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However, Willow knew full well that everything she was saying was completely fabricated. There was absolutely no way she could possibly know WH.

So, she asked again, her tone laden with intense scrutiny this time. "How exactly do you know her?"

Falling upon Vivienne's ears, this repeated question took on an entirely different flavor.

She simply assumed that Willow had heard of WH's incredible reputation and was filled with envy—perhaps even jealousy—desperately wanting to cling to and meet this monumental figure.

In an instant, her vanity hit its absolute peak, and the look she gave Willow became increasingly contemptuous and endlessly mocking.

She took a step forward, closing the distance between them, and looked down her nose at Willow, every word dripping with crushing superiority. "Even if I told you, what good would it do? You don't naively believe that you're actually qualified to meet a titan like WH, do you?"

"Willow, take a good look at your own status and capabilities." She scoffed, her tone dripping with vicious sarcasm. "Someone as narrow-minded and inflexible as you probably hasn't even heard of GeneEdit Nexus, the top international academic forum. You couldn't even reach the barrier to entry, yet you actually have the delusional audacity to want to meet WH? That's just completely unhinged and pathetically unaware of your own limits."

"But there's no need to rush. Who knows, maybe you'll find out exactly who she is very soon."

Seeing her act like this, Willow realized she wouldn't get any actual answers out of her. She decided to simply leave, refusing to waste another breath on her.

Stepping out of the noisy venue, the chatter of the crowd gradually faded away. Without slowing her pace, Willow immediately pulled out her phone and opened the GeneEdit Nexus page.

Her fingers swiped across the login screen. The exact moment she entered her details to log in, her heart sank violently.

Her account had indeed been hacked.

She finally realized that the sudden email alert from a few days ago hadn't been a glitch at all—it was a genuine warning of suspicious activity on her account. At the time, she had been swamped with summit preparations and experiments, so she had just briefly glanced at it before pushing it to the back of her mind, completely ignoring such a critical red flag.

Willow patiently went through the recovery, verification, and permission-reset processes one by one. After several attempts, she finally managed to regain control of her account, but the sight that greeted her when the page refreshed made her blood run cold.

All the professional commentaries she had published, the meticulously drafted research notes she had poured her heart into, and the private idea logs she had saved were entirely gone. Her entire account was completely empty, every single piece of data scrubbed utterly clean.

A suffocating wave of anxiety instantly gripped her.

Originally, she hadn't had a single clue about the account theft, but with Vivienne's deeply loaded words from the venue still echoing in her ears, countless clues suddenly snapped together. In that moment, a crystal-clear theory regarding the identity of the hacker formed in her mind.

Willow was absolutely certain that Vivienne was deeply involved in this hacking incident.

Otherwise, why would she choose this exact moment to spew those specific theories? The timing was far too coincidental. Furthermore, the bizarre sense of familiarity she had felt while listening to Vivienne's confident speech finally made sense. Those seemingly unique insights and rigorous methodologies weren't Vivienne's own research at all. It was painfully obvious that after stealing the account, she had simply copy-pasted all the data and drafts Willow had saved there.

She just needed the evidence to prove it.

However, before Willow could find that evidence, a tidal wave of breaking news suddenly crashed over the entire industry.

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Just as Willow expected, the account issue was indeed Vivienne's doing.

But what caught her off guard was that Vivienne's ambition went far beyond stealing research and hijacking her fame. She had the sheer audacity to publicly announce that she was WH.

Piggybacking on her stellar performance at the recent summit, combined with the gold-standard prestige of the mysterious WH identity, Vivienne instantly took the bio-research world by storm.

Major industry media and academic forums blew up overnight, with her face dominating every front page. Industry insiders marveled; no one expected someone as young as Vivienne to be the hidden god of their field.

Overnight, titles like "The Stunning Genius Scholar" and "The Most Beautiful Researcher" rained down on her. In just a few days, Vivienne was thrust into a blindingly bright spotlight.

Even Julian, who had been icing her out lately, changed his tune. He came home to have dinner with her for the first time in ages. "I had no idea you were WH. Why didn't you ever mention it?"

Vivienne lowered her eyes, her face the picture of modest indifference, though she couldn't hide the secret triumph in her gaze. She smoothly delivered the lines she'd rehearsed a thousand times. "Julian, you know me. I've never wanted to rely on empty titles. I don't care about that stuff. To me, doing the research and getting solid results is enough. I didn't want to use it for attention. If it wasn't for this huge misunderstanding, I never would have revealed myself."

"Oh, really?" Julian arched a brow. "I didn't know you thought like that."

Vivienne kept up the act. "Actually, I have a lot of thoughts I just haven't had the chance to share with you. If you have time, we can talk about them more."

Julian didn't commit one way or the other. He didn't shoot down the idea, either, because he had his own plans.

Professor Smith wasn't an employee of Sinclair Group, after all. He would leave eventually. When that happened, Julian would need someone else to be the face of the company. The old Vivienne might not have made the cut, but with the title of 'WH' attached to her name, she would do just fine.

Susannah chimed in from the sidelines, completely dropping her usual disdain for the woman. "I always said you were capable, Vivienne. You were just too low-key before. You

should show off what you can do. I know you and Sinclair Group are going to do great things together."

Vivienne knew perfectly well they were only changing their tune because of the 'WH' title, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was getting what she wanted.

But while everyone else was busy singing her praises, there was one person who remained completely indifferent to her recent rise to fame.

That person was Smith.

There was nothing Vivienne could do about it except seethe in frustration.

In the grand hotel suite, the heavy blackout curtains were drawn tight against the city's neon glow. Only the warm interior lights illuminated the mess strewn across the room, making it look all the more glaring.

The air was thick with the lingering scent of their passion, mixed with a faint trace of tobacco.

Vivienne turned her back to the sprawling bed, her posture rigid. She didn't possess an ounce of post-coital relaxation. With her eyes downcast, her fingers moved with cold efficiency as she buttoned her shirt, dressing herself piece by piece. "What is it going to take to win over that stubborn old fool Smith? I've gone this far, and everyone else believes me. Why won't he?"

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Jayden Chase lounged casually against the headboard, his bare chest exposed to the cool air. He held a half-smoked cigarette between his fingers, his voice raspy and careless. "What's the rush? These things take time. You stole the show at the summit, and the whole industry acknowledges your talent now. Isn't that enough progress?"

"How is this enough?" Vivienne's tone was icy. She didn't spare him a single pleasant look. "Besides, I don't have the luxury of wasting time on him. This needs to be wrapped up immediately."

She shot Jayden a sharp glare, her irritation flaring. "And from now on, unless it's an emergency, don't come looking for me. We shouldn't be communicating this much."

The tension in the room thickened instantly.

Jayden's fingers stalled on his cigarette, his lazy smile slowly dissolving. "What, things are just starting to look up for you, and you're already trying to shake me loose? Vivienne, you burn your bridges awful fast."

Vivienne met his predatory gaze without flinching. Her thoughts were pragmatic and unashamed.

She meant every word.

She had laid low, bided her time, and plotted every step. Now she had found her footing and clawed her way back into the public eye. Not only had she escaped her slump, but she had also won back Julian's approval. She had more leverage now, and her resources were lightyears beyond what they used to be.

Jayden had been a useful stepping stone, but his value to her had expired.

To Vivienne, this shady affair was just a rung on the ladder. Now that the path ahead was clear, she couldn't wait to cut this dead weight loose and step cleanly into her new position of power.

Seeing right through her, Jayden crushed his cigarette into the ashtray. His dark eyes locked onto hers, his voice dripping with a naked warning. "Vivienne, I suggest you rethink that attitude. I pulled you out of the gutter and helped you flip the board. I can just as easily smash you back down and leave you exactly where you started."

He slowly rose from the bed, closing the distance between them until his towering presence suffocated her. "Don't get greedy, and don't get heartless. Without me, you'll never win over Smith, and you won't keep a single thing you've stolen. Understand?"

Vivienne's spine stiffened. A flicker of dread passed through her, but she forced her expression to remain coldly indifferent, refusing to back down. Internally, she swore that one day, she would rid herself of this scumbag for good.

Meanwhile, in the Sinclair Group laboratories, Professor Smith stood in front of the main display screen in his crisp white lab coat, analyzing the data flashing before him.

An assistant handed him a fresh batch of test reagents and ventured a question. "Professor, now that we've found WH, why do you seem so unhappy? Finding her was a huge reason you came to New York. You should be thrilled, but you've been looking more and more stressed."

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Professor Smith didn't answer right away.

The only sound in the room was the steady, rhythmic beeping of the equipment. After a long moment, he slowly shook his head. His voice was steady and absolute, laced with extreme caution. "It's wrong."

He turned around, his gaze heavy with conflict and doubt. "The data checks out. The methodology is sound. She even shares a lot of WH's core research habits. But my gut tells me she isn't her."

Smith pointed a finger at the readouts on the screen, his tone deepening as he broke it down. "The real WH is calm, reserved, and grounded. She is meticulously rigorous. She doesn't speak much, but she thinks deeply. She approaches everyone with a pure, detached professional distance. Her eyes are only on the research. There is no room for vanity or ambition."

"But this Vivienne Sinclair," he paused, recalling Vivienne's speech, her expressions, and the look in her eyes during the summit. "Her technique might be real. Her talent might be real. But she's too eager."

"The way she speaks, her attitude, the raw hunger and calculation in her eyes—it's completely at odds with the WH in my memory. The real WH is devoted to the science, untainted by the secular world. They are two entirely different people."

The assistant blinked in surprise and quickly pressed, "Could her mindset and personality have just changed over the years? People change."

Smith shook his head again, his doubts only growing stronger, though his voice remained firm. "When someone is that deeply entrenched in top-tier research, their foundational ethos and scientific integrity are carved into their bones. They don't just disappear. She might have WH's skills, but she doesn't have WH's soul."

"So, this isn't as simple as it looks."

The assistant didn't entirely understand the professor's absolute certainty, but he had worked for Smith for years and trusted his judgment implicitly. Even if he couldn't see the full picture, he didn't question it. He knew Smith never made a claim without good reason.

After a brief silence, the assistant chose his words carefully. "Professor, there's something I've been noticing for a while, but I wasn't sure if I should bring it up."

Smith looked over, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. "Go on."

"Ms. Sinclair seems to be very well-liked. A lot of people on our team get along great with her. But I've bumped into her and Jayden Chase several times now. They'll be tucked away in a corner, talking privately, and it looks pretty intense."

The moment the words left his mouth, Smith's brow furrowed. His calm demeanor vanished, replaced by a thick layer of suspicion.

He remembered asking Jayden about his relationship with Vivienne earlier. Jayden had looked completely nonchalant, claiming they were just regular colleagues who rarely interacted and hardly knew each other.

Smith hadn't thought much of it at the time. But pairing his assistant's observation with the fact that Jayden was the only one who stepped up to cover for Vivienne's mistakes during the symposium... all the little details began to connect, and none of it felt right.

Smith tapped his finger against the desk in a slow, calculating rhythm.

Noticing his shift in mood, the assistant looked confused. "Professor, do you think they have some kind of history? I mean, they usually keep their distance and only interact occasionally. They don't look that close."

"People are very good at hiding what they don't want seen," Smith said, his voice dropping in temperature. "Besides, Jayden Chase is too cunning. His motives are never pure."

Looking back, Jayden hadn't even been on his initial shortlist for the New York project. Jayden had aggressively campaigned for the spot, repeatedly emphasizing that he was a local who knew the city's network, the rules, and the red tape. He had begged to come along, promising to make the project run smoother, until Smith finally caved.

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Thinking about it now, that eagerness had probably been laced with selfish motives from the very start.

Smith gave a low command. "Keep a close eye on the two of them from now on. Note down every private interaction and every little detail, but keep it completely off the radar."

"Understood," the assistant replied, knowing better than to say anything more.

Because Vivienne's recent explosion in popularity was so massive, even Silas Thorne had heard about it.

Over dinner, he brought it up with Willow. "If you hate seeing her steal the spotlight and it's making you uncomfortable, just say the word. I can have all the media coverage pulled. I can wipe out her hype overnight and reduce her little victory lap to zero."

With his power and connections, crushing a few PR pieces was child's play.

Willow just shook her head. She hated Vivienne, and she was sickened by her manipulative, opportunistic scheming, but she didn't want to handle it like this. If she was going to beat her, she was going to do it in the proper arena, using her own genuine expertise.

More importantly, she didn't want to burden Silas with it.

Silas didn't mind her answer. He always respected her choices. "Do whatever you think is best. I've got your back." He placed a piece of food on her plate, his expression softening. "Is there anything I can do for you, then?"

He wouldn't interfere with her decisions, but he had to be in her corner. If he didn't do something to help her, he wouldn't be able to sleep at night.

Willow looked down at her plate, thinking it over for a moment. Then she looked up at him, a sharp clarity in her eyes. "I actually do need your help with something."

Silas arched a brow, patiently waiting for her to continue.

"My resources are limited. There's a lot of classified data and network information I just can't access," Willow said frankly. "I'm not looking to attack her, but I need enough intel to see her hand. I have to be prepared."

She wasn't the type to be stubbornly independent to her own detriment. She knew how to read a situation, and she knew when to leverage her assets. Silas held the keys to top-tier resources; instead of letting them sit there, she might as well use them.

"So," Willow held his gaze, her eyes clear and direct. "I just need you to look into the classified information I can't reach. I want to beat her fair and square, but I can't do that if I'm flying blind."

A deep, affectionate smile spread across Silas's face. He was incredibly proud of her. "Done," he agreed without a second of hesitation.

"What exactly are we looking for?"

"Look into how she pulled off this WH stunt. I want to know exactly how she manipulated this."

The topic was quickly put to rest. Since they were picking Martha up from the hospital this weekend, Silas walked her through the itinerary, asking if she wanted to change anything.

From the discharge paperwork to the car arrangements, right down to sanitizing the house before she arrived, he had thought of absolutely everything. Willow couldn't find a single flaw in his plan.

Seeing her nod in approval, Silas added, "By the way, I'm coming with you this weekend."

"Don't you have that conference in Seattle?" Willow recalled him mentioning it. He had even asked if she wanted to tag along and make a trip out of it.

Instead, Silas brushed it off. "It's not important. I can just cancel it."

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"How is it not important?" She frowned, a little anxious. It was a major state-sponsored government summit. Top-tier corporations were lining up around the block just to get a seat at the table. It dictated the company's entire policy alignment for the coming year. How could that not be important?

Willow tried to talk him out of it. "You really should go. I can handle my mom on my own. If you skip this, I'm worried it's going to hurt your work down the line."

Silas looked at her earnest expression, a faint smile touching his eyes. She was worried about him.

He leaned in slowly, pressing his warm fingers gently against her smooth forehead in a comforting touch. "It's just a meeting. If I cancel it, I cancel it. Don't worry about it."

He stood up and began clearing the plates. "Get some rest and focus on picking your mom up this weekend. I've got everything handled. You don't need to stress."

Willow wanted to argue, but Silas wasn't having it.

To anyone else, that high-profile summit might be crucial to shaping the landscape of public-private partnerships. But to Silas Thorne, all the business, fame, and career prospects in the world couldn't compare to a fraction of Willow.

Forget a government summit. Even if the President himself were hosting a private roundtable, if it conflicted with Willow, Silas would cancel without batting an eye.

The weekend arrived quickly, and Willow and Silas went to pick Martha up from the hospital together.

Because Willow had specifically asked her not to, Martha didn't pry into the status of their relationship. But as she watched the two of them walk in side-by-side, she couldn't hide the smile in her eyes.

They looked entirely too perfect together. Silas was tall and elegant, radiating a calm, commanding presence that came from years at the top. And Willow was gentle and elegant, her features stunningly beautiful. Cold and soft, they complemented each other perfectly. They were a match made in heaven that left no room for anyone else.

In Martha's heart, they were already destined for each other.

Even if there were still walls between them and unresolved issues keeping them apart for now, she was absolutely certain that no man on earth was better suited for Willow than Silas Thorne. After all the twists and turns, they would inevitably find their way to each other and get their happy ending.

Her certainty only grew when she realized that every single detail of her discharge—from the VIP fast-track lane and zero-paperwork checkout, to the security escort and the convalescent setup waiting for her at home—had been personally arranged and overseen by Silas himself.

She saw right through it. The only reason Silas was going to such incredible lengths, personally managing every detail and sacrificing his own time and energy, was because of Willow.

While Willow was packing up the room, Martha took the opportunity to speak with Silas. "Silas, I really have to thank you today."

Her voice was gentle and brimming with sincerity. "Thank you for making my discharge so seamless and looking out for me. But most of all, thank you for taking such good care of our Willow for all this time."

"Once I'm fully recovered, I'm going to cook you some authentic New York dishes myself. You better not complain about my cooking."

Warmth flooded Silas's dark eyes, melting away his usual sharp edges. "I wouldn't dream of it. I'd be honored."

"And Martha, you don't need to thank me. It's nothing. It's what I should be doing."

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Martha looked at his gentle, sincere expression, her heart aching with fondness. She let out a soft sigh, her tone warm and reflective. "There's no such thing as 'should' in this world. Even parents and children have boundaries, let alone you and me, who aren't even family. But, I understand why you're doing this."

She softened her voice, offering a subtle hint and a gentle push of support. "I know my Willow. She takes her time, and she overthinks everything. Because she's been hurt so badly in love before, she's incredibly guarded now. She's terrified of committing, and she's terrified of trusting."

Martha's gaze was steady and encouraging as it rested on Silas. "But I trust you. As long as you're willing to give her a little more patience, a little more persistence, and help her heal day by day, she'll come around eventually. All these issues will work themselves out."

Those heartfelt words struck Silas right in the chest.

He froze in place, completely stunned.

"Martha, you knew..."

"I guessed," Martha said gently. "I don't know if I'm right, but if I'm off base, just ignore me."

Silas didn't give her a direct answer, but his silence was confirmation enough. His immediate reaction was to apologize. "Martha, I wasn't trying to hide it."

He knew he should have been the one to step up, make his intentions clear, and confess everything. But for a myriad of reasons, he just hadn't made his move yet.

"I'm not saying this to blame you, and I won't interfere too much with you and Willow," Martha explained. Willow had previously told her that Silas was in love with someone else, but Martha had never bought it. She knew there had to be some sort of misunderstanding.

Martha didn't want to overstep; she just couldn't bear to see such a good man struggling. That was why she had finally spoken up today. "I just wanted you to know that you have someone in your corner."

"Thank you," Silas's voice trembled slightly. He was incredibly nervous. He hadn't felt this kind of anxiety in years.

And it was all because the woman standing in front of him was Willow's mother. She was the woman who had raised the love of his life. She was the person Willow loved, valued, and trusted most in the world.

To Silas, her approval, her hopes, and her understanding weighed heavier than any multi-million dollar contract or boardroom victory.

