And let me tell you the truth. I am currently researching the absolute latest in gene-editing technology. You heard my speech on stage earlier. It won't be long before I completely destroy you, ensuring you never have a place in New York City ever again."

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Despite all the vicious things Vivienne had just spat out, Willow didn't take any of it to heart. Instead, she mocked her right back. "After all this time, how have you managed to not improve at all? You just keep repeating the same baffling nonsense and making these completely illogical, childish, and laughable remarks. Aside from using these pathetic methods to provoke people, do you actually know how to do anything else?"

Willow's calm gaze swept over Vivienne's deeply flushed cheeks, piercing right through her and seeing every hidden thought. "I often wonder, did you get to where you are today with Julian based on your own merits, or was it entirely because you used Toby as a bargaining chip?"

"If it weren't for Toby acting as the glue holding your relationship together, do you honestly think a woman as impulsive, foolish, and entirely talentless as you would ever make Julian look at you twice, let alone stay with you?"

Her words fell lightly, yet they acted like a surgically precise blade, stabbing fiercely into the most deeply hidden, vulnerable corner of Vivienne's heart.

Because Toby wasn't Julian's biological son, this was the absolute last topic she ever wanted brought up. But she couldn't let Willow see that, so she feigned calmness and snapped defensively, "Just because you can't have kids yourself, doesn't mean you have the right to be jealous of someone else's."

Hearing this, Willow merely wanted to laugh.

Given Toby's completely cold-blooded, twisted, and abnormal personality, Willow would gladly remain childless rather than have a child with a temperament like his.

"If that's the case, then I sincerely wish for you to give birth to a few more kids exactly like Toby," Willow retorted coldly.

Vivienne was furious, but she didn't want to linger on the topic either, mostly because she was incredibly guilty and terrified of exposing her secret. So, she swiftly changed the subject. "At the end of the day, the only reason you dare to speak to me like this is because you think you're better than me in terms of professionalism and capability, isn't it? But you saw my performance with your own eyes just now. If you still think I'm beneath you, it simply proves that you're shortsighted and hopelessly ignorant."

She paused deliberately, looking at Willow's utterly unbothered face as the superiority in her chest swelled drastically. Emphasizing each word with intentional bragging and mystery, she slowly continued, "I might as well tell you. I recently got acquainted with a true titan in the industry. WH. Have you ever heard that name?"

"WH?" Hearing the name, Willow instantly frowned.

WH was the very pseudonym she used to remain anonymous in the industry and publish her theories online.

How on earth did Vivienne know about it? And she claimed to know her personally?

Willow asked directly, "How do you know her?"

It was a perfectly normal question, but in Vivienne's eyes, it carried an entirely different meaning. Assuming Willow was completely clueless, she launched into a barrage of arrogant mockery. "I suppose that makes sense. With your social circle and limited perspective, how could you possibly interact with an industry heavyweight of her caliber? WH is the absolute pioneer in the gene-editing field right now. Do you know how many veteran professors and elite researchers are desperately chasing after her insights?"

"The academic arguments and research pathways she publishes on GeneEdit Nexus are always groundbreaking and visionary. Every single time, she completely shatters the industry's preconceived notions and spearheads entirely new research directions. Calling her an industry benchmark and the ultimate pioneer isn't an exaggeration in the slightest."

Vivienne was practically foaming at the mouth, her face glowing with triumph. Every single word was designed to elevate WH to god-like status, and by extension, elevate herself. She was weaponizing this completely fabricated network to ruthlessly crush Willow, practically radiating an overwhelming aura of superiority.