"Oh, one more thing," Martha added. "Let's keep this conversation between us for now. I don't want to put any pressure on her."

Silas didn't hesitate for a second. "Absolutely. I agree completely. I won't pressure her, either."

Moments later, Willow came back from packing. Seeing Silas and Martha chatting, she asked what they were talking about.

Silas was quick on the uptake, remembering Martha's warning. He smoothly deflected, "Martha was just saying that once she's fully recovered, she's going to cook a few dishes for me."

Willow smiled, completely oblivious. "You're in for a treat. My mom is an amazing cook."

She turned to Martha, giving her a playful smile. "Do I get to piggyback on this and get a plate, too?"

Knowing her daughter was just fishing for affection, Martha laughed. "What do you think?"

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The three of them walked out together, chatting and laughing. The atmosphere was completely relaxed and brimming with warmth.

But that idyllic scene shattered the second they stepped out of the inpatient lobby. They walked right into Julian Sinclair.

The easygoing vibe vanished instantly.

Willow's smile died, and a layer of frost settled over her features. Martha's warm expression hardened into a deep scowl. Even the gentle warmth in Silas's eyes vanished, replaced by an abyss of frigid hostility.

All three of them stared at him with absolute ice.

Julian obviously spotted them, too. He had come here specifically for this.

He had pulled some strings and found out Martha was being discharged today. He had taken time out of his busy schedule to show up in person, thinking it would earn him some points and that Martha and Willow would be grateful.

Plus, he knew Willow would be here. He hadn't seen her in ages, and he didn't know where she was living, so this was his only shot. He wanted to use this chance to tell her about Sinclair Group's recent successes and how, with WH's backing, they might even surpass Merit Biotech in due time.

He wanted her to realize what she was missing, hoping that if she was willing to come back and drop the divorce, he could still give her a position at the company.

But the sight before him burned his eyes.

Willow looked radiant and gentle, her smile soft—a complete 180 from the cold, defensive wall she always threw up around him. She was chatting happily with Martha and Silas. The three of them stood close, their chemistry effortless and natural. From a distance, they looked like a picture-perfect, happy family.

A wave of absurd fury crashed through Julian's veins.

They weren't even divorced yet! As long as the paperwork wasn't finalized, she was still Julian Sinclair's wife. And here she was, parading around with another man, without a shred of decency!

Jealousy and rage tangled together, incinerating the last of Julian's rationality.

He didn't care who was watching. His face darkened, and he lunged forward, reaching out to grab Willow. "Get over here."

Before Willow could even react, a tall, broad-shouldered figure stepped smoothly in front of her. It was Silas.

His spine was ramrod straight, his broad shoulders entirely blocking Julian's line of sight. He turned his head and spoke to Willow and Martha in a calm, soothing tone. "Go get in the car. I'll be right there."

Without a second of hesitation or a single doubt, Willow did exactly as he asked, leading Martha away.

She didn't so much as glance at Julian the entire time, let alone listen to his demands.

The utter humiliation of being completely ignored hit Julian like a sledgehammer. He was a proud man who demanded respect. When had he ever been treated like dirt?

The rage boiled over. Unable to hold back a second longer, he swung his arm to shove Silas out of the way. "Move, Silas! This is between me and her. It has nothing to do with you."

Silas stood his ground, immoveable as a mountain, his expression devoid of emotion.

When his shove failed, Julian's fury spiked. He threw a punch straight at Silas's face, fast and vicious. But against Silas, his attack was clumsy and amateurish.

Silas kept himself in peak physical condition year-round. He was grounded, and his reflexes were lightning-fast. His dark eyes narrowed slightly as he leaned out of the way, easily dodging the brutal punch. In the same breath, his hand shot up, his fingers clamping down on Julian's forearm like a steel vice. With a calculated, restrained force, he completely immobilized Julian's arm.

Refusing to back down, Julian gritted his teeth and drove his knee upward, aiming for Silas's stomach in a desperate bid to gain the upper hand. But Silas was faster. He shifted his long legs, his knee blocking Julian's strike effortlessly. At the same time, Silas twisted Julian's trapped arm and shoved downward.

With a sickening thud, Julian's center of gravity gave out. His body lurched uncontrollably, and he stumbled forward, nearly face-planting on the concrete.

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After that brief exchange, it became painfully clear to Julian that he was completely outmatched.

He couldn't win a fight. But walking away meant swallowing his pride, and he refused to leave like a beaten dog.

His chest heaved, his eyes burning with a murderous rage as he glared at the impossibly calm man standing in front of him. Through gritted teeth, he demanded, "What the hell is your problem, Silas?!"

"You're only protecting Willow because of Arthur Vance, right? But he's just your assistant! Are you really willing to burn bridges with your business partners and tear up our relationship over a damn employee?"

The air around them seemed to freeze.

Silas's lips curled into a faint, freezing smirk.

He looked down at the pathetic, enraged man before him, his voice low, icy, and laced with mocking indifference. "Didn't Vivienne tell you?"

Julian froze, utter confusion washing over his face. "Tell me what?"

Seeing his clueless, pathetic state, the coldness in Silas's eyes deepened into outright disgust. "It seems your little mistress isn't exactly honest with you."

He paused for a beat before delivering the killing blow, his voice absolute and overpowering, shattering Julian's reality into a million pieces. "Since she didn't tell you, I will."

"From the very beginning, the man pursuing Willow was never Arthur Vance. It was me."

Silas had told Vivienne the exact same thing, and ironically, Julian's face mirrored the exact expression she had made.

Julian's pupils contracted. The rage drained from his face, replaced by pure, unadulterated shock. He stood there, completely paralyzed.

It took a long time for him to find his voice. When he finally spoke, it dripped with disbelief, confusion, and a desperate edge of superiority. "Impossible! Do you even know who you are? You're the CEO of Merit Biotech! You're at the very top of the food chain! Willow is a nobody with zero background. Women like her are a dime a dozen. Why the hell would you ever look twice at her?"

"Besides, she's still my wife! How could you—how dare you have designs on her? Aren't you afraid your family will intervene? Aren't you afraid of becoming a laughingstock in our circle?"

Silas couldn't care less about his family's reaction; the Thorne family fully supported his choice.

As for their 'circle,' Silas cared even less. He had never paid attention to the petty gossip of high society, and it certainly wasn't going to stop him now.

The only part of Julian's rant that made him frown was the phrase "my wife."

But Silas possessed an unwavering certainty about that, too. "You'll be divorced soon enough."

Those few words completely obliterated Julian's remaining bravado.

He went rigid, a tsunami of emotions crashing over him. Shock, jealousy, resentment, and panic twisted together, gripping his heart in a suffocating chokehold.

Julian had always been arrogant. He had always believed he was the absolute best Willow could ever hope for. He thought she would inevitably hit a dead end and come crawling back, begging for his forgiveness and a place in his home.

But this changed everything.

Silas Thorne—the untouchable, aloof billionaire who famously kept his distance from women—was actually in love with Willow? He had been secretly pursuing her and protecting her this whole time?

That realization shattered Julian's ego and his illusion of control in an instant.

Watching Julian stand there looking entirely defeated, caught between rage and shock, a flash of pure mockery crossed Silas's eyes. "I have to say, you and Vivienne really are perfect for each other. You share the exact same shallow worldview, and you're both equally delusional."

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With that, Silas turned to leave. Before he walked away, he threw a final warning over his shoulder. "From now on, stay the hell away from Willow. Don't show your face in her life, and don't harass her. If I catch you coming anywhere near her again, I will end you."

Julian's expression, already dark, plummeted into a dangerous scowl. His fists clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white, his eyes burning with resentment and fury. "Willow and I are legally married! Who the hell are you to interfere in our business? You're the other man, yet you're acting like you're on a moral crusade!"

Silas's lips quirked into a ghost of a smile, absolutely dripping with contempt. The ice in his eyes grew colder. "Married? A dead marriage where you're just unilaterally harassing her—you call that a marriage?"

The only reason Silas was wasting his breath on this trash instead of stepping in and destroying him was because Willow hadn't asked him to yet. He respected her, so he held back. But that didn't mean he would sit on the sidelines forever.

Julian's chest heaved. Silas's dominating declaration made him feel suffocated, trapped between rage and absolute powerlessness. "What? Is Mr. Thorne openly admitting to stealing another man's wife? Using your power to bully others?"

"Call it whatever you want," Silas replied, completely unfazed by the taunt. He was open, dominant, and didn't try to hide a thing. His voice rang with undeniable certainty. "I am going to make Willow mine."

Those words fell lightly from his lips, but they slammed into Julian's chest like a boulder, crushing his last pathetic delusion.

He couldn't handle the truth. He couldn't accept that Willow—the woman he had always looked down on and treated as a disposable accessory—was cherished and fought for by a man who sat at the absolute pinnacle of power.

Resentment, jealousy, humiliation, and paranoia twisted together, completely scrambling his brain.

He locked eyes with Silas, his tone manic and desperate as he tried to convince himself of his own lies. "Silas, you don't know a damn thing! Do you really think she feels anything for you? Back then, she was absolutely obsessed with me! She loved me so much it was pathetic. She begged and schemed just to marry me!"

Julian's voice pitched higher, clinging to the ghosts of the past to validate his ego, his eyes wild with obsession. "She loved me to death! I don't believe it! I refuse to believe she could move on that fast and stop loving me!"

Silas watched him quietly, staring at the hysterical, delusional man in front of him. His eyes were devoid of anything but freezing apathy. "People move forward. No one stays

trapped in the past forever. Her past obsession was just youthful ignorance. She picked the wrong man. But instead of cherishing her, you bled her dry and ground her gentle heart into dust. She hit her limit, and she walked away. You're living in a pathetic fantasy, humiliating yourself over a past that doesn't exist anymore."

That blunt, surgical breakdown struck Julian exactly where it hurt, stripping him of whatever dignity he had left. Suddenly, he burst out laughing. His eyes turned dark and malicious, filled with ugly suspicion. "I get it now. You're so hell-bent on stealing my wife, interfering in someone else's marriage... When it comes down to it, you just want her skills, don't you? You just want her genius in the lab!"

"I'll admit, Willow is talented. She's smarter than most. But at the end of the day, she's just a regular woman, and there are plenty of women like her. For the almighty CEO of Merit Biotech to stoop to stealing another man's wife just for a researcher... don't you think that's a little pathetic?"

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Chapter 561

Silas stared at him with lethal coldness. "You underestimate Merit, and you completely misjudge Willow."

"Merit has the best resources and the most brilliant minds in the world. We don't need to chain a woman to a marriage to build an empire. As for Willow, you only see her skills. You only see her as a tool to be used. You never saw her kindness, her resilience, or her pure heart. You didn't understand her worth, and you trampled all over her devotion. That is going to be the biggest, most foolish regret of your pathetic life."

Julian completely snapped. His grip on reality shattered. Deep down, he knew Silas was right, and it terrified him because everything was spiraling out of his control.

Consumed by toxic jealousy, he lost his mind, abandoning all pretense of decency. He spat out the filthiest, most vile accusations he could think of, desperate to drag Willow down and take everyone with him.

"Cherish her? She doesn't deserve it! Silas, do you really think you found some pure, innocent angel? You don't know her at all!"

"Willow has been dirty for a long time! She was sleeping around long before she ever married me. Why do you think I never wanted to touch her during all our years of marriage? Why do you think we never had a kid?"

"She's a whore! You're breaking your back trying to steal my sloppy seconds!"

The disgusting words had barely left his mouth when—

Smack!

A sickening, bone-crunching impact echoed through the air.

Silas moved with terrifying speed. He threw a devastatingly heavy punch, his fist connecting violently with Julian's jaw.

The sheer force of the blow sent Julian stumbling backward until he slammed hard into the cold concrete wall. His lip split open instantly, a bright streak of blood sliding down his chin as the side of his face immediately began to swell.

A dead silence fell over the walkway.

Silas stepped closer, towering over Julian, who had slumped pathetically against the wall. Silas's voice was colder than liquid nitrogen, vibrating with absolute menace and fiercely protective rage. "Watch your mouth. If I ever hear you say something that filthy, that vile, and that entirely fabricated about her again, you're a dead man."

"Julian, get this through your head. The only reason she has ever suffered, the only reason she has ever been degraded, and the only reason her life has been difficult, is because she met you."

"You don't get to judge her character, her purity, or her worth. You are a selfish, narrow-minded, incompetent piece of trash."

"You aren't worthy of saying her name."

With that, Silas pulled his gaze away, looking at Julian like he was a stain on the sidewalk. Unwilling to waste another second on him, he turned and walked away.

Behind him, Julian slowly dragged himself up against the wall, his dignity entirely obliterated by a single punch. Half his face throbbed with agonizing heat, and the metallic taste of blood coated his tongue.

The extreme humiliation and jealousy completely short-circuited his brain. He suddenly started screaming at the top of his lungs. "Silas! You talk a big game! You act like her knight in shining armor! But have you ever even asked her what she wants?"

"It's pathetic! You pour your heart out, you bend over backwards to protect her, and you do all this work behind the scenes, but you don't even know if she gives a damn about you! She probably doesn't even like you!"

"You have no idea, do you?!"

"You don't even have the balls to ask her, do you?!"

"At the end of the day, you're the real coward!"

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Chapter 562

Hearing those words, Silas Thorne's footsteps faltered for a fraction of a second—a hesitation so brief it was nearly imperceptible.

Usually a man of icy self-control who never let his emotions show, a faint flicker of gloom and panic flashed through his deep, predatory gaze.

Julian Sinclair was right. He truly didn't know, and he didn't dare to ask.

His only weakness—the one thing he was afraid to touch, test, or question—was Willow Horgan's heart.

He was terrified that the answer wouldn't be what he desperately wanted to hear. He feared pushing her away and ruining the fragile bond they currently shared.

Silas continued walking. His pace remained steady, but an invisible weight now settled over his every step.

Downstairs, Willow and Martha Mercer were waiting for him in the car.

Silas slid into the driver's seat, the earlier shadows in his eyes completely erased, replaced by his usual calm demeanor. He glanced at the two women beside him, his voice gentle and soothing. "It's alright now. Everything has been handled. He won't bother you again."

Both Willow and Martha thanked him.

He didn't elaborate on the bitter confrontation that had just unfolded in the hospital room, brushing over the conflict with a few light words. Still, Willow caught the subtle shift in his mood.

But with Martha present, Willow didn't press the issue, not wanting to upset her mother. It wasn't until they were getting out of the car that she softly asked Silas if the conversation with Julian had gone poorly.

"It was fine," Silas replied, reaching out to help her carry their things. It was then that Willow noticed his hand.

Across his long, elegant knuckles was a fresh, angry scrape. The raw, reddened skin stood out starkly against his luminous complexion, faintly beaded with blood.

Willow's immediate thought was that Julian had done it. "What happened to your hand?" she asked, her voice laced with concern. "Did Julian do this? Does it hurt?"

Silas lowered his gaze, taking in the undisguised worry in her eyes. It was as if a warm tide washed over his chest, easing the suffocating wave of despair Julian's provocation had left behind.

He had originally planned to brush it off with a casual, 'It's nothing, just a scratch.'

But as the words reached his lips, looking at Willow, who was so clearly worried about him, a selfish urge took root.

He wanted to hold onto her concern, to test her true feelings. He needed to know if he held any special weight in her heart.

And so, the usually restrained and stoic man dropped his impenetrable armor for the very first time. "Yeah," he admitted, his voice a low, husky rasp. "It actually hurts quite a bit."

Those few simple words stripped away all his dominance, revealing a hidden, agonizing vulnerability.

Willow's heart ached at the admission. Her tone softened instantly. "Just bear with it for a little while. I'll clean and bandage it as soon as we get inside."

"Okay," Silas agreed obediently, his gaze lingering affectionately on her stunning curves.

Sunlight flooded the living room as they walked into the house.

Willow carefully settled Martha in first, making sure her mother was resting comfortably in her bedroom before hurrying back out.

Silas was still standing in the living room. Willow quickly retrieved the first aid kit and guided him to sit on the sofa.

She crouched in front of him, her movements cautious and incredibly gentle. Holding his fingers lightly, she meticulously cleaned the dirt from the scrape. Then, taking a cotton

swab soaked in antiseptic, she dabbed the wound, using the lightest touch possible, terrified of causing him any pain.

For a moment, the air fell perfectly silent, save for the faint sound of the cotton swiping against his skin.

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Chapter 563

The warm sunlight spilled across Willow's profile, highlighting the delicate curve of her jawline. Her long eyelashes cast faint, sweeping shadows over her cheeks, making her look impossibly gentle.

Silas stared down at her focused expression, the deep affection in his eyes practically overflowing. In that instant, all the gloom, frustration, and dark anxiety that had built up inside him dissolved into nothingness.

She did care about him.

"Does it still hurt?"

Her soft voice broke through his thoughts, pulling him back to reality.

Silas blinked, his gaze remaining firmly locked onto her face. He shook his head slowly. "Not anymore."

"Are you sure?" Willow glanced up at him, still not completely convinced. "Maybe we should head to the hospital just in case? Or I could call a private doctor over?"

"Oh, and you need to avoid getting it wet for the next few days. Don't bump it against anything, and try to eat clean."

Willow meticulously listed out all the precautions, but Silas wasn't listening. His entire focus was captivated by her face. He just nodded blindly to whatever she asked, distracted and giving noncommittal answers.

Noticing his distraction, Willow paused her bandaging and frowned slightly. "What is it?" she pressed gently. "Did I hurt you? Or did I say something wrong? You keep zoning out. What's on your mind?"

The moment the words left her mouth.

The man who had always kept his distance, who had always maintained an iron grip on his self-control, could no longer hold back the surging tide of his desires.

He didn't answer her. Throwing his restraint to the wind, he leaned forward, slipping his hand to the back of her neck. He tilted his head and pressed his lips firmly yet reverently against her forehead.

It was a tender, lingering kiss—brief, but heavy with electric tension, carrying all the suppressed devotion he had harbored for so long.

He pulled away just a fraction of an inch.

Resting his forehead against hers, his breath hot against her skin, Silas stared into her eyes with raw intensity. "This is exactly what I was thinking about."

Willow froze instantly, the cotton swab stalling in her hand.

This was the second time he had initiated a kiss.

The first time had been in Seattle, veiled in ambiguity. Everything had happened so fast back then, and Willow had chalked it up to the atmosphere. After all, people were easily swept away in such romantic settings. To avoid complicating things, she had never brought it up again.

But this time, bathed in the quiet, bright sunlight, his intent was unmistakable. It was clear, solemn, and deliberate. All the teasing, the push-and-pull, the cautious testing of waters—it was all laid bare now, impossible to deny or ignore.

Willow's heart gave a violent jolt. She looked up at the man so close to her, a storm of emotions churning in her chest, fully prepared to demand answers.

She wanted to ask him how he truly felt. What did this mean? What about that person he had mentioned liking before? If he had someone else in his heart, why was he kissing her now?

Her lips parted, ready to speak—

"Willow, could you come here for a second?" Martha's gentle voice floated down from the second floor, instantly shattering the thick, sensual tension in the room. "I need to talk to you about something."

The questions died in Willow's throat.

The electric atmosphere between them evaporated under the sudden interruption.

Willow glanced at him, her cheeks still flushed a furious crimson. She pointed toward the bedroom hallway. "I should go check on her."

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Chapter 564

Willow walked into the bedroom. Martha was lying in bed, watching a live television interview. The person on the screen was none other than Vivienne Sinclair.

Vivienne was dressed in an elegant, cream-colored tailored suit. Her long hair was pinned back in an immaculate bun. She practically glowed with the triumphant aura of a rising scientific star, her expression brimming with smug satisfaction.

Facing the cameras and the sea of reporters, Vivienne wore a perfectly calculated smile—gentle, yet brimming with confidence. Every gesture she made reeked of manufactured grace. Every glance, every pause was designed to show off her newfound superiority.

On screen, she declared to the reporters that she was WH. She claimed she had spent years quietly conducting research under an anonymous alias, perfecting the technology because she despised the vanity of fame. She said she only wanted to create real results that benefited patients. She spun a tale of how recent events forced her to reveal her identity, adding that she welcomed public scrutiny and support moving forward.

Martha's brows knitted together as she listened, pure disbelief in her eyes. "Willow, what is going on here? Aren't you WH? When I was cleaning your study a while ago, I accidentally saw the login credentials on your computer. You've used that account for years. Why is Vivienne claiming to be you?"

Willow hadn't expected her mother to catch the news broadcast. Worried about Martha getting too worked up, she immediately tried to calm her down. "Mom, please don't stress yourself over this. You need to focus on your health."

"How can I not worry?" Martha asked, her face tight with anxiety. Willow was entirely on her own now, and Martha still wasn't fully recovered enough to help. The thought of her daughter facing these battles solo tore at her. She hated her own helplessness.

Sensing her mother's distress, Willow offered a reassuring smile. "I've known about this for a while, Mom. I've been handling it behind the scenes. I'm not just letting her get away with it. Don't worry, she won't be able to steal what belongs to me."

Seeing Willow's calm confidence brought Martha a little comfort. But the memory of the hospital incident soon rushed back, making her shudder with lingering fear.

"And that Julian Sinclair is no better," Martha said bitterly. "Earlier at the hospital, if Silas hadn't been there to protect you, who knows what would have happened. Julian didn't look like he was going to let things go. What about next time? If he shows up again and Silas isn't around, what will you do?"

Today's confrontation had completely blindsided her. Willow hadn't expected Julian to ambush her like that. Normally, she wouldn't give him the time of day and would just have security toss him out. But with Martha present, she hadn't wanted to risk escalating things.

Willow opened her mouth to explain, but Martha pressed on. "The best and safest option is to finalize that divorce with Julian immediately. You need to sever all ties with the Sinclair family for good. Only then can you actually live in peace without them dragging you down."

Willow nodded. She had originally intended to keep the messy details to herself and only share the news once everything was settled. But now that Vivienne's face was plastered across every television screen, hiding it was impossible.

"I know, Mom," Willow promised softly. "The second-instance appeal is coming up soon. This time, I will get the divorce. I'm going to cut ties with the Sinclair family permanently. I'm done with them."

"As for Vivienne... it's time she pays for what she's done."

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Chapter 565

There was no hesitation, no turning back. After suffering in silence for so long, this was the absolute endgame she had to achieve.

Martha's anxieties eased slightly at that declaration, though she couldn't help but offer a warning. "As long as you have a plan. The sooner you escape those two scoundrels, the sooner you can start fresh. But carrying all this weight by yourself is too much. Silas is incredibly sharp, well-connected, and reliable. If you hit a roadblock, don't be afraid to ask for his advice. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to help you."

Just hearing the name Silas made Willow's face flush. The sudden memory of his kiss flashed violently through her mind—the heat of his palm, the proximity of his breathing, the soft warmth of his lips.

A fiery crimson rushed up her neck, burning the tips of her ears before flooding her cheeks, painting her radiant complexion in deep, embarrassed hues.

Her sudden distraction and glowing face did not escape Martha's notice.

Unaware of what had just transpired in the living room, Martha assumed Willow was feeling unwell. She reached out, pressing a hand to Willow's forehead. "What's wrong? Why is your face so red? Are you sick? Did you catch a fever?"

"I'm fine," Willow snapped out of her daze, frantically trying to bury the nervous flutter in her chest. She avoided her mother's probing gaze, grasping for a random excuse. "It's just a little stuffy in here, that's all. Oh, I just remembered I need to do something in the other room."

She remembered Silas was still sitting out in the living room.

"Will you be okay by yourself? Are you feeling alright?" she asked Martha before leaving.

"I'm fine. Go take care of your things."

"Okay, I'll check on you in a bit."

With that, Willow stepped out of the bedroom and headed back to the living room.

But Silas was nowhere to be seen. The sofa where he had just been sitting was empty. The only proof that he had ever been there was the faint, lingering scent of cedar in the air.

Silas had left.

Realizing he was gone, a faint pang of disappointment washed over Willow. Before she could unpack why she felt so let down, her phone screen lit up on the side table.

She picked it up. It was a text from Silas: I headed back to start cooking. Take your time talking with your mom. No rush.

The tone was warm and considerate, completely characteristic of him. He was giving her space, ensuring he didn't intrude on her private family moments, just as he always did.

That one simple sentence instantly lifted Willow's spirits. It struck her then—without her even realizing it, her emotional state was already completely tied to his every move.

Meanwhile, back at the hospital, Julian hadn't stuck around much longer after Silas left. Boiling with rage and nursing a bruised jaw, he drove straight to his family estate. The moment he kicked the door open, he barked, "Where is Vivienne?"

Susannah Sinclair was sitting on the living room sofa, helping Toby build a block tower. Hearing the violent slam of the front door, she looked up, startled by the dark aura radiating from Julian.

She immediately dropped the toy blocks and rushed over. "Julian? Why are you back so early? And why are you throwing a tantrum?"

Then her eyes locked onto his split lip. She gasped in shock. "My god! What happened to your mouth? You're bleeding! Who did this to you?"

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Chapter 566

Julian completely ignored her question, repeating his demand like a broken record. "Where is Vivienne?"

"Vivienne?" Susannah was taken aback by his freezing tone. "She had a live interview today, remember? She left early this morning. I was just watching the broadcast! She was absolutely brilliant. So articulate and commanding. The internet is singing her praises, and Sinclair Group's stock is already skyrocketing because of it!"

Whenever the topic of Vivienne came up, Susannah simply couldn't hide her pride. She rambled on, practically glowing. "Everyone is talking about how talented and successful she is! She's miles ahead of those spoiled rich girls in our social circle! You really ought to give her the praise she deserves—"

"Enough." Julian cut off her endless chatter. There was no joy in his expression, only a dark, simmering fury.

He couldn't be bothered to waste another breath on her. Spinning on his heel, he marched toward his second-floor study, tossing a final order over his shoulder. "Tell her to report to my study the exact second she walks through that door."

Susannah stared at his retreating back, utterly bewildered. "Have you lost your mind?" she muttered to herself. "Vivienne is making the family look incredible and boosting our stock prices. What on earth do you have to be mad about?"

Across town, having just wrapped up her exclusive interview, Vivienne was relaxing in the studio's green room.

She checked her phone and saw a text from Susannah, letting her know that Julian was waiting for her at home and wanted her back immediately.

A surge of sweet anticipation flooded Vivienne's chest at the message.

She immediately assumed that her performance on camera had been so spectacular, so impactful, that Julian had watched the broadcast and was waiting at home to congratulate her on her brilliant triumph.

She smiled the entire drive back, completely unable to contain her euphoria.

But the moment she stepped through the front doors of the estate, she sensed the oppressive, dead silence hanging in the air. The atmosphere was suffocating.

The joy drained from Vivienne's veins. Wiping the smile from her face, she slowly climbed the stairs and pushed open the heavy oak door to the study.

The curtains were drawn halfway, casting the room in shadows. The tension was thick enough to choke on.

Julian was seated behind his massive ebony desk, rolling an unlit cigarette between his fingers. He radiated an icy hostility. His head was bowed slightly, highlighting the harsh angles of his jaw, and the fresh cut on his lip looked angry and jagged.

Vivienne's chest tightened. She hurried forward, her voice dripping with cautious concern. "Julian, what happened? Why are you bleeding? Let me get the first aid kit—it's going to scar if it gets infected."

She reached out, intending to gently touch his bruised lip.

Before her fingers could even graze his skin, Julian violently slapped her hand away.

The forceful blow caught Vivienne entirely off guard. A sharp jolt of pain shot up her wrist, and her hand froze in midair.

Stunned, she looked up, colliding with his pitch-black, frigid glare.

Julian pinned her with a stare sharp enough to draw blood. "You knew," he said, his voice deadly quiet. "You knew the entire time that Willow's true suitor was Silas Thorne, not Arthur Vance. Didn't you?"

The words detonated like a bomb in Vivienne's ears.

Her entire body locked up, her blood running cold. Her carefully crafted mask of gentle innocence shattered. Panic flared wildly in her eyes, though instinct quickly took over. "Julian, what are you talking about?" she stammered. "How could I have known that? Who is spreading these lies to you?"

"Lies?" Julian let out a dark, mocking scoff. "Silas Thorne told me himself. To my face. Are you seriously still trying to lie your way out of this?"

With the absolute truth staring her down, denying it was pointless.

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Chapter 567

Vivienne's tense shoulders slumped. Her masquerade had collapsed entirely. Dropping her hand, she looked away in defeat and gave a slow nod. "Yes," she rasped out. "I knew. But I only found out by accident."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Julian demanded furiously. "You knew the whole truth, yet you didn't say a single word. Were you just enjoying watching me play the fool?"

Faced with his interrogation, Vivienne snapped her head up. The panic in her eyes vanished, replaced by a stinging bitterness. She glared right back at him. "Why should I have told you? What would knowing have changed?"

"It would have changed everything," Julian growled. If he had known sooner, he never would have let the situation spiral out of control. He never would have given the two of them the chance to get close. And he absolutely never would have agreed to divorce Willow.

He didn't say that last part out loud, burying the confession in heavy silence.

But Vivienne knew him better than anyone. How could she not see right through him?

Watching the subtle shifts in his expression, it felt as though a knife had been violently twisted into her chest. A bitter, self-deprecating smile twisted her lips.

She had known all along that if Julian found out about Silas's feelings for Willow, he would only become more stubborn, more fiercely determined never to sign those divorce papers. That was exactly why she had chosen to keep her mouth shut.

"If you had known earlier, you never would have agreed to divorce her, would you?" Vivienne spat out, throwing caution to the wind.

Called out on his true motives, Julian didn't even bother denying it. "Yes. I will not divorce Willow. I made that entirely clear to you from the very beginning."

"But we are talking about your actions right now," he fired back. "Why did you hide the truth? Why did you let me make a fool of myself?"

His relentless accusations acted as a spark to the powder keg of rage and resentment Vivienne had been harboring for years. Tears of anger welled in her bloodshot eyes. Tearing away the last shreds of her gentle facade, she let all her toxic obsession and jealousy bleed through.

"So what?!" she screamed. "Why refuse to let her go?! If it's about her professional value, I have fame now! I have the skills! I have the leverage! I am not inferior to her in any way! I can easily replace her and make Sinclair Group grow even faster!"

Julian watched her hysterical outburst without an ounce of sympathy. He slowly shook his head, his voice dead flat but uncompromising. "It has nothing to do with any of that."

That answer brought a brief second of relief, only to violently plunge Vivienne into an even deeper, darker pit of despair.

She clenched her fists so hard her knuckles turned white. Clinging to one final, desperate thread of hope, she asked, "It's not about her value? Then what is it? Is it the rumors? Are you afraid that divorcing Willow to be with me will ruin the Sinclair family's reputation? Are you worried high society will judge you?"

If that were the case, she was willing to step back. She could compromise.

Biting her lip, she cast aside all her pride, begging him like a pathetic animal. "If that's what it is, we don't have to go public! We don't need a wedding, or even a marriage license. I don't need the title. I don't need to be Mrs. Sinclair. I will gladly stay by your side in secret for the rest of my life. Just divorce her. As long as I can be yours, that's enough for me. Please, is that enough?"

But as her desperate pleas faded, Julian's brow remained furrowed. His eyes were resolute, silently radiating the exact same rejection.

A bone-deep chill shot up from the soles of Vivienne's feet, paralyzing her entirely. The absolute last sliver of hope in her soul was crushed into dust.

After a long, agonizing silence, she let out a hollow laugh. It was a bleak, miserable sound that carried the weight of a dying heart. The tears in her eyes dried up, leaving nothing behind but an endless, barren wasteland.

Staring at him with a mix of disbelief and dreaded realization, her voice shook as she asked the final, damning question. "Don't tell me... do you actually still love her?"

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Chapter 568

Love?

When Julian Sinclair heard that word, his first reaction was to scoff. His lips curled into an icy, cynical smile. There was not a shred of warmth in his eyes, only a freezing mockery and obsessive control.

How could he possibly love Willow Horgan?

What gave her the right to make him feel anything at all?

When they were younger, she had been entirely devoted to him. She carefully hid her secret crush, though the adoration in her eyes was as plain as it was pathetic. She had chased him across half the city, yet he had turned a blind eye, treating her with utter indifference without a single flicker of emotion. Back then, he didn't love her.

Later, she joined the Sinclair family, asking for neither title nor money. Even when she was left completely out in the cold, she remained obedient and quiet. Still, he felt nothing. He didn't love her then, either.

Then she was sent away to Seattle, far from home, shouldering all the pressure alone. She hadn't uttered a single complaint from start to finish, venturing off to a distant city by herself to stabilize the overseas projects and hold the fort for the Sinclair family. And still, he didn't love her.

So how could he possibly love her now?

Moreover, Vivienne Sinclair was the one who had given him a child and continued the family lineage. That was what he valued most. And that was something Willow could never do.

Therefore, Julian convinced himself that the turbulent emotions churning inside him were neither love nor guilt. It was an ingrained need for control, the sting of challenged arrogance, and an absolute inability to accept things slipping from his grasp.

To him, Willow had always been something he held in the palm of his hand. She was the docile, obedient toy who would always stay right where he left her, no matter how much he neglected or ignored her. She was never supposed to escape his reach.

But now, this toy he had discarded for years actually wanted to turn and run. What fueled his growing, intolerable rage was the fact that someone else was stepping in to claim her—and that someone was Silas Thorne.

That powerful, impossibly arrogant man who looked down on all of Seattle from his high horse had actually given all his favoritism and tenderness to the Willow he didn't want.

Anyone coveting what belonged to him, even if it was something he treated like trash, was the ultimate insult.

Watching Willow slip out of his cage, how could he possibly allow it?

Julian raised his eyes. His gaze turned somber, and his tone was stripped of all warmth as he answered Vivienne's earlier question. "Do you really think that's possible? And don't ever mention that word in front of me again."

As the words dropped, the air in the room plummeted to freezing.

Vivienne curled her fingers tightly by her sides, a dark emotion flashing in her eyes. She knew Julian too well. She understood the thoughts hidden beneath his icy exterior even better than he did.

If he truly didn't care, he wouldn't need to get angry, he wouldn't need to deliberately deny it, and he certainly wouldn't need to explicitly forbid the topic.

He was just proud and stubborn, refusing to admit that through all the daily push and pull, the gains and losses, he had fallen for the Willow he had ignored for so long. Or perhaps, he hadn't even realized it himself yet.

But no matter what, she couldn't let things go any further.

She had to destroy everything Willow had with her own hands. She would ruin her reputation, leaving her with no chance to bounce back, so she could never stand in front of Julian again. Only then would her own position remain unshaken.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere at Willow and Martha Mercer's home was gentle and peaceful.

Ever since Martha had been discharged from the hospital, Willow rarely worked late anymore. She clocked out on time every day, heading straight home to keep her company.

Although Silas had already arranged for a housekeeper to manage all the household chores flawlessly, taking care of every little detail, Willow still wanted to spend time with Martha whenever she could,

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Sometimes they prepped vegetables together, sometimes they watched TV, and sometimes they sorted laundry. It didn't matter what they did, as long as she was by her side.

Looking back, she had started school early, boarded during middle and high school, went straight to college, and then got married and moved to Seattle. Over the years, she had actually spent very little time with Martha.

When she was young and naive, she had only focused on moving forward—busy studying, growing up, and chasing after the unattainable Julian. After waking up from that long, exhausting dream, she finally realized she had neglected the family she should have cherished the most.

And the person Willow had been thinking about nonstop these past few days was Silas Thorne.

They hadn't seen each other since that incident, mainly because he had flown out on a business trip to Europe the very next day. Between the time difference and the distance, they naturally hadn't communicated as much as they did at the office. Willow was worried about distracting him from work, so she hadn't brought up the matter over the phone. But the bigger reason she stayed quiet was that she felt some things simply had to be said in person.

So, Willow decided to wait until he returned. It wouldn't be too late to ask then.

The days passed peacefully. One crisp morning, with the sunlight bright and a gentle breeze blowing,

Willow arrived at the office on time as usual. Just as she sat down and organized her desk, the receptionist gently knocked on her door, carrying a massive cardboard box. "Director Horgan, you have a package."

Willow paused, glancing up at the huge, heavily taped box with surprise. "For me?"

She never had things shipped to the office. Her personal packages always went to her apartment. Seeing such a large, seemingly important delivery arrive at work caught her off guard.

"Yes, the name and information match yours. It just arrived." The receptionist placed the box by her desk and smiled. "It's packed incredibly tight. There are layers of bubble wrap and waterproof film inside and out. It looks like it was prepared with a lot of care."

"Alright, thank you." Willow thanked her, staring at the heavy box, utterly confused.

She ran her fingers over the rough cardboard exterior, thinking hard, but she couldn't figure out who would send her such a massive gift and pack it with such meticulous care.

The office was quiet. She grabbed a box cutter and carefully sliced through the tape, peeling back the thick layers of packaging one by one.

As the bubble wrap gave way, the tightly sealed exterior opened to reveal a neatly organized assortment of local specialties. There were medicinal herbs, wild mushrooms, dried fruits, and more.

Everything was perfectly arranged, and each small bag was carefully sealed. There wasn't a hint of disorder.

Right in the center of the box lay a neatly folded handwritten letter and a clear, candid photograph.

When she recognized the youthful, smiling face in the photo, Willow froze, her hand hovering mid-air.

All her confusion vanished in an instant, replaced by an overwhelming wave of tender warmth and a lump in her throat.

It was Ethan Walker!

She crouched down and gently picked up the photo. The boy in the picture was wearing a clean white hoodie. His eyes were clear and gentle, and he was offering the camera a soft smile. He had shed the fragility of his illness, radiating the vibrant energy of a young man.

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Willow lightly brushed her fingers across the photo, feeling tears prick her eyes.

Then, she opened the letter and began to read it, word for word.

[Dear Willow:

It's been a while. How have you been lately?

I've been thinking about you a lot. I don't know if your work in New York City is too busy or exhausting. You have to take good care of yourself. Don't always stay up late working. No matter how important your job is, your health matters too.

I still remember when you came all the way out here to help me. You patiently taught me how to care for myself and calmed me down over and over again. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have recovered so well recently. So, thank you so, so much.

Don't worry, my condition is really stable now. When I went to the hospital for a check-up, the doctor said my numbers are great and I've improved a lot. I strictly follow the care routine you taught me every day. I don't dare slack off, and I rarely feel sick anymore.

I haven't fallen behind on my studies, either. I go to class and finish my homework on time every day. I also read a lot in my spare time to keep up. I've kept the words you told me etched in my heart. I haven't forgotten them, and they're what keeps me going and working hard.

My mom and dad talk about you every day. They're so grateful to you. The local goods we sent were all handpicked by them. They're the most authentic things we have here. They aren't expensive, but they're packed with all our family's gratitude. I hope you like them.

The doctors and my teachers both say my recovery looks really optimistic. As long as I keep up with my care and treatment, it won't be long before my condition is completely stable and I can leave these mountains.

I'm really looking forward to that day. When I can finally leave, I'm going straight to New York City to see you. I hope I get to see my beautiful, kind Willow again.

Wishing you all the best at work, safety, happiness, and that everything goes your way. Stay warm and bright forever.

Thinking of you always, Ethan]

The handwriting at the end of the letter swept upward slightly, carrying the boy's earnest hopes and affection.

Willow finished reading every word. Her fingers traced the youthful script, her heart flooding with a bittersweet, moving warmth.

When she had left, Ethan had clung to her jacket with red eyes, entirely reluctant to see her go. But he was only a fifteen-year-old boy. Willow had assumed his attachment was just a fleeting childhood emotion. She had never expected that this teenager—who had been tormented by a rare disease and had every reason to be fragile and guarded—would hold on to her brief company, her advice, and her help for so long.

She looked up at the package on her desk. The herbs, mushrooms, and dried fruits were all individually packed in clean, sealed bags and stacked perfectly. Every detail was meticulously thoughtful. It was heavy with the pure, rustic kindness of Ethan's family.

Willow's heart swelled.

Before she had left, she had actually given Ethan her personal phone number, thinking that if he ever felt sick or ran into any trouble, he could call her anytime.

But he hadn't called. Instead, he chose to write a letter—the oldest, most cumbersome, yet most sincere method possible. Perhaps it was the only way he could properly articulate all the gratitude tucked away in his heart, word for word.

Without hesitation, Willow pulled out a sheet of stationery, deciding to reply the exact same way.

In her letter, she first thanked Ethan and his family for the local gifts, saying how much she loved them.

Then she told him how much she missed him and wished him and his parents continued good health.

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She praised him for being so diligent with his care and promised she would wait for him in New York City. When he finally arrived, she was going to show him a great time.

Finally, she shared some excellent news.

The clinical data she had gathered from his case had gone through rigorous expert reviews and cross-checks recently, and it was nearly finalized. Once she completed the last round of edits, she would officially draft the paper and submit it for academic publication.

This data wouldn't just document his specific symptoms and aid his long-term care; it would serve as an authoritative clinical reference. It was going to help countless other patients suffering from Butterfly Children disease across the country, bringing hope to their treatments, daily care, and lives.

After finishing the letter, Willow gathered a bunch of items from New York City. Mimicking Ethan's family, she carefully packaged every single thing before asking the receptionist to ship it out for her.

Right after that, Willow called Leo Yardley and the other project members into the conference room to officially discuss the academic publication and patent application.

Leo spoke first. "Director Horgan, this dataset is totally solid. Before, domestic Butterfly Children research relied entirely on overseas case studies, which had terrible compatibility. Many grassroots care plans were useless for domestic patients. Now, our localized, comprehensive case system is an absolute industry first. Should we go straight to journal submission?"

Willow's gaze was calm. She scrolled through the standardized care models on the screen, her tone firm and professional. "File for an invention patent first, then run the academic publication and industry rollout simultaneously. Just publishing a paper only serves as an academic reference; it won't help us standardize the roll-out or prevent industry exploitation. Securing the patent is the only way to legally and ethically distribute the tech nationwide, actually saving lives and driving industry standards."

No one in the room was more familiar with the patent process than she was, so Willow claimed the task herself. "I know the patent side inside and out. I'll handle that. You guys take care of the rest."

She had already mapped out the entire plan and broke it down systematically. "Besides the patent, our second priority is standardizing grassroots medical care. We need to pair our research with dermatology clinics to write a grassroots rare disease care manual. We'll distribute it to county and rural hospitals to train local medical staff, enabling early screening, identification, and intervention to prevent misdiagnoses."

"Next, we need to fuel further scientific breakthroughs. This publication will provide real clinical data for future gene therapies and targeted drug development, drastically cutting down the research timeline for domestic rare diseases."

"Finally, and most importantly, we have to break the information barrier. Much of a rare disease patient's suffering doesn't just come from the illness, but from the crushing isolation. We'll use legitimate academic platforms and public outreach to educate people on Butterfly Children care, clearing up public misconceptions. The more people understand this rare disease, the more compassion and grace these patients will receive."

Having finished, Willow dropped her gaze back to her laptop screen, logging everything she had just outlined for future tracking.

The team was stunned by her rigorous professionalism. Someone couldn't help but marvel, "Director Horgan, you're amazing! Your expertise is off the charts, and you've got such a rare, kind heart. What you're doing is going to alter the fates of so many patients. They're going to owe you their lives!"

Willow just offered a faint smile. It wasn't a big deal to her. "I'm just doing my job."

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Chapter 572

For several consecutive days, Willow threw herself entirely into her work.

The multi-layered verification of the patent application, the final proofreading of the academic paper, and the meticulous sorting of clinical research data—each step required absolute precision. There was no room for error.

Following the official protocol of the world's top biological academic summits, any selected breakthrough research required a public presentation and a full-floor academic defense.

So, very quickly, Willow and her team arranged the conference.

The entire symposium was to be live-streamed in high definition, with cameras covering every corner of the venue. Broadcast globally to the biopharmaceutical and genomic research sectors, it was an incredibly prestigious public debut, drawing immense attention and live viewers from all over the internet.

The event took place at the premier international convention center downtown. The expansive floor-to-ceiling windows reflected the brilliant lighting, and the hall was packed with the absolute best in the industry. The audience included top-tier university academicians, department heads from major hospitals, and leading figures from biotech corporations.

A slew of veteran heavyweights who had dedicated decades to genomic editing sat in the front row. And, of course, Mr. Smith sat dead center at the expert panel, radiating a commanding, dignified presence.

With such a high-profile event underway, there was no way Vivienne would miss it.

Originally, she didn't have the credentials to attend, let alone sit at the expert panel. But given her recent surge in popularity, which had driven massive exposure for the entire industry, the organizers had invited her just to capitalize on the hype.

Riding the coattails of WH's reputation, she had crafted the persona of a 'genius researcher.' Not only had she talked her way into the venue, but she had brazenly taken a seat at the side expert panel.

Dressed in an impeccably tailored cream blazer and skirt set, her makeup flawless and her posture poised, she looked every bit the young prodigy and rising star of the industry.

From the moment she took her seat, Vivienne deliberately avoided looking at Willow at the main presenter's podium. She feigned a haughty detachment, acting as if they were total strangers.

Thanks to the recent buzz around 'WH,' many scholars and guests eagerly approached her to chat. "Ms. Sinclair, it's an honor! Many of your recent theories have made massive waves internationally. I'm truly impressed!"

"Such brilliant talent at your age. To produce results that surpass overseas benchmarks so young is incredibly rare!"

"We'll have to look to you for guidance in the future, Ms. Sinclair."

Surrounded by a chorus of flattery, Vivienne wore a perfectly measured, polite smile, accepting the praise with practiced grace.

However, every time she finished a conversation, she would use the moment she sat back down and sorted her notes to shoot a covert, arrogant, and thoroughly disdainful glare toward Willow.

She was silently gloating: Even if this is your stage today, all the glory and adoration belong to me. What are you going to do about it?

But Willow completely ignored her from start to finish. She was here for business.

Wearing a minimalist black business suit, her long hair pulled up cleanly to highlight her sharp, composed features, Willow looked utterly serene. The noisy sycophancy and the silent hostilities around her were nothing but background noise.

Soon, it was her turn to present. The house lights dimmed, and all cameras locked onto her at the center of the stage as the live stream kicked into high gear.

Willow took her stance with easy confidence. Her calm gaze swept over the packed crowd of industry titans. Her voice rang clear and steady, echoing through the hall via the microphone. "Esteemed experts and colleagues, good morning. Today, I will be presenting

our research findings on precise gene-editing repair for the rare EB disease, also known as the condition affecting Butterfly Children. All data, clinical records, and experimental reviews have been publicly filed and are available for immediate verification."

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She manipulated the massive screen behind her. Instantly, clear, intuitive, and meticulously organized research data, gene sequencing comparisons, experimental logs, and Ethan's comprehensive treatment records flashed into view.

Her presentation layered concept over concept, entirely professional and profoundly thorough.

It covered the current technical shortcomings in domestic EB gene therapy, the barriers in overseas research, and the core innovations of this study that smashed through those established international frameworks. She detailed the technical hurdles her team had spent countless hours and hundreds of experiments overcoming, backing every single claim with verifiable, rock-solid evidence.

Willow hit her focal point. "The most significant breakthrough of this research is our optimization of the precision in gene cleavage and repair. We've bypassed the off-target risks prevalent in standard overseas tech, making rare disease gene therapy drastically safer and more compatible with domestic patients. This essentially brings our local genomic research up to par with—and in some areas, ahead of—the world's leading technology."

But beyond the hardcore technical achievements, Willow's presentation held a deeply moving human element.

When Ethan's photo appeared on the screen, her tone softened. She looked at the before-and-after comparison of his treatment. "Rare disease research is never just about overcoming technical barriers; it's about the human safety net. Throughout all our trials and treatments, we accounted for the patients' physical and mental well-being, their quality of life, and their psychological support. We didn't just chase perfect data. We fought to ensure that every patient suffering from this rare disease could truly break free from their pain and have the chance at a normal life. The ultimate goal of scientific research is, and always has been, to save lives."

As she finished, the hall plunged into silence for two full seconds.

Then, deafening applause erupted, rolling through the convention center in endless waves.

Genuine awe and deep respect filled everyone's eyes. The industry heavyweights nodded in fierce approval, buzzing with animated whispers.

"Absolutely stunning! That's true hardcore research—packed with real substance and zero fluff!"

"It's not just the technical breakthrough that's solid. The vision and compassion she brings to her research are incredibly rare."

"I've been tracking related overseas research for years. I never expected us to reach this level domestically! It completely matches top-tier international standards!"

An elderly academician in the front row with graying hair set his pen down, a look of absolute admiration on his face. "This researcher is from Merit Biotech? I've been in this field for decades, why haven't I ever heard your name? Talent and skill like this shouldn't remain obscure."

His question instantly sparked the curiosity of everyone else in the room, and the murmurs grew louder.

Someone muttered, "I think I heard that Willow Horgan used to work at Sinclair Group, but for some reason, she left and went to Merit Biotech."

"Sinclair Group? Isn't that Vivienne Sinclair's family company? Does she have some connection to Ms. Sinclair?"

"Probably. For one company to produce two incredible talents at the same time, there's got to be a link. The only question is, who's actually better?"

Fragmented speculations spread through the crowd. Many eyes began darting back and forth between the poised, unbothered Willow on stage and Vivienne in the audience.

Mr. Smith, sitting at the expert panel, watched Willow command the stage with fearless grace, every word landing with absolute authority. His eyes shone with sudden clarity. The doubts he had harbored for so long finally had their answer.

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Chapter 574

Only Vivienne sat stiffly, her face looking dreadful, a tsunami of dark resentment and bitterness raging in her eyes.

She hadn't considered Willow a threat at all. In her mind, Willow's presentation would just be reading off a script and going through the motions. She assumed she'd have no real substance and would buckle under the weight of such a massive stage.

But as she listened to the razor-sharp logic of the presentation, hitting the core of the issue with every sentence, and stared at the flawless, comprehensive data on the screen, Vivienne's jealousy and venom practically spilled over.

Because she believed all these achievements, these patents, and these clinical breakthroughs should have belonged entirely to her.

She was the one who had noticed this case first. She had contacted the patient's family first. Yet, in the end, Willow had intercepted her and stolen the experimental and patent data. If it weren't for Willow, Vivienne would be standing on that stage right now, soaking up all the validation and praise.

But Willow had ruined everything.

Vivienne curled her hands into tight fists, struggling to keep her composure, a suffocating wave of anger crushing her chest.

She scoffed inwardly. It's a bit early to be taking a victory lap. The higher Willow stood now, the harder she was going to crash.

Right now, she wore the prestigious title of WH. She was the recognized authority of the entire industry. The moment she voiced a doubt, everyone in the room would blindly trust her judgment. Today, she was going to tear Willow down in public, rip away this fake prestige, and show everyone that her results were a complete sham. She was going to humiliate her so badly in the international academic community that Willow would regret ever stepping foot in this hall.

At the same time, at the Sinclair Group, Julian was watching the live stream alone.

On the massive HD screen, Willow's calm, unwavering demeanor was lightyears away from the quiet, sometimes timid woman he remembered.

Facing hundreds of industry titans, she was neither arrogant nor subservient, and fiercely professional. She discussed complex gene-editing tech with absolute ease. Her insights into experimental flaws, optimization strategies, and clinical risks were razor-sharp, demonstrating a level of expertise that eclipsed many veteran researchers.

Julian furrowed his brow, his deep eyes filled with shock and suspicion.

For years, he had never truly acknowledged her professional abilities. He always assumed she was useless and certainly knew nothing about high-level scientific research. But watching her shine so blindingly on the live stream, for the first time, his convictions began to fiercely waver.

Could it be... that she really did possess an unparalleled genius in genomic research?

Meanwhile, on the express lane heading toward the venue, a black Bentley was speeding smoothly along the highway.

Silas sat in the backseat, his eyes locked unblinking on the live stream playing on the car's monitor. A faint glimmer of pride and deep affection rippled in his eyes, his heart melting completely.

He had just returned from his trip, and the very first thing he did was head straight for Willow.

Though he had always known her capabilities, whenever she was with him, he instinctively wanted to protect her. So he rarely got to see her like this—so radiant, so fiercely independent.

A small smile tugged at Silas's lips, his eyes brimming with pride. He admired her and was thrilled for her. Yet, deep in his gaze lay a barely contained urgency.

He tapped the back of the front seat, his deep, magnetic voice ringing with undeniable haste. "Go faster. Get me to the venue in under twenty minutes."

The driver respectfully acknowledged the order and slammed the gas pedal. The luxury car surged forward, tearing through the wind.

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Back inside the venue, Willow's presentation was coming to a close.

She finished her final breakdown of the patent results, gave a slight nod, and spoke with poise. "That concludes my team's comprehensive findings on EB gene repair technology. There is still room for optimization in this research, and I welcome any feedback, corrections, or technical questions from the esteemed colleagues and mentors here today."

With that, the floor opened for Q&A.

The first to raise their hands were several veteran professors from major universities, along with research directors from top-tier hospitals. Everyone approached the session with a genuine desire for academic exchange. Their questions were laser-focused, professional, and entirely respectful.

Willow answered each one with effortless grace. Not only did she perfectly resolve their queries, but she also offered entirely new avenues for research, earning constant nods of approval from the audience. The academic atmosphere in the room was vibrant and highly collaborative.

After a dozen highly technical questions, the flow remained smooth and amicable. No one was trying to back her into a corner.

Until the moderator looked toward the VIP seating and politely asked if there were any further questions. Vivienne suddenly spoke up. "I have a few words."

Currently bearing the title of WH, she commanded immediate respect. The entire room subconsciously held its breath, eagerly anticipating the unique critique of a top-tier expert.

Vivienne slowly raised her eyes, dropping her polite smile to don a mask of cold, detached severity. She unhurriedly picked up the microphone, tracing its edge with her fingers before locking eyes with Willow. Her gaze was sharp, dripping with condescending disdain. "I've listened closely to your entire presentation, and I've reviewed all the experimental data and patent reports you displayed. Frankly speaking, I absolutely reject your research findings and core theories."

That single sentence instantly shattered the harmonious atmosphere.

A low murmur swept through the room. Everyone froze, their heads snapping between Willow on stage and Vivienne in the stands. They clearly hadn't expected such a brutal assessment.

Willow stood at the podium, her expression completely unchanged as she looked back calmly. "I'm listening."

Seeing her remain so unfazed only fueled Vivienne's rage. Her tone grew sharper and more deliberate, weaponizing the authority of WH to corner her step by step. "First of all, regarding your core patent for EB epidermal gene repair, you claimed in your presentation that this technology can reduce post-operative rejection risk to under 0.3%. Is that correct?"

Willow nodded, entirely undisturbed. "Yes. Verified through three hundred simulated trials and twenty clinical pilot cases. The data is fully accessible."

"Verified?" Vivienne scoffed softly, her tone thick with dismissal and heavy with authoritative pressure. "In my view, this data is entirely invalid. It's pure, idealized conjecture."

She leaned forward slightly, her gaze piercing as she publicly tore into her. "Globally, the lowest recorded rejection risk for EB gene repair is 0.8%. That is the absolute limit recognized by the international academic community. For a novice researcher like you, after just a few months of study, to claim you've shattered the industry limit and crushed the risk down to 0.3% is nothing short of absurd."

"I have every reason to suspect that your experimental data has been artificially padded and has never undergone comprehensive closed-loop verification. Your so-called patented results are just paper theories with absolutely zero clinical value."

The hall fell into a dead silence, all eyes locked obsessively on the stage.

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Without pausing, Vivienne leveraged the crushing weight of WH's reputation to continue her public execution of Willow's work. "Secondly, regarding your targeted precision gene cleavage technology, your core argument is that it adapts to pediatric patients and lowers the risk of post-operative skin fibrosis. But based on my years of frontline research experience, your cleavage logic contains a fatal flaw."

"You completely ignored the fragmented nature of the gene chains in EB patients. The cleavage sites you selected are far too singular. It might look fantastic in the short term, but long-term monitoring will inevitably reveal genetic backlash, directly escalating the risk of severe skin ulceration."

She looked up, delivering her judgment with cold arrogance. "Did you honestly miss such an obvious technical flaw? Or did you deliberately hide it just to churn out results and secure the patent? For a researcher, ignoring clinical risks and falsifying data isn't just an academic oversight. It's blatant scientific misconduct."

Finally, Vivienne delivered a blanket condemnation, seeking to obliterate the entirety of Willow's presentation. "To summarize, I completely reject all your research findings today. Your entire theoretical framework crumbles under scrutiny, your data is highly suspect, and your technology holds fatal flaws. You don't deserve to be on this stage, let alone file for a national-level core patent."

As her words hung in the air, the hall fell dead silent.

Everyone stared in shock. They knew WH would have critiques, but no one expected a total annihilation. Even so, subconsciously, the room was already siding with Vivienne. After all, she was the legendary WH—her reputation was stellar, her track record verifiable. And this Willow was just some rookie researcher who had popped out of nowhere.

A wave of hushed whispers broke out. Countless eyes—filled with doubt, scrutiny, and surprise—fixed heavily on Willow.

But Willow merely lifted her gaze, not a single trace of panic in her eyes, leaving only a frigid calm. Her posture remained perfectly straight, the hand holding the clicker steady as stone.

Three seconds of silence passed.

She spoke softly, her clear, steady voice cutting through the speakers and washing over the entire hall, silencing the murmurs. "Thank you for your questions, but I reject your assessment entirely."

Her fearless opening instantly quieted the room once more.

Willow stared dead into Vivienne's hardened face, her logic flawless, firing back line by line with unyielding force. "First, you stated that the global academic standard for minimum rejection in EB gene repair is 0.8%, and that my 0.3% figure is padded conjecture with no clinical viability."

She tapped the clicker, and the screen instantly shifted to a massive wall of raw double-blind experimental data. "Here are the raw backend logs of three hundred and twenty-seven simulated trials, alongside the complete follow-up files of the clinical pilots. Every single dataset is traceable and reproducible. It has already been uploaded to the summit's public database. The experts in this room can verify it right now."

At that, a ripple went through the crowd. Several front-row professors immediately looked down and accessed the summit's synchronized terminals.

Willow kept going, her logic airtight. "The 0.8% limit is the industry ceiling for traditional single-target cleavage. The core innovation of my research today is the Double-Target Cross-Repair Technology."

"After technological iteration, shattering old data ceilings and reducing rejection rates isn't absurd; it's a scientific breakthrough. Authorities shouldn't cling to outdated theories, nor should they deny authentic, proven experimental results."

In just a few sentences, she completely dismantled Vivienne's first major criticism.

Vivienne's face darkened, her lips pressing into a thin line. She was just about to fire back when Willow's voice cut her off. "Secondly, you accused me of using singular targeted cleavage sites, ignoring the fragmented nature of the patients' genes, and declared my tech had a fatal flaw that would cause genetic backlash and worsen ulcers. Your critique is entirely based on a six-month-old experimental prototype."

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Willow clicked again, pulling up the latest technical revision reports and long-term follow-up results. "Three months ago, my team completed several rounds of optimization. We integrated a bridging buffer mechanism for fragmented gene chains and added a Reverse Error-Correction Cleavage Mechanism. The so-called 'fatal flaw' you mentioned is an outdated problem that we solved and discarded months ago."

She locked eyes with Vivienne, her tone calm but carrying a suffocating pressure. "Aren't you being a bit careless, using the flaws of an expired prototype to invalidate a fully matured and implemented technology?"

Vivienne's breath hitched violently. She tried to speak, but Willow cut her off once more. "Finally, you accused me of scientific misconduct, of hiding flaws, and of unworthy patents. The greatest scientific negligence isn't daring to break past old data. It's weaponizing an authoritative title to publicly annihilate someone else's fully validated research, armed with nothing but fragmented, outdated, and unverified information."

That single blow left the entire room stunned into total silence.

It instantly clicked for everyone. Willow hadn't faked her data, nor was her tech flawed. Vivienne's assessment was wrong!

The legendary WH had actually made a mistake? And against such a novice researcher? Everyone was floored.

In an instant, every eye in the hall swung back to Vivienne in the VIP seats, loaded with deep scrutiny and subtle judgment.

Under the glaring spotlight, the mask of calm authority on Vivienne's face fractured completely. She gripped the microphone so hard her knuckles turned white, her chest heaving with humiliation, fury, bitterness, and panic.

Everything she had just spouted had been furiously plagiarized and memorized from WH's personal accounts. She assumed she had the most current data. How could she have known there was an updated version? For a moment, she was utterly lost for words.

Willow looked at her and wrapped up lightly, her tone still mild but vibrating with unquestionable confidence. "In academia, titles mean nothing; evidence proves right from wrong. My presentation is complete. I welcome any professional critique, but I refuse to accept a blanket rejection built on outdated, biased, and one-sided assumptions."

As Willow's flawless conclusion landed, the entire room's gaze pinned Vivienne, who was now deathly pale and rigid.

Embarrassment, distress, and panic crawled over Vivienne's eyes in waves. She refused to go down like this. In a desperate move, she decided to crush her with the identity of WH. "You're nothing but a green rookie, a mere presenter! What gives you the right to question my judgment? I am WH! I am the recognized chief authority of the genomic editing field with years of dedicated research!"

"My views and my judgments are the industry standard! How dare you publicly overthrow and question me?!"

Her words dripped with an overwhelming, domineering arrogance, slamming into every corner of the room.

The crowd's expressions shifted subtly.

It was true. Regardless of who won the technical debate, WH's status was undeniable—an international, top-tier authority. For a rookie to openly clash with and refute WH was a blatant violation of academic hierarchy.

But on stage, Willow suddenly let out a low laugh.

The smile was incredibly faint and freezing cold. The corners of her lips curled up. There wasn't a shred of fear in her eyes, only a biting, long-repressed mockery.

This was exactly what Willow wanted. Even if Vivienne hadn't jumped out today, Willow had never planned on letting her walk away. Her entire goal on this stage was to prove to the world that Vivienne wasn't WH.

And so, she spoke with chilling calm. "What if you aren't WH at all?"

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As her words fell, the high-end conference hall plunged into dead silence. Even the humming of the central air conditioning seemed to vanish, leaving the room without a single sound.

Everyone was desperately trying to process what Willow had just said.

If the previous doubts and arguments had only caused an uproar and shock, then the moment she dropped the bombshell—"You're not WH at all"—the entire venue descended into absolute, suffocating stillness.

It was completely out of everyone's expectations.

But the silence didn't last. A massive wave of murmurs and whispers swept through the room, rising and falling like a tempest as people leaned in to talk over one another.

"Vivienne isn't WH? How is that possible? She admitted it herself not too long ago. This isn't something you joke about."

"Exactly. If this is proven true, her academic career is completely ruined. A lifetime ban from the scientific community would be getting off lightly."

"I doubt it. You can't just impersonate a titan like WH. But if she dares to say it so publicly, she must have solid proof."

Everyone present knew that WH was a genius scholar who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere in the gene-editing field in recent years. With just a few groundbreaking papers, she had shattered existing technical barriers, becoming an industry icon that countless people revered.

Bearing that title brought immense attention, but if Vivienne had been a fraud this entire time, an academic scam of this magnitude would socially and professionally annihilate her on a global scale. It would be a devastating, irreversible death sentence to her career.

So, everyone remained extremely cautious, not daring to jump to conclusions.

Meanwhile, outside the venue, Julian sat in his office, chain-smoking. Right now, beyond his anger, a deep sense of dread consumed him.

If what Willow said was true and Vivienne really wasn't WH, she wouldn't be the only one collateral damage.

Sinclair Group had tied themselves far too closely to her recently. The moment her reputation collapsed, their stock would nosedive, and partnerships would dissolve. It would be an unprecedented, fatal blow to the company!

In a panic, he immediately ordered his assistant to get the car ready, rushing toward the symposium.

At the same time, on the main highway, a black Bentley accelerated drastically.

In the backseat, Silas's expression remained largely unchanged, but a heavy layer of dark anxiety knotted his brows.

He didn't care about what Willow had just claimed; his only concern was that he wasn't by her side to protect her during such a critical moment. His voice was low and commanding as he instructed his driver, "Faster. We need to reach the venue immediately."

No matter what kind of storm was about to break, he was going to stand in front of her, shield her, and make sure no one dared to hurt her.

Back in the chaotic hall, Mr. Smith sat in the front row, utterly composed. He showed none of the shock or disbelief that gripped everyone else.

His gaze flicked between Willow and Vivienne a couple of times before his mind settled on a firm conclusion.

Whether it was the academic tone, the logical framework, or the innovative mindset, WH had a unique, unmistakable signature that couldn't be replicated just by trying hard. He had long suspected Vivienne was an empty vessel, all hype and no substance. Today's events only cemented that belief.

At the center of the uproar, Vivienne looked terrible.

A bone-chilling panic swept through her. Her back was completely drenched in cold sweat, the damp fabric clinging to her skin as her heart hammered violently against her ribs.

Her first reaction was pure terror mixed with burning hatred. By exposing her so brutally in front of the world, Willow hadn't left her a single way out.

But her panic only lasted a few seconds. Years of feigning confidence and feeding her own delusion forced her to violently push down the terror bubbling inside her.

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

Chapter 579

She gritted her teeth, steadying her trembling body, desperately comforting herself. WH was a phantom. She operated behind the scenes and never showed her face. No one could possibly know her true identity.

Furthermore, her fraud, theft, and disguise were flawless. Every trace had been wiped clean, buried so deeply that there was no trail left to follow. There was absolutely no way anyone could dig up the evidence.

With that thought, the panic in Vivienne's eyes vanished, replaced by an extreme, toxic aggression.

She snapped her gaze up, staring daggers at Willow. Straightening her spine, she feigned a blazing fury. "You're speaking absolute nonsense! This is a premier symposium filled with industry titans. What are you trying to pull by slandering me in front of everyone?"

The room quieted down a fraction. Everyone held their breath, eyes glued to the confrontation.

Vivienne pressed her attack, her tone a mix of aggrieved victimhood and sharp accusation. "Just because I pointed out the glaring holes and flaws in your data earlier, you're holding a grudge? So you decided to fabricate rumors to frame me? Someone with your vindictive mindset doesn't deserve to stand on this stage or work in research!"

Then, she pivoted to a personal attack. "I've seen plenty of narrow-minded, impatient people like you. When you lack the talent, produce mediocre results, and can't get any respect in the industry, you resort to cheap stunts. You try to smear top scholars just for a shred of attention. Well, unfortunately for you, you messed with the wrong person today. I won't let you get away with this."

Finally, she threw out a fatal counter-question, trying to corner Willow and flip the narrative. "You keep screaming that I'm not WH, but you have no proof. In science, we deal in evidence. Bring it out. If I'm not WH, then please, enlighten us—who is the real WH?"

The aggressive questioning hung in the air, plunging the room back into absolute silence.

Hundreds of eyes zeroed in on Willow, waiting with bated breath for her answer, eager to see how this explosive showdown would end.

Offstage, a few neutral scholars were already nodding slightly, silently agreeing with Vivienne. In the academic world, hard evidence was everything. Accusations without proof were just malicious gossip.

While Vivienne ranted, Willow stood quietly in her simple, tailored suit. Her posture was relaxed but commanding. In the face of Vivienne's theatrical rage, her gaslighting, and her aggressive interrogation, Willow didn't show a hint of panic.

Inside, she let out a cold, sharp laugh.

She had fully expected Vivienne to pull this exact stunt. People consumed by vanity and greed never confessed until they were pushed off the very edge of the cliff. They only knew how to thrash and deflect.

Truthfully, she couldn't immediately produce a physical paper trail that would kill Vivienne's lies on the spot. But she possessed something far more absolute, far more undeniable than any document.

Meeting the gaze of thousands, and staring down Vivienne's smug, arrogant eyes, Willow slowly looked up. Her voice was clear, ringing out through the microphone, piercing every corner of the room. "Vivienne, there's no need to bark so loudly. If I dare to tear down your fake identity in front of all these people, it means I hold all the cards."

She leaned in slightly, her gaze sharp as a scalpel, slicing right through Vivienne's facade. "Didn't you just ask who the real WH is? I'll tell you right now."

"The real WH is me. Willow."

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Chapter 580

This time, the audience bypassed shock entirely and went straight into numb paralysis. Everyone stood frozen in place.

After so many twists, no one could predict where this was going anymore. They just stayed quiet, watching the two women face off.

Vivienne was the first to crack. A storm of disbelief and outrage swirled in her eyes as she glared at Willow. "You've got some nerve! How dare you spout such garbage? Do you even know who WH is? Do you understand the years she spent revolutionizing gene editing? Do you know the core theories behind every single one of her papers?"

She rapidly fired off questions to belittle Willow, trying to prove her claim was absurd. "Are you really so desperate to frame me that you've resorted to pure delusion? I suggest you take that back right now. Otherwise, I'm calling security and the police. I'll sue you for malicious defamation and academic fraud!"

It was a smart play. Vivienne not only insulted Willow but also attacked her credibility, shifting the suspicion right back onto her.

Yet, facing the barrage of threats, Willow remained perfectly still, her expression entirely undisturbed. She simply looked up, her words cutting straight to the core. "Why is it that when you claim to be WH, it's an undeniable fact, but when I say it, it's delusional nonsense?"

That simple question instantly choked Vivienne.

A flash of panic darted across Vivienne's eyes, but she quickly covered it up with an overbearing aura. "Because I have the full account credentials, years of documented research, and public academic records around the globe! I've shared WH's core findings at the Asia-Pacific Summit, and all the experts here can vouch for that. I've proven my identity. What do you have? Who are you to even compare yourself to me?"

Willow didn't even flinch at her bragging. "Everything you just mentioned can be mimicked. And I have to admit, your imitation was quite convincing."

"WH operates anonymously and rarely appears in public. The only things people see are the published papers and public theories. Those have a specific structural logic and writing habit. If someone deliberately spent a massive amount of time tearing them apart and studying them, they could absolutely force an imitation and replicate the style."

"You're lying!" Vivienne screeched. "If it were really that easy, anyone could pretend to be WH!"

"Exactly," Willow countered flawlessly. "It is that easy for a thief. In fact, I can demonstrate it for you right now."

With that, her gaze swept over the senior experts in the audience. Without missing a beat, she began to recite a core academic theory belonging to WH.

Willow's pace was steady, her technical terminology razor-sharp. Her breakdown of CRISPR's off-target risks and her hypotheses on targeted gene therapy for rare diseases showcased a highly unique, brilliant line of reasoning. It was glaringly obvious that her thought process perfectly mirrored WH's.

Instantly, the expressions of several veteran experts shifted. They began turning to one another, whispering intently.

But she wasn't done. Willow then pulled up a detailed log of backend logins and password change alerts on the massive screen. "Not too long ago, the password to my registered email on GeneEdit Nexus was maliciously changed, and the account was accessed from an unknown location. All the details are right here. Please, take a look."

The records on the screen were crystal clear, every line undeniable proof. Willow turned back to Vivienne. "You hacked my account, stole my research, copied my academic style,

and stood in the spotlight reaping fame and fortune under the name WH. Your so-called proof of identity was entirely stolen from the very beginning."

At that moment, the last shred of Vivienne's composure shattered completely.

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Chapter 581

Her whole body went rigid. It felt like all her blood rushed to her head, only to plunge into a frozen lake. A numb, icy sensation crawled over her skin.

She had definitely impersonated WH, but she never, in her wildest dreams, imagined that the real WH was Willow.

This was a catastrophic double blow. Not only had she been exposed, but the very capital she had flaunted and revered actually belonged to the woman she despised the most. Vivienne's entire reality was turned upside down.

Her mind blanked, a deafening ring echoing in her ears.

But with hundreds of eyes staring at her, she couldn't back down. She definitely couldn't admit that her glory and academic achievements were stolen.

After just two seconds of shock, Vivienne violently suppressed the massive tidal wave of panic inside her and shrieked back, "You're lying! You doctored these records! They mean absolutely nothing!"

She glared fiercely at the screen, biting down hard on her excuses, desperate to invalidate the evidence. "GeneEdit Nexus is entirely anonymous. There's no public way to verify backend data! Anyone can fake a screenshot. You have no way of proving those logs are real!"

"You're just trying to frame me and destroy my career in front of the entire industry!"

Willow watched her pathetic thrashing quietly. There wasn't a ripple of emotion in her eyes, just a faint, lingering trace of mockery.

She knew Vivienne would deny it to her dying breath.

Throwing the logs on the screen was never meant to be the killing blow. She knew a few screenshots wouldn't make Vivienne confess; it was just setting the stage.

Now that the trap was set, it was time to drop the guillotine.

Willow spoke slowly, her clear voice cutting through the heavy breathing and murmurs of the crowd. "You're right. Writing styles can be mimicked, logical structures can be copied, and yes, backend logs can be faked. But copying only gets you the surface. What you can never steal is actual scientific capability and the skill to execute under pressure."

She looked up, her gaze like a blazing torch, locking onto Vivienne. "Since you're so adamant that you are the real WH and I'm just framing you, let's settle this right now with a live lab challenge. Right here, in front of all these experts, professors, and doctors, we will both perform a targeted gene-editing sequence for a rare disease, predict off-target risks, and design a repair protocol in real-time."

"A live challenge will prove who's real and who's a fraud. Fair, transparent, and undeniable. What do you say?"

The moment the words left her mouth, a subtle commotion rippled through the hall. Everyone's eyes burned with anticipation.

This was the most direct, unsparing, cheat-proof method of verification imaginable!

But Vivienne's face instantly drained of color. Pure, suffocating terror hit its peak.

How could she possibly agree?

All of her results were stolen. Every theory was copied. She had zero actual lab experience at this high level. A live, high-stakes academic showdown would immediately expose her incompetence and ruin her forever.

So, there was no way she would accept.

In a split second, Vivienne forced herself to steady her racing heart and scrambled for an excuse. "There's no need. A public circus like this has zero academic value. It's a complete waste of the symposium's time. I refuse to participate in such a childish stunt."

She tried to brush it off, hoping to slip through the cracks.

But just as she thought she had stabilized the situation, a deep, authoritative male voice boomed from the senior judging panel.

The blonde, blue-eyed Mr. Smith slowly stood up. As an international titan in the field of gene editing, his clear, serious gaze swept over the two women on stage. Speaking fluent English with unquestionable authority, he announced, "I agree with Willow. This is, by far, the fairest, most transparent, and most definitive way to uncover the truth."

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Chapter 582

As soon as Mr. Smith finished speaking, a wave of agreement echoed throughout the massive hall.

"The professor is right," an elderly, white-haired academic in the front row said gravely. "Science is built on empirical truth, not empty words. Since we can't tell who's lying, a live experimental challenge is the only way to eliminate false accusations and clear the innocent."

A researcher beside him chimed in. "A transparent, live demonstration is the most definitive way to expose academic fraud. With a live broadcast and hundreds of witnesses, one experiment will settle the debate once and for all. There's no room for tricks."

Other attendees nodded vigorously, their voices layering over each other in resounding agreement.

Suddenly, someone turned toward the pale Vivienne. "Ms. Sinclair, since we're already at this point, you might as well accept the challenge. If you refuse now, the public will only keep speculating. The controversy will never die, and it will only damage your reputation further."

"Yeah, it's not like she's too scared to do it, right?" In the crowd, some of the more impatient attendees were already getting vocal.

At those words, the room went dead silent again. Everyone's gaze nailed Vivienne to the floor, filled with scrutiny, probing curiosity, and blatant suspicion.

The speaker continued, "Ever since this scandal broke, you've been dodging the issue. Are you terrified because you know your research is fake and your theories are hollow? Are you too scared to accept because the second you touch the equipment, everyone will know you're a fraud?"

Every word felt like a tiny, vicious needle driving straight into Vivienne's heart. A fresh layer of cold sweat broke out across her back.

She was resisting the challenge with every fiber of her being.

Her so-called theories and findings were all stitched together from WH's stolen account. She barely grasped the surface of the dense gene-editing logic and precise lab techniques. She had zero ability to run an independent experiment.

But her back was against the wall.

With hundreds of top-tier scientists staring her down, the cameras broadcasting her every flinch, and the entire global scientific community watching online, rejecting the challenge would be an immediate confession of guilt. Her carefully constructed fame, status, and future would turn to ash in an instant.

On the other hand, if she risked it, there might be a tiny sliver of hope.

Vivienne's mind raced frantically for an exit strategy. She had watched others perform basic lab work before, so she remembered the general framework. If push came to shove, she could covertly mimic Willow's movements and fake her way through. If that failed, she could try to cheat when the cameras weren't looking.

Most importantly, she still harbored a toxic, arrogant delusion about Willow. She stubbornly believed Willow was a talentless nobody. As long as her performance wasn't glaringly worse than Willow's, the crowd might not notice the flaws.

After a few agonizing seconds of inner turmoil, Vivienne snapped her head up. Forcing down her guilty panic, she put on a mask of fearless righteousness. "Since all my esteemed peers and seniors are demanding a public verification, I'll play along. I will use my skills to prove exactly who the liar is."

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Chapter 583

Her gaze hardened, playing the perfect victim. "I know my research process is flawless and entirely authentic. A live experiment today is the perfect opportunity to wash away these baseless smears and clear my name."

Hearing this, the heavy atmosphere of doubt in the room eased slightly as everyone settled in for the highly anticipated showdown.

Mr. Smith raised his microphone. "Since neither party objects, the live challenge will commence immediately."

Having a man of his stature act as the arbiter of the challenge lent the event absolute credibility.

Quickly, the exclusive sterile laboratory on the side of the hall was activated. High-definition cameras were set up for a 360-degree, zero-blind-spot broadcast, feeding directly to the giant screen in the room and the global livestream. Every microscopic movement and data point would be completely exposed.

"Please step into the lab area," Mr. Smith instructed.

Willow stepped forward smoothly, her pace steady as she led the way to the sterile lab.

She had remained completely serene this entire time. From the initial explosion of controversy, to the murmurs, to the final agreement of the challenge, not a single trace of panic had crossed her face. She looked as though she were merely walking into a routine daily lab session, not a high-stakes battle for her entire reputation.

Vivienne, on the other hand, wasn't nearly as relaxed. Forced to follow, her legs felt like lead. Her steps were stiff and heavy, and cold sweat dripped down her spine.

One after the other, they entered the lab and stood at their respective workstations. The equipment, reagents, and materials were perfectly identical, guaranteeing absolute fairness.

Mr. Smith stepped between the two stations, holding the protocol manual. He announced the specific test: "For this verification, we will utilize the Single-Base CRISPR Target-Editing for EB Pathogenic Mutation Repair. Focusing on the COL7A1 gene locus typical in Epidermolysis Bullosa, you will complete the full sequence: repairing the single base in isolated skin cells, testing the off-target rate, and validating the fragment's activity."

He then listed the exact parameters: "The procedure must be entirely sterile and temperature-controlled. You will identify the pathogenic mutation, execute the C-to-T base swap, maintain a post-edit cell survival rate of 95% or higher, keep the off-target rate below 0.01%, and complete the initial fragment amplification and activity test within ten minutes, recording all data."

As soon as he finished, a massive uproar swept through the audience. This wasn't some entry-level lab work.

Single-base CRISPR repair for EB mutations was the absolute pinnacle of current genetic medicine. The theory was incredibly dense, and the physical execution required horrifying precision. It demanded absolute mastery over the tools, instantaneous judgment, and flawless real-time adjustment. It was utterly impossible for a fraud who only read reports to pull it off.

Even veteran researchers and seasoned PhDs couldn't guarantee they could complete the full sequence perfectly on their own.

But for a situation like this, it was the perfect test.

The whispers exploded again.

"This is a brutal test of real skill. You can't fake your way through this."

"Exactly. Whether you have the talent or not will be obvious the second you touch the pipette."

"Whoever's lying better watch out. You can't memorize your way through an operation like this."

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Chapter 584

Soon, the experiment officially began.

Inside the sealed, sterile lab, everything was dead silent except for the low hum of the machinery.

Outside, the audience held their breath, watching the intense duel.

Willow expertly slipped on her sterile gloves, precisely picking up the pipette. With flawless control, she drew the exact volume of cell culture medium and slowly infused it into the human skin cell petri dish.

Her movements were perfectly fluid and incredibly professional. It was obvious she had performed these routines thousands of times.

At the same time, she activated the thermostatic microscope. The screen displayed the genetic sequence magnified thousands of times. Willow's eyes darted across the dense map of markers, instantly locking onto the COL7A1 pathogenic mutation. With a wrist as steady as a rock, she adjusted the parameters and activated the single-base editing system.

Calibrating, targeting, editing, and sealing—every transition was seamless. Her precision was textbook perfect. She looked so profoundly relaxed that it was clear this insanely complex procedure was carved into her muscle memory.

On the other side of the glass, Vivienne was falling apart.

The second she put on her gloves, her hands started shaking uncontrollably. Her fingertips went numb, and a relentless coat of sticky, cold sweat made her panic even more.

At first, she clung to the hope of cheating. She glanced sideways, hoping to mirror Willow's movements and fake her way through. But one look completely shattered her.

Willow was too fast, too precise, and entirely too advanced.

The complicated targeting, the microscopic adjustments to the parameters, the millisecond-perfect timing—these were all practical nuances that were never written in any published paper. The dense genetic sequences, the rapidly shifting data, and the intricate calibration logic flashing on her screen looked like ancient, undecipherable runes to Vivienne.

She didn't understand a single thing.

She could see Willow's hands moving in a blur, but she had absolutely no idea what the underlying principles were or what adjustments she was making. Vivienne couldn't even figure out the basic starting parameters.

Pure, suffocating terror dragged her heart into her stomach.

Desperate, she considered looking for outside help, only to realize the 360-degree cameras were tracking her every flinch. The audience, the judges, the internet—millions of eyes were locked onto her station. Let alone sending a secret message, even a twitch of her finger would be magnified for the world to see. She had zero chance.

Despair wrapped around her like a suffocating shroud.

The monitor in front of her glowed with an icy light, displaying parameters and genetic maps. Her reagents and tools were neatly arranged, yet Vivienne's mind was completely blank. The blood in her veins felt like sludge, and sweat poured down the side of her face.

Forcing herself forward, she reached out to adjust her own machine. But her fingers trembled so violently she kept hitting the wrong dials. The pipette felt like it weighed a ton, and she ruined the dosage multiple times.

In just three minutes, she had made countless catastrophic errors. Her movements were chaotic and stiff. Compared to Willow, who was gliding through the procedure well ahead of schedule, the difference was staggering.

The experts in the hall and the viewers online saw everything with crystal clarity.

"The skill gap is insane. One is a masterclass, and the other is a trainwreck."

"Vivienne clearly has no idea what she's doing. She's completely frozen. She's just pretending to work."

"Well, the truth is obvious now. We don't even need the final data to verify it; her lab technique says it all."

As the doubts swelled into an uproar, Vivienne's heart hammered frantically against her ribs.

She knew better than anyone that she couldn't finish this experiment. If she kept forcing it, she would be completely exposed. The moment the final results printed, her entire charade would implode, and the reputation, status, and future she had spent years building would burn to ash today.

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Chapter 585

No, she couldn't let this happen.

Like a bolt of lightning, a desperate thought slammed into her mind: she had to stop the experiment. As long as the test was aborted, no one would have the final proof.

Taking a deep breath, Vivienne forced her chaotic mind to focus, lowering her eyelashes as she rapidly brainstormed an excuse to pull the plug.

Given her years of experience manipulating situations, she quickly formulated a plan.

Once she decided on her strategy, she purposely slowed her breathing, letting her shoulders slump. She reached out to grip the edge of the lab table, allowing her body to sway, perfectly simulating physical exhaustion.

This subtle shift was immediately caught by the people in the front row.

"Look at Ms. Sinclair. Something's wrong. She looks like she's about to fall over."

At those words, the rest of the room immediately looked her way. "Is she just nervous? The pressure of this challenge is astronomical, after all."

"Probably. I thought she looked off earlier. She's pale as a ghost and has been pushing herself to the brink. Her body is probably giving out."

The chatter instantly pivoted, shifting everyone's focus from the blatant gap in their skills to Vivienne's deteriorating health.

Just as the crowd buzzed with concern and all eyes locked onto her, Vivienne went limp. Without warning, her knees buckled, and she collapsed hard onto the floor.

With a heavy thud, she lay sprawled on the ground, her eyes shut tight, completely motionless.

The entire hall plunged into dead silence.

A second later, absolute chaos erupted.

"She fainted! Ms. Sinclair passed out!"

"Hurry! Someone get in there!"

Industry veterans, reporters, and event staff immediately scrambled into a frenzy. People leaped from their seats, pressing themselves against the glass, their faces pale with panic as they stared at the collapsed woman.

Two of the closest staff members threw open the lab doors and rushed in. Dropping to their knees, they gently shook her shoulder. "Ms. Sinclair! Can you hear me?"

But no matter how loudly they called, Vivienne remained perfectly still, her eyes firmly shut.

"This is bad. It looks serious," one of the staff members yelled, looking back toward the crowd. "Get a medic! Call the standby medical team right now!"

People scrambled for their phones to call emergency services. Others hovered nervously, checking her breathing and pulse, while a few began muttering with regret.

"We never should have pushed for this challenge. Why did we back her into such a corner?"

"Exactly. It's just an academic debate. Winning or losing isn't worth dying over. What if something happens to her?"

In the blink of an eye, the narrative violently flipped. The same people who had just been doubting her skills and praising Willow suddenly changed their tune, overflowing with sympathy and blame.

One female researcher looked fiercely at Willow, who was still standing calmly by her station. Her tone was laced with harsh judgment. "Was it really necessary to be so vicious and aggressive?"

Another person immediately chimed in, their voice dripping with condemnation. "Does a flashy title or accurate data matter more than a person's life and health?"

The crushing weight of public opinion instantly slammed down entirely on Willow.

Willow stood quietly by her equipment, her fingers still hovering over the controls. A flicker of genuine surprise finally crossed her clear eyes.

She hadn't expected Vivienne to pull a fainting spell. It was such a cheap, desperate tactic.

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Chapter 586

Just as the room devolved into chaos and public opinion began to turn, the heavy wooden doors of the conference hall were suddenly thrown open from the outside.

A freezing, suffocating wave of pure dominance swept into the room. Every whisper, argument, and accusation was instantly severed, snapping like a broken violin string.

Then, a deep, icy, and entirely merciless male voice echoed through the massive hall. "Vivienne fainting is a result of her own weak psychological fortitude. It has absolutely nothing to do with Willow."

Everyone instinctively turned toward the entrance, only to realize the man walking in was Silas Thorne.

He stood silhouetted against the light, his posture tall and impossibly regal. Dressed in a sharply tailored, dark bespoke suit, he radiated an untouchable, lethal aura. His gaze was dark and predatory, and the oppressive chill he brought into the room made everyone's chests tighten with dread.

Who was Silas? He was the absolute authority behind Merit Capital, the man standing at the very apex of the pyramid. The moment the crowd recognized him, the room plunged into a terrified silence. No one dared to breathe another word.

Silas's intense gaze cut straight through the crowd, landing flawlessly on Willow, who was still standing composed at her station. From across the room, he didn't need to say a word; she understood exactly what his eyes were telling her. *Don't be afraid. I'm here.*

Truthfully, Willow wasn't afraid. She wore her own armor and was perfectly capable of weathering the storm of criticism alone. She had already formulated a plan to handle the fallout and was confident in her ability to see it through.

But meeting his eyes, her tense nerves instantly softened.

Knowing her greatest support was standing right there, understanding all her quiet strength and unspoken grievances, she couldn't help but feel a deep wave of emotion.

Silas withdrew his gentle gaze from her. When he looked back at the terrified crowd, his eyes held nothing but a glacial, merciless freeze. Instinctively, the crowd parted, creating a clear, wide path for him.

He strode forward with unhurried authority, stepping onto the stage and taking the microphone. "First, I'd like to thank everyone for traveling so far to attend this summit. I also thank you for giving Merit and myself this opportunity."

It was a statement loaded with profound implications.

This summit, which Willow had painstakingly organized and led from the start, was now explicitly being claimed under his absolute protection. It was a blatant, unapologetic declaration of his bias and defense of her.

Everyone in the room was a shrewd professional; they instantly decoded the hidden warning. Willow was under his protection. Anyone who dared to utter another syllable against her would be making an enemy out of Merit Capital, and more importantly, Silas Thorne himself.

He then cut straight to the point. "I have been watching the live broadcast of this summit. I believe that, just like me, all of you have already realized exactly who is right and who is wrong. I am here today for one reason only: to clear Willow's name."

Silas looked down at the crowd, his voice hardening into steel. "Therefore, this experimental challenge will continue. If anyone here has an issue with my decision, or objects to the continuation of this test, you are welcome to speak to me directly."

"And if anyone still believes that a scientist's reputation is meaningless, or that baseless slander is perfectly acceptable, then you will personally bear all the consequences that Vivienne is about to face."

With a threat like that, not a single soul dared to speak. You could hear a pin drop in the sprawling hall.

Meanwhile, Vivienne, who had been pretending to be unconscious on the floor, fluttered her eyes open. She had faked the fainting spell to escape, but Silas had ruthlessly cut off all her exits. Staying on the floor was pointless now. It was better to 'wake up' so she could gauge the room and figure out her next move.

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Chapter 587

Seeing her wake up, the medical staff rushed over to examine her. They quickly concluded that she had suffered no physical harm. It was merely a brief spell of dizziness brought on by extreme stress and anxiety, and she would recover with a few moments of rest.

Just as Vivienne was frantically trying to spin a new excuse to back out, another sharp male voice rang out from the entrance, shattering the silence once again. "Isn't Mr. Thorne pushing things a bit too far?"

This time, it was Julian.

He stormed into the venue in a dark suit, his expression fierce and practically vibrating with anger. The second he stepped in, he aimed all his hostility at Silas. "She just collapsed! Her body is failing, and her mental state is completely shattered. It's just an academic test—is it really necessary to torture her like this?"

Silas didn't look even remotely surprised by his arrival. He merely cast a cold, apathetic glance at Julian, his tone merciless and unyielding. "She can choose to forfeit, but the experiment will be concluded. Willow's innocence must be proven in front of everyone today."

Julian's brow furrowed tightly as he took a few steps forward. He still wanted to negotiate. He refused to believe that Silas would entirely burn his bridges with the Sinclair Group just for Willow.

Switching to a more persuasive tone, Julian said, "Mr. Thorne, it's always best to leave some room for grace. We have a long future ahead of us. After all, Sinclair Group and Merit still have ongoing partnerships, don't we? Let's drop this for today. We can delay the experiment for a few days until Vivienne recovers, and then discuss it calmly. There's no need to publicly drive her to the edge of a cliff."

"The edge of a cliff?" Silas let out a low, dark scoff, his voice chilling to the bone. "The one driven to the edge wasn't Vivienne. It was Willow—the woman whose years of blood and

sweat were stolen, who was dragged through the mud by the entire internet as a fraud, and who had her very identity ripped away."

His tone left zero room for negotiation. "With the top experts and media gathered here today, the only way to completely tear down these lies and completely restore Willow's name is to finish this test right now, under the world's watch."

Hearing this, Julian knew Silas was dead set. In an instant, his jaw clenched, and whatever remaining politeness he held shattered. "Silas, do you really have to be this ruthless? Show some mercy. It's just a dispute over an academic title. Do you really need to go for the throat?"

"Go for the throat?" Silas's eyes flashed like a drawn blade as he laughed coldly. "You should be asking her that." He shot a look of pure disgust at Vivienne on the floor. "When she framed Willow, wasn't she going for the throat?"

Refusing to waste any more breath, Silas delivered his final ultimatum. "Willow has suffered enough abuse. Today, I am going to reclaim every ounce of respect she is owed, right in front of all these witnesses. This experiment is happening, whether you like it or not."

The two men clashed from across the room, the explosive tension between them crackling in the air.

Everyone in the hall held their breath, absolutely terrified to interrupt.

Julian clenched his fists so tightly his knuckles turned white. A storm of rage and helplessness raged in his eyes. The only reason he was fighting so desperately to cancel the experiment was that he had already seen enough from their initial lab work to know the ugly truth.

Vivienne was not WH. Everything she had claimed was an elaborate, disgusting lie.

The reason he was shielding her so frantically was out of pure terror.

He was terrified that if the experiment continued and the final data was published, Vivienne's massive fraud would be broadcast to the world.

Once the scandal was confirmed, it wouldn't just be Vivienne's career burning to the ground. The Sinclair Group's entire research division, their academic partnerships, and their global scientific reputation would completely collapse, suffering an apocalyptic, irreversible blow!

But he never expected Silas to be this overwhelmingly dominant, refusing to leave even a single inch of mercy.

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Chapter 588

Silas Thorne refused to give anyone an inch. Left with no other options, Julian Sinclair swallowed his suffocating frustration, completely powerless against the man as he watched the experiment proceed.

Just as Silas had declared, Vivienne Sinclair would not be participating. This demonstration was entirely for Willow Horgan, a definitive proof of her innocence.

As a result, a rather comical scene unfolded at the summit. What was meant to be a head-to-head challenge was now a solo performance by Willow, while Vivienne lay motionless off to the side, playing dead.

Though she had successfully dodged the experiment by feigning collapse, her complexion was dreadful. She remained stiff, her skin deathly pale. Hundreds of eyes in the venue—some subtle, some blazing, others filled with contempt or disbelief—were locked onto her.

The collective stares felt like thousands of needles piercing her skin, making Vivienne’s cheeks burn with shame. She didn't dare open her eyes.

Even worse was the looming dread of Willow's results. If Willow actually succeeded, how would Vivienne survive the fallout? How could she possibly spin a lie to justify herself in front of this entire crowd?

In stark contrast, Willow remained completely unfazed under the spotlight. Her movements were fluid, professional, and flawlessly precise.

For the first step, her fingers expertly handled the pipette, keeping the margin of error down to a perfect zero. She steadily drew the high-activity stem cell reagent and injected it smoothly into the incubator.

Next, she adjusted the centrifuge dial, inputting the exact speed and temperature parameters. Faced with the complex, rapidly shifting data on the micro-gene sequencer, she didn't show a hint of panic. A quick glance from the corner of her eye was all it took to identify a minor parameter deviation before she reached out and smoothly calibrated the machine.

Throughout the entire process, she worked without an assistant or a single reference sheet. Relying purely on her own expertise, she single-handedly executed one of the most grueling, top-tier experimental procedures in the industry.

As she worked, Silas stood just half a step behind her workstation, his gaze never leaving her. He stayed close enough to shield her from the probing, malicious eyes of the crowd, creating an impenetrable bubble of calm around her.

The icy, predatory glare he had aimed at Julian earlier was completely gone. His dark eyes were fixed on Willow's slender, focused figure, brimming with undisguised tenderness and affection.

He didn't speak a single word to disrupt her rhythm. He simply offered his unwavering support through his presence alone, ensuring that the moment she looked up, she would find him standing steadfastly by her side.

Forty-eight minutes later, the final set of fluorescent gene markers lit up in a clear, brilliant green.

The equipment chimed with a steady completion tone, and the screen displayed a flawless, fully compliant experimental data report that met every single standard perfectly.

The experiment was a complete success.

An unstoppable wave of awe swept through the audience.

"A perfect loop, zero parameter errors! That is the absolute gold standard of experimental results!"

"Incredible! She did it all on her own, and her speed and accuracy are better than a two-person team!"

"Well, that settles it. With skills like that, it goes without saying who WH really is."

The crowd murmured in agreement, their eyes filled with immense respect and sheer amazement as they looked at Willow.

Meanwhile, Vivienne was practically paralyzed. The last ounce of color drained from her face, and a bone-deep chill washed over her. She never actually believed Willow could pull it off.

Standing nearby, Julian looked even worse. The atmosphere around him was suffocatingly dark. Utterly humiliated, he couldn't stomach staying in that room for another second. He abruptly stood up, preparing to leave.

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Chapter 589

But before he could take a single step, Silas blocked his path. "Where exactly do you think you're going, Mr. Sinclair? We aren't finished here. Who gave you permission to leave?"

Julian halted, biting back his fury. "Mr. Thorne, Willow has completed the experiment and proven her innocence. The victor is clear, and we concede. Let's leave it at that."

"Leave it at that?" Silas let out a low chuckle, his dark eyes leveling them with an icy glare. "Willow completing that experiment solo simply proved her competence. It crushed your pathetic smears and vindicated her professional reputation. But that does not mean this matter is over."

"What more do you want?" Julian's face twisted into an ugly scowl.

Silas continued to treat him like dirt beneath his shoes. "Vivienne Sinclair hacked into a top-tier research account, stole core experimental data, and deliberately framed an innocent person. We still have a score to settle for that."

Upon hearing this, Vivienne's heart violently seized in her chest. Her pupils dilated in sheer panic as she blurted out, "What nonsense are you spewing? I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"No idea?" Silas's gaze grew even colder. He raised a hand, signaling the tech crew behind him to cast onto the main screen. "Over the past few days, I hired a premier digital forensics team and a cross-border data legal squad. They traced the entire backend login log, IP addresses, device fingerprints, and offshore proxy routing history for the WH account."

With methodical precision, he listed every damning detail. "First, the WH research account was secured with biological encryption and bound to specific hardware credentials. Two weeks ago, at two in the morning, an unauthorized login occurred from a remote location. It bypassed the dual facial recognition system, utilized a cracked intranet proxy server to bounce through overseas nodes, and wiped the surface-level login history. And that person was you. Second, after dismantling three layers of VPN masking, we traced the login device directly to your personal laptop. The hard drive still contains traces of the backend cracking software and keyloggers. Third, we pulled your network access logs and device connection timestamps, which align perfectly with the exact moment the experimental drafts and raw sequencing data were stolen. Fourth, we intercepted your private communications with black-market technicians, uncovering your transaction history for purchasing the hacking tools and paying to delete the backend logs."

As he spoke, pages of irrefutable evidence flooded the massive screen behind him: encrypted IP tracing reports, hardware credential matching screenshots, black-market

chat logs, international wire transfer receipts, and the raw data extraction logs from the official website's backend. Every single piece was crystal clear and utterly undeniable.

"Vivienne," Silas looked down at her, his voice chillingly absolute. "You stole the WH account, plagiarized the original drafts, and then had the audacity to frame Willow for stealing from you. This is premeditated academic framing and scientific fraud, backed by undeniable proof. Are you still going to deny it?"

Vivienne was paralyzed by his relentless onslaught of facts, momentarily forgetting how to even react.

Impossible. How could this be happening?

She had been so careful. She spent hundreds of thousands of dollars, and those hackers promised her that even the government wouldn't be able to trace it. How on earth did Silas Thorne dig this up?

Backed into a corner with nowhere left to run, she clung to the only strategy she had left: absolute denial. Feigning dizziness, she let her eyes unfocus and her voice tremble. "I don't understand a word you're saying. I barely even comprehend what these things mean, so how could I possibly do them? Mr. Thorne, just because you hold a position of power and want to protect Willow, doesn't mean you can just forcefully pin these crimes on me."

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Chapter 590

"You talk too much."

Silas completely cut off Vivienne's incessant rambling, his patience fully exhausted.

He lifted his gaze, his dark eyes devoid of any emotion. "The witness testimonies, physical evidence, transaction records, and backend login logs form a closed, airtight loop. I've already submitted the complete package to the Bio-Tech Regulatory Commission and our legal team. If you have any more excuses, save them for the investigators."

That single, effortlessly delivered statement utterly shattered Vivienne's last sliver of hope.

Her body went completely rigid. Her knees buckled, and she stumbled back half a step.

Regulators? Lawyers?

Were they going to arrest her on the spot? Was she going to prison?

If that happened, the prestigious socialite persona she had painstakingly curated, the Sinclair family's reputation, and her brilliant future would all be reduced to ashes.

An overwhelming wave of panic consumed her. With red-rimmed eyes, Vivienne whipped her head toward a furious Julian, begging through her tears. "Julian, you have to save me! Please believe me, I didn't do any of this!"

Julian's expression was just as horrific. His jaw was clenched so tight it looked ready to snap, the veins at his temples pulsing as a terrifyingly dark aura radiated from him.

Of course he wanted to save her. Even if he didn't care about Vivienne, he had to protect his own interests. But how could he? He didn't have the leverage.

He couldn't go head-to-head with a titan like Silas Thorne, who possessed deep-rooted power and absolute authority. And pleading for mercy wasn't an option either; he had already tried to negotiate earlier, but Silas had been an immovable wall, refusing to grant him an ounce of grace.

What else could he possibly do?

He was trapped, utterly powerless.

Julian squeezed his eyes shut, suppressing the boiling rage and helplessness that clawed at his chest, defeated. Every single pair of eyes, every camera, and the entirety of public opinion were locked onto them. The Sinclair family had been thoroughly disgraced, and he had no cards left to play.

In a bout of sheer desperation, Vivienne turned her frantic gaze to Professor Smith, whose face was grim. "Professor, you have to help me! You know me, please explain everything to them!"

Hearing her plea, Professor Smith faced the audience, his steady, booming voice echoing clearly through the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, given today's academic scandal, I believe it is necessary for me to step forward and speak. First, I was the one who orchestrated this experimental challenge from start to finish. Second, regarding the hacked account, the falsified results, and the academic identity theft... I am indeed aware of the truth."

The moment those words hung in the air, Vivienne's tear-filled eyes lit up with wild hope. She assumed Professor Smith was going to cover for her, given his lucrative partnerships with Sinclair Group. Clutching at him like a lifeline, she eagerly raised her voice, urging

him on. "Professor, tell them! Tell them the truth right now! Tell them Willow maliciously framed me! Clear my name and restore my honor!"

But Professor Smith completely ignored her frantic begging. He turned slightly, stepping right past the pathetic displays of both Vivienne and Julian, and walked purposefully toward Willow.

The internationally renowned biological research expert bowed slightly, his posture full of sincerity and deep remorse, as he offered Willow a profound apology. "I am so deeply sorry."

A stunned silence washed over the entire room.

Ignoring the shock of the crowd, Professor Smith continued. "Previously, without conducting a thorough investigation, I blindly listened to one side. I was blinded by false information, which led to countless misunderstandings about you. I publicly questioned your scientific competence, invalidated your hard-earned research, and subjected you to immense unfairness. This was a grave dereliction of duty on my part. I offer you my most sincere apologies, and I beg for your forgiveness."

Willow’s expression remained perfectly serene, her demeanor cool and graceful. She wasn't an unreasonable person. "You don't need to blame yourself, Professor. The fault doesn't lie with you. You were simply manipulated by someone with a hidden agenda."

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Chapter 591

Watching their exchange, the hopeful smile completely froze on Vivienne's face. A second later, she shrieked, "Professor, what is the meaning of this? Weren't you going to help me clear my name? Why on earth are you apologizing to Willow?"

Professor Smith finally turned to look at her, his expression ice-cold. "There's no need to rush. I won't leave out a single detail of the truth."

With that, he picked up the tablet on the podium and instantly mirrored it to the massive LED screen dominating the venue.

Professor Smith spoke, enunciating every word clearly. "As far as I am aware, months ago, Vivienne Sinclair secretly colluded with a member of my team, Jayden Chase. Together, they conspired to steal the complete raw experimental data from the WH account. Following that, they orchestrated a massive smear campaign, manipulating

public opinion to drag Willow's name through the mud and subjecting her to vicious cyberbullying. All of these events were meticulously planned and executed by the two of you."

Hit by one devastating blow after another, Vivienne completely lost control. She screamed back at the top of her lungs, "I did not! You're all teaming up to frame me! Willow bought you off, she bribed Jayden to pin this on me! I'm innocent!"

Unfazed, Professor Smith ignored her hysterical screeching. He simply tapped the tablet screen. A second later, a high-definition video filled the massive display.

In the video, Jayden Chase sat with his head bowed, his face fraught with exhaustion and guilt. Looking directly into the camera, he confessed to the entire conspiracy, detail by agonizing detail. From the exorbitant bribe Vivienne offered him, to their joint theft of the data, to the subsequent media manipulation—every timeline, transaction amount, and secret conversation was laid bare. Nothing was omitted.

The evidence was absolutely concrete. Indisputable.

Vivienne's pupils dilated in raw horror, her entire body shaking violently as if struck by lightning. She screamed like a lunatic, "Impossible! It's a fake! That video is a deepfake! You people spent millions bribing everyone just to tear me down! You meticulously plotted to destroy me, you vile monsters!"

"I absolutely refuse to accept this! Bring Jayden out here! I demand a face-to-face confrontation! I want to interrogate him myself!"

Professor Smith lowered his gaze, his tone completely flat as he delivered her final death sentence. "I'm afraid that's impossible. Jayden Chase has already turned himself in. He boarded a flight back to his home country early this morning to face a lifetime industry ban, criminal prosecution, and the full extent of internal corporate disciplinary actions. He is taking full responsibility for his crimes."

Her last shred of hope shattered into dust.

The blood in Vivienne's veins turned to ice, rooting her to the spot. She turned her head, looking at Julian standing beside her, desperately hoping he would step up to defend her.

But Julian's face was a mask of furious contempt, his eyes boiling with murderous rage. If glares could skin someone alive, Vivienne was certain she would have died a thousand agonizing deaths by now.

In that chilling moment, reality finally crashed down on her. She had lost today's war in the most humiliating, absolute way possible, and there was no coming back. She was facing prison time and total social ruin. There was no escape.

An overwhelming cocktail of terror, despair, profound shame, and total mental collapse slammed into her brain. Buckling under the sheer pressure, her vision went black. A suffocating tightness seized her chest as a wave of intense nausea washed over her.

Her body went limp. She couldn't even muster a gasp before her legs gave out entirely, and she collapsed heavily onto the floor.

This time, it wasn't a calculated, theatrical faint. It was a genuine, full-body shutdown triggered by an absolute psychological breakdown.

Silas lowered his eyes, casting a fleeting, emotionless glance at the unconscious woman on the floor. He refused to waste another second looking at her.

Instead, he naturally reached out, gently took Willow's hand, and with a calm, unbothered stride, led her straight out of the chaotic, disgraced venue.

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Chapter 592

Silas Thorne practically carried Willow Horgan out of the venue. She was perfectly compliant, offering no resistance as she quietly leaned against his chest.

Outside, a black Rolls-Royce was already idling by the curb. The driver quickly stepped out to open the rear door.

Silas guided Willow in first before sliding his long legs into the backseat beside her. He tapped a button to raise the privacy partition, completely shutting out the chaos of the outside world.

In the quiet, enclosed space of the car, the atmosphere was thick with a tender intimacy.

Before either could speak, Silas leaned in. His long fingers gently grasped her right hand, his thumb carefully inspecting her skin inch by inch. His dark gaze was sharp and serious, refusing to miss a single detail.

She had just handled corrosive experimental reagents and dismantled lab equipment in front of an entire crowd. Even though she insisted she was fine, Silas couldn't rest easy. He was terrified she might have missed a spot and burned herself.

"Did any of the reagents splash on your skin?" he asked, his eyes still scanning her hands. "Did you scrape yourself on the equipment? Tell me immediately if anything hurts."

Willow shook her head. Meeting the lingering heavy concern in his eyes, she offered a soft, reassuring smile. "I'm really okay. I wore full protective gear, so I didn't get a single scratch."

Silas still wasn't convinced. He thoroughly checked both of her hands and every inch of her exposed skin. Only when he was absolutely certain there wasn't a trace of redness, scratches, or chemical burns did the suffocating tension in his chest finally dissipate.

The next second, he pulled Willow into a tight, desperate embrace. His arms banded around her as if trying to merge her into his very being. "You scared me to death out there," he murmured against her ear. "If you ever face something this dangerous and complicated again, you have to tell me immediately."

His hold was tight, his tone bordering on demanding, but Willow didn't feel suffocated in the slightest. Instead, she felt an overwhelming sense of security.

Resting her head against his chest, listening to the steady thud of his heartbeat and breathing in the crisp, clean scent of cedarwood, the tension that had gripped her all day finally melted away.

"Were you worried about me?" Willow asked softly.

"What do you think?" Silas replied, holding her even tighter.

Willow could feel a faint tremble running through his body. He was completely different from the dominant, untouchable man he had been inside the venue.

During the confrontation, he had walked in slowly, silenced the crowd, controlled the narrative, and commanded the room flawlessly. He had looked like a man who held the entire world in the palm of his hand, completely unfazed. She hadn't realized that beneath that calm exterior, he had been this terrified.

Willow raised a hand and gently rubbed his back. "Don't worry. I had it under control."

"How could I not worry?" Silas's voice was hoarse with lingering dread. "What if I had been ten minutes late? What if Vivienne had gone completely psycho and attacked you? What if she brainwashed the entire industry against you?"

He hadn't dared to entertain those thoughts for even a single second.

Just thinking about it made his chest ache. He looked down, his deep, dark eyes locking onto hers, swirling with fear and heartache. "I couldn't bear to imagine how you would have survived those attacks all by yourself."

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Chapter 593

Willow could feel the sheer depth of his concern. Her heart softened, accompanied by a bittersweet ache. She patted his back gently, offering a silent promise. "Don't be afraid. I was fully prepared. If it came down to it, I would have taken her down with me. I wasn't going to let anyone walk all over me."

"Don't ever say that," Silas demanded, abruptly releasing his hold to look at her. A cold, stern layer settled over his features.

He had never spoken to her with such severity.

His usual gentleness vanished, replaced by a stubborn, unyielding intensity. "I never want to hear you talk about taking someone down with you or putting yourself in danger again."

"And from now on, no matter what happens, you tell me first. Not just things like today. Everything about you—your struggles, your secrets, your problems—I want to know all of it. You don't hide a single thing from me."

His words were absolute, echoing with a fierce, burning possessiveness and deep devotion.

Willow stared at his handsome face, entirely overwhelmed by the weight of his declaration. The tips of her ears flushed a subtle pink.

She wasn't oblivious; she knew exactly what he was implying.

The memory of their kiss from a few days ago suddenly rushed back—the kiss she hadn't dared to bring up, yet hadn't been able to stop thinking about.

Her eyelashes fluttered. Looking up at him, her voice was soft and laced with careful hesitation. "Silas, can I ask you a question?"

"Anything," he answered without a second thought. He would answer a thousand questions if she asked.

Willow's fingers curled inward as her heartbeat picked up speed. Meeting his profound gaze, she asked softly, "Why... are you so good to me?"

The question had been weighing on her heart for a long time.

To the rest of the world, he was the ruthless head of Merit Capital—a powerful, untouchable billionaire who kept everyone at a distance. Yet, time and time again, he had thrown caution to the wind to protect and favor her. She needed to know why. She needed to hear him say it.

Why?

Silas looked into her clear, slightly apprehensive eyes. Something shifted deep within him. He reached up, his fingers brushing against her cheek.

He had held back for so long. He had waited for so long. Did he really need to keep pretending?

Finally, the restraint shattered. In that moment, he didn't want to hide anymore. He just wanted to follow his heart.

"What do you think?" he countered softly.

"When a man drops all his boundaries and principles for a woman, when he protects her, cares for her, and accepts every part of her. When he wants to lay the best of what the world has to offer at her feet. Why do you think that is?"

It was the first time Silas had stripped away all his armor, casting aside his status, his reservations, and the past, to lay his heart bare in such a raw, burning confession.

Willow stiffened, her mind blanking completely. Soon, instinct overrode all logic. She held her breath, her eyelashes trembling, and spoke in a voice as light as a feather. "You... you like me?"

Their eyes locked. The car was dead silent.

The intensity in Silas's eyes melted into pure tenderness. He took her delicate hand, lowered his head, and pressed a reverent, solemn kiss to her knuckles.

"No. I love you."

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Chapter 594

He said he loved her?

Willow froze completely, her eyelashes fluttering wildly like a startled butterfly. Even her breathing hitched.

All the surrounding noise faded away, leaving only his burning, direct confession echoing in her ears.

He loved her?

Had she heard him right?

It wasn't that she hadn't suspected anything. Through all their time together, she had noticed the way he looked at her, the way he constantly protected her and made her his exception. This man, who stood high above everyone else and never spared a second glance for anyone, treated her differently.

But she had never dared to imagine he would just drop the word "love" so easily, without any preamble.

It was too sudden, too intense, and it threw Willow's thoughts into complete chaos.

Silas looked down at her stunned, bewildered expression and found it incredibly endearing. His large hand gently gripped her waist, pulling her a fraction closer.

He lowered his head, his nose brushing affectionately against hers. His voice was gentle but unmistakably resolute. "Yes, you heard me right. Willow, I love you."

Willow finally snapped out of her daze, but another thought quickly surfaced. "Didn't you say before... that there was someone you were deeply in love with?"

She wasn't asking to interrogate him. After all, she was still entangled in a failed marriage and a messy past; she had no right to judge his history.

But she remembered the deep, restrained longing in his eyes when he had mentioned that person. He had looked so genuinely happy. She just wanted to understand.

Silas's lips curved into a very faint, incredibly tender smile. He didn't hide a thing. "Yes. I do have someone I've kept in my heart for years, someone I've loved for a very long time."

"Then do you..." Willow hesitated before finishing, "Do you not love her anymore?"

Silas shook his head. When he spoke, his deep voice was laced with an unshakable devotion. "The person I love has always been you."

Willow's eyes widened in disbelief. "Me?"

"Yes. Just you."

She realized he wasn't joking. Her heart hammered wildly against her ribs.

Thinking back, Silas had intentionally dropped hints that the woman he loved was married. If she looked at it from that angle, she certainly fit the description.

"So, you've loved me since then?" Willow asked.

"No, much earlier," Silas murmured, pulling her tighter against his chest. "I've loved you for far longer than you could ever imagine. I'll tell you all about it later."

Right now, he had a much more pressing question that needed answering.

His hand slid to the small of her back, pressing her intimately against him. His dark eyes searched hers, revealing a rare glimpse of nervous anticipation. "What about you? How do you feel about me? Do you like me?"

The air instantly stilled.

Willow lowered her gaze, her long lashes hiding the complex storm of emotions in her eyes.

How could she not like him?

When Julian Sinclair was subjecting her to endless manipulation, coldness, and exploitation, it was Silas who had offered her a safe haven. He had given her dignity, tenderness, and unwavering loyalty.

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Chapter 595

She had given him her heart a long time ago.

But she was still legally married to Julian Sinclair. Her divorce was pending, and she was still weighed down by the ugly, chaotic chains of her past.

She didn't dare make Silas any promises just yet.

When Willow remained silent, Silas's anxiety spiked.

He was terrified of rejection, terrified she would pull away, terrified that this love he had nurtured for years would ultimately end in heartbreak.

But he couldn't bear to pressure her. Forcing down his rising panic, he softened his tone. "It's okay. I won't force you to answer. Just tell me... do you hate me?"

Willow's eyelashes fluttered, and she shook her head without hesitation.

"Are you disgusted by me?" Silas asked, his tension easing slightly.

She shook her head again, her gaze clear and steady.

Two denials down. He asked his final question, his heart in his throat. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Of course not," Willow replied, finally breaking her silence to voice the denial.

Three consecutive rejections of the negative. The rigid line of Silas's shoulders instantly relaxed, and the heavy boulder pressing on his chest shattered. It felt as if he could finally breathe again. The tight lines around his eyes smoothed out, replaced by a soft, glowing warmth.

He leaned down, resting his forehead against hers. His voice was a gentle, relieved whisper. "You don't hate me, you aren't disgusted by me, and you aren't afraid of me. Can I take that to mean you like me?"

This time, Willow didn't shake her head.

Her silence was all the confirmation he needed.

A brilliant light exploded in Silas's eyes. A fierce, overwhelming wave of happiness crashed through him, leaving his chest aching and burning with joy.

He wrapped his arms around her, crushing her against his broad, warm chest. He pressed a kiss to her forehead—a touch so gentle, yet so incredibly profound. "That's enough."

He never dared to be greedy. He never expected Willow's feelings to match his instantly.

He knew full well that his love for her was an all-consuming obsession forged over years of waiting—something no one else could easily replicate. Not even her.

So, he didn't demand an equal love right away. As long as she cared for him and was willing to stay by his side, that was more than enough.

Wrapped in his secure embrace and listening to his steady heartbeat, the exhaustion that had plagued Willow for days vanished. She felt a profound sense of peace.

Still, the reality of her situation had to be addressed. "But Julian and I aren't divorced yet," she murmured softly.

Silas didn't loosen his hold in the slightest. His tone remained perfectly calm, completely unfazed. "I know. When is the second hearing? Do you need my help?"

"The day after tomorrow. I don't need your help just yet," Willow replied. "I have everything prepared. Jade and I have already gone over the evidence and the witnesses. I will definitely win my freedom this time."

She had planned and endured for so long, all for this trial. She was going to sever every last tie with Julian Sinclair.

Silas looked down at the determined spark in her eyes and gently brushed her cheek. "I believe you. I've always believed in you. But I can't wait any longer."

His gaze grew dark, swirling with the raw, possessive desire and deep love he had restrained for years. All his endless waiting was woven into those words.

Now that he finally had her, he refused to waste another second.

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Chapter 596

Meanwhile, Vivienne Sinclair had been rushed to the hospital after fainting at the venue. When she woke up, a splitting headache pounded against her skull. Her temples throbbed so violently she barely had the energy to move her eyes.

But she didn't have time to worry about her health. She quickly realized her hospital room was packed with people, the air so thick with tension she could hardly breathe.

Julian Sinclair stood directly across from her bed, dressed in a sharp, dark bespoke suit. He radiated a freezing, intimidating aura. Susannah Sinclair was there too, looking pale and completely drained, her eyes brimming with sheer disappointment.

Beyond them stood various elders and key figures of the Sinclair family. They all wore furious expressions, glaring at her with unbridled disgust and contempt.

It was obvious they had all watched the livestream. They knew everything—the stolen WH credentials, the academic fraud, the blatant lies.

"You actually have the nerve to wake up?" an older relative snapped before Vivienne could even open her mouth. Her voice was shrill and biting. "Vivienne, the Sinclair family treated you like royalty! We brought you in, raised you in luxury, gave you status and endless resources. And this is how you repay us?"

An uncle quickly chimed in, his voice booming with rage. "Plagiarism? Identity theft? Stealing years of someone else's hard work? Are you out of your mind?! The entire internet is blowing up. Our partners are pulling out of contracts. The stock is in a free-fall—we lost billions in half an hour! You're going to destroy the entire Sinclair Group!"

"We raised a snake in our own home!" another relative scoffed. "You always acted so sweet and innocent, but your heart is pure poison. We took in the wrong girl!"

"We absolutely did!" someone else sneered. "If we had known, we never would have let Julian divorce Willow. Look at her now—she's brilliant, talented, and actually has morals. Having her in the family was a blessing. No wonder Susannah fought so hard against the divorce. She must have known what kind of trash you really were."

The insults, mockery, and furious accusations battered Vivienne's eardrums. Her head was already pounding, and the sheer panic and rage bubbling in her chest pushed her to the brink of insanity.

Her fingers clamped down on the white bedsheets until her knuckles turned white. Her eyes went bloodshot as she screamed hysterically, "Shut up! All of you, shut up!"

The room fell silent, but not out of respect. They all stared at her with the cold, disgusted detachment one might reserve for a raving lunatic.

Vivienne didn't care. She locked her gaze on the one person who mattered—Julian, who stood silently in the distance, looking carved out of ice.

He stared back at her. The indulgence and pity he used to show her were entirely gone. In their place was a bone-chilling hatred. It was the look of a man who realized he had been dragged down and played for a fool.

Meeting his gaze felt like a knife twisting into her chest.

A massive wave of terror crashed over her. Ignoring the IV still in her hand, she threw off the blankets. Dizzy and weak, she stumbled out of bed.

The IV stand shook violently, the needle ripping from her vein and dripping blood. She didn't care. She dropped to the floor and crawled desperately toward Julian, her hands locking onto his expensive trousers in a death grip.

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Chapter 597

Tears streamed down her face as she begged in absolute terror. "Julian, you have to believe me! I didn't do it! I didn't steal her work, and I didn't impersonate WH! It was all a setup! Willow and Silas Thorne plotted against me to destroy the Sinclair Group! You have to believe me! Please!"

She looked up at his chiseled, unfeeling jaw. Her face was a mess of tears, stripped of all her pride as she groveled in the dirt.

But Julian just stared down at her, his eyes devoid of a single ounce of pity.

He wasn't stupid enough to deny the overwhelming evidence displayed in front of the entire world. And with the Sinclair Group facing an unprecedented crisis, he was absolutely not going to risk the family empire for her.

When he spoke, his voice was as freezing as a winter storm. "The evidence is absolute. The whole world knows. Stop your pathetic lying."

With a swift, ruthless motion, he yanked his leg free from her grasp. He delivered his final verdict without a shred of hesitation. "As of today, you are officially fired from the Sinclair Group. We have nothing to do with you. Whatever legal and academic consequences you face, you will face them alone."

With one sentence, he severed every tie between them. Without sparing her another glance, he turned and strode out of the room.

Vivienne froze, her blood running ice-cold.

She understood perfectly. Julian was throwing her to the wolves. He was making her the sole scapegoat to protect the company.

No! That couldn't happen!

She couldn't be abandoned! She refused to go to jail!

Catching a glimpse of Susannah Sinclair's conflicted face, Vivienne immediately lunged at her, wrapping her arms around the older woman's legs and sobbing hysterically.

"Mom! Please save me! You raised me! You've known me for over twenty years, you know I wouldn't do this! I was framed! You can't just let my life be ruined! Please, talk to Julian! Beg him for me!"

She looked up, her eyes wild, and played her final trump card. "Even if you hate me, think about Toby! He's so little and so sweet. He can't grow up without his mother!"

Susannah looked down at the pathetic, screaming woman at her feet. She frowned, her eyes swirling with conflict and a lingering sense of pity.

They had spent over two decades together; there was still some affection there. More importantly, she was Toby's mother.

Toby was the precious heir to the Sinclair bloodline.

Susannah closed her eyes, swallowing her anger. "You still refuse to admit your mistakes! The evidence is right there, and you're still making excuses! Do you have any idea how close you came to destroying our family?!"

Despite her harsh words, Susannah couldn't completely harden her heart. She sighed, pulled her legs free, and hurried out of the room to catch up with her son.

In the corridor, Julian hadn't gone far.

Susannah grabbed his arm, her voice exhausted. "Julian, I know she made an unforgivable mistake. I'm furious too. But please, for Toby's sake, give her a break. The boy is too young to be without a mother. He is your flesh and blood, the heir to the family. We need to give him a stable environment. Do you really want him growing up with the stigma of a mother in jail?"

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

Chapter 598

Despite Susannah's desperate pleas, Julian's expression remained as impenetrable as a glacier. He didn't soften in the slightest.

He was a man driven by cold, hard calculations. Vivienne hadn't just messed with a relationship; she had struck at the very core of the Sinclair Group's interests.

The massive academic fraud, the global backlash, the corporate fallout, and the crashing stock price were all due to her selfish greed. For Julian, business always came before

romance. Vivienne was now a massive liability. Cutting her loose was the only logical choice.

As for Toby, the public still believed Willow was his mother anyway. Vivienne's ultimate fate wouldn't really affect the boy's public image. As long as Julian could win Willow back, everything could be fixed.

In fact, given Willow's surging reputation, getting her back would be a huge win for the Sinclair Group. It would instantly repair their image and bring in massive partnerships.

In a twisted way, discarding Vivienne was the best business move he could make.

Susannah kept trying to convince him, but Julian's patience ran out.

He looked at his mother, his dark eyes void of any warmth. His words were razor-sharp and absolute. "The decision is final. There is no room for discussion. The lawyers will handle her tomorrow morning."

"Julian!" Susannah protested, but he was already walking away. Left with no choice, she could only sigh in defeat.

Inside the hospital room, Vivienne stood just behind the door, her nails digging into her palms until she bled.

She had heard every single word. Each syllable felt like a knife plunging into her chest.

She had clung to the desperate hope that Toby—the sweet, obedient son she had given him—would make Julian soften his stance. She hoped he would show at least a fraction of mercy.

But she had been completely delusional.

A wave of suffocating despair washed over her, making her body tremble uncontrollably. All her years of grievance and ambition shattered into a mocking realization.

She really should have known.

Julian Sinclair had always been a selfish, ruthless opportunist. When he had cast aside Willow—a woman who loved him deeply and sacrificed everything for him—did he ever show a shred of mercy? Now, it was simply her turn.

Vivienne leaned heavily against the cold wall, her face as pale as a ghost.

Julian was this ruthless even while believing Toby was his biological son. If he ever discovered the truth—that the boy he had raised for years wasn't his, and that she had conned him—he would absolutely destroy her.

He wouldn't just throw her out. He would hunt her down and make sure both she and Toby suffered a fate worse than death.

The more Vivienne thought about it, the more terrified she became. She couldn't just sit there and wait for the axe to fall!

She had to secure an escape route.

That night, under the cover of darkness, she sneaked out of the hospital.

The wind was biting cold. Clutching her thin hospital gown, Vivienne stood under a flickering streetlamp and dialed a number she had sworn to never call again.

The phone rang endlessly, each beep plucking at her frayed nerves.

After seven rings, the call connected. A lazy, arrogant male voice came through, dripping with amusement. "Well, if it isn't the Sinclair princess. What a rare honor. To what do I owe the pleasure after all these years?"

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

Chapter 599

The moment Vivienne heard his voice, a deep frown creased her forehead. Her tone was sharp and devoid of emotion. "Cut the crap. I need you."

She rattled off her location, her voice slipping into its usual commanding arrogance. "Come pick me up right now."

The man on the other end let out a low, mocking laugh. "Vivienne, do you think it's still three years ago? Do I look like a dog that comes running the second you snap your fingers?"

Vivienne had zero patience for his games. She was running out of time. "What if I told you I didn't get rid of the baby? What if I told you I had your son?"

Dead silence fell over the line.

The man's lazy, arrogant breathing hitched. For five long seconds, even the wind seemed to stop. When he finally spoke, his voice was tight. "What did you say?"

Vivienne's eyes darkened as she repeated, "I gave birth to your son. He's three years old. Come get me, and I'll explain the rest."

"Got it," he finally replied. "Wait there."

As the call ended, Vivienne's mind drifted back to the past. If she had a choice, she would never have contacted this man again. But she had no options left. Three years ago, while studying abroad, a reckless fling resulted in a pregnancy. She had fully intended to quietly abort it, until she accidentally discovered Julian Sinclair's most guarded secret: he was permanently infertile.

That information changed everything.

She immediately returned to New York City, used the pregnancy to manipulate her way into Julian's life, gave birth to Toby, and successfully ousted Willow.

She had planned to take that earth-shattering secret to her grave and live out her life in luxury. But with Julian tossing her to the wolves, Toby's true parentage was a ticking time bomb. She had to secure her exit before her entire world collapsed.

Ashton Lockwood was her final lifeline.

Barely twenty minutes later, a heavily modified black sports car roared down the street, its blinding headlights cutting through the night.

The door swung open, and Ashton stepped out. Dressed in designer streetwear with silver-gray highlights in his hair, his striking features were ruined by a sleazy, unapologetic playboy aura. He looked like the definition of new money trash.

He sauntered over, his eyes roaming over Vivienne's pale but gorgeous figure shivering in the hospital gown. A flash of appreciation crossed his eyes. "It's been a few years, but you've gotten even prettier. You actually look better desperate."

His tone was infuriatingly casual as he reached out, trailing a hand down her cheek.

Bile rose in Vivienne's throat. It took every ounce of her willpower not to slap his hand away.

She needed him, so she swallowed her pride and endured it.

Seeing her submit, Ashton's smirk widened. He leaned in, burying his face in her hair to take a deep sniff. "Still the same scent. You haven't changed a bit."

The sleazy intimacy was suffocating. Vivienne jerked her head away, her voice turning to ice. "I didn't call you here to hook up, Ashton. This is strictly business."

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

Chapter 600

Ashton pulled back slightly, recalling what she had said on the phone. His lips curved into a smirk. "So, you're telling me you had my kid?"

He looked completely unbothered, his eyes dancing with amusement. It was obvious he didn't care at all about suddenly becoming a father.

Vivienne noticed his indifference. This man was exactly as she remembered—selfish, sleazy, and entirely heartless. She couldn't believe she had ever been foolish enough to sleep with him.

She despised his arrogant playboy act, but right now, she was a pariah facing total destruction. If she didn't use him, she was completely screwed.

Forcing down her rising nausea, she looked him dead in the eye. "Yes."

"And I'm just supposed to take your word for it?" Ashton scoffed, his eyes brimming with mockery.

"I have no reason to lie," Vivienne said sharply. "The timeline matches perfectly. You were the only one I was sleeping with back then. He is yours."

"Besides, he looks exactly like you. Once you see him, you'll know. And if you're really that paranoid, we can do a DNA test."

Ashton fell silent, clicking his lighter shut. He nodded slowly, but there wasn't a single trace of fatherly joy in his eyes. He looked as if they were discussing the weather.

He knew exactly what his position was. The Lockwood Family was a second-tier wealthy family in New York City, plagued by vicious infighting among multiple wives and illegitimate children. His mother was a mistress with zero power. Ashton himself had never been favored by the patriarch, and he knew bringing home a bastard son wouldn't win him a dime of the family fortune.

The only reason he had bothered to show up tonight was because he had seen the explosive headlines about Vivienne, the Sinclair Group, and Merit Biotech. He knew those companies sat at the absolute apex of the business world.

He was here to play the opportunist. He wanted to use Vivienne to extract a massive payout from those billionaire circles.

His playboy facade faded, replaced by the calculating gleam of a greedy businessman. "So, what's your play? You want to hand the kid over so he can join the Lockwood family?"

Vivienne thought he actually cared about the boy. A glimmer of hope lit up her eyes. "He's your flesh and blood. He belongs with you. He should take your name and inherit your share of the wealth."

"You're right about that," Ashton played along, baiting her to reveal her true motives. "But knowing you, you're not just handing over a golden ticket for free, are you?"

Finally at the crux of her plan, Vivienne didn't hold back. "Of course not. Nothing in this world is free, especially a child. In exchange, I need you to do two things. First, secure a safe route for me to leave the country immediately. Second... I need you to kill someone for me."

The air instantly froze.

Ashton raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised for a second before his expression morphed into dark amusement. He looked at the pale woman shivering in a hospital gown.

Murder?

She really had some nerve.

Alright then, he'd play her game.

Ashton chuckled darkly. He didn't expose his true intentions, nor did he reject her. "Those are massive favors. A kid alone isn't going to cover the bill. You know exactly what I mean, Vivienne."