



# THE FORBIDDEN HEIRESS

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### A SPECIAL PROJECT

**A**n urgent message awaited Sabree the next morning.

**FROM:** Maggie Calloway

**SUBJECT:** Meeting with Mr. Montague

Dr. Warner,

Mr. Montague would like to see you in his office at 10:30 a.m. sharp. Don't be late.

No explanation. No details. Sabree's stomach twisted into knots. The message amounted to a summons, but she would play it cool.

She stepped off the elevator onto the executive floor. Maggie glanced up from her computer screen as Sabree entered the suite. Maggie's black-and-white color-block dress looked like it belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine, her hair in a sleek, salon-perfect twist.

Sabree smoothed the skirt of her own navy sheath, new but bought off-rack on sale, her natural curls pulled into a practical bun. Maggie's smile was warm, the kind that said she saw Sabree's nerves and believed she belonged here.

Maggie reached for her desk phone and alerted Alistair of Sabree's arrival. A brief pause passed, then his deep voice came through the speaker. "Send her in."

Maggie nodded toward the doors, but before Sabree could move, she lowered her voice, just enough that it felt like something meant for Sabree alone. “Don’t let them intimidate you.”

Then Maggie returned to her screen, back to business as usual. With a steadying breath, Sabree pushed open the doors to Alistair’s office.

He sat behind his desk. “Dr. Warner,” he said in greeting, his voice smooth, authoritative. “Take a seat.”

She obeyed, suppressing the spark of nervous energy that came with sitting across from one of the most powerful men in the industry.

“I’m putting you on a special project,” he announced.

“A special project?”

“I want you to review Montague Pharmaceuticals’ shelved projects. Every drug, every molecule, every abandoned pipeline that has ever crossed this company’s desks.”

Sabree frowned. “You mean the archived compound library? That’s unusual.”

“Unusual does not mean unnecessary.”

Sabree didn’t miss the deliberate phrasing. Was this some kind of test? “With all due respect, sir,” she said carefully, “this sounds like something R&D should handle, not someone who just joined the company.”

Alistair’s gaze sharpened. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?”

He rose from his chair and walked toward the window, hands clasped behind his back. “Do you know how many promising treatments have been developed here, only to vanish into obscurity?”

Sabree had heard of shelved drug candidates, called “developmental dead ends,” compounds that failed due to efficacy, side effects, or lack of commercial viability.

Most people had no inkling the pharmaceutical industry

operated on brutal economics. It took twelve to fifteen years and could cost well over a billion to bring a single drug to market, with only one in a thousand compounds that entered laboratory testing ever making it to human trials.

The industry had some of the highest profit margins of any sector, with pharmaceutical companies averaging seventy-six percent gross profit margins compared to thirty-seven percent for other S&P 500 companies.

But when promising compounds got terminated without explanation, it represented hundreds of millions in lost potential revenue, and years of research down the drain. Sabree folded her arms. "That depends. Were they buried because they failed or because someone didn't want them to succeed?"

Alistair turned slightly, enough for her to catch the glint of approval in his eyes. "That's precisely the right question."

Sabree's mind raced. Pipeline prioritization, a corporate strategy determining which drugs moved forward and which were left, could be another reason certain projects had been archived. But something in Alistair's tone suggested this wasn't just about corporate strategy.

"You suspect internal sabotage," she said bluntly.

He turned fully to face her. "I suspect people have shaped the pipeline to serve their own interests. There are individuals in this company who have ensured certain discoveries never saw the light of day. Scientists whose careers ended prematurely. Research that conveniently vanished."

Sabree's stomach lurched. "So you want me to find out who's behind it?"

"Yes," Alistair said. His tone didn't invite further questioning, but something brazen rose inside Sabree.

Alistair may show her the door before she had the opportunity to explore this *special project*, but he had sought her

out, not the other way around, and in some twisted way, that gave her leverage.

"If you suspected sabotage, why haven't you stopped the people responsible and why me? Why now?"

It wasn't as if Alistair was a lightweight. The man probably crushed competitors while taking his morning coffee and reading *The Wall Street Journal*. "Because suspicion isn't proof. I wanted to believe I was wrong, that it was just disorganization, bureaucratic rot. But I waited too long."

He paused, then said, "I need a scientist. One who knows the difference between coincidence and corruption. And one who doesn't owe anyone in this building a damn thing."

Sabree exhaled, her mind spinning. She hadn't expected him to admit it; this was huge. And a major problem. So big, in fact, he wanted her to go digging.

"How long have you suspected something was off?"

"About a year."

She replied, "That's a long time for something so serious."

"I couldn't afford to be wrong. I don't know who else could be compromised, and a false accusation could have triggered shareholder lawsuits or internal collapse."

*True*, Sabree thought. However, if something sinister was going on, the real reason these promising compounds went nowhere, there was a possibility it had been going on for much longer than a year.

"What tipped you off?" Sabree asked.

"An investor pitch deck from a small biotech start-up. They used a compound eerily similar to one we shelved a decade ago."

A decade ago. Something about this unsettled her. Pharmaceutical companies often patented compounds, methods of synthesis, or early findings, even if the research was later abandoned. These were known as "defensive patents," filed to block competi-

tors or preserve intellectual property in case a shelved compound proved useful later.

However, if a patent wasn't pursued further or renewed, it would expire, typically after twenty years from the filing date, often less if maintenance fees weren't paid. Ten years was long enough for Montague Pharmaceuticals to give up on a compound that lay dormant, let the patent expire.

Sabree chewed her bottom lip, lost in thought as she considered what was at stake. If Montague Pharmaceuticals' own compounds showed up in a competitor's pipeline, they couldn't legally sue for IP theft if they never renewed the patent. Worse, the biotech version could beat them to market, damaging their commercial future.

Playing out worst-case scenarios was premature, but she had a feeling Alistair was doing the same, otherwise she wouldn't be in his office. He was trying to get ahead of potential risk to the company.

Shedding all inhibitions, she said, "If Montague-related compounds keep surfacing in competitors' pipelines and we see a phase one fatality that can be linked back to our archive, it's game over. The media and FDA won't care that we never greenlit these compounds for development."

"I know," he said solemnly. "That's why I want you to investigate. You're looking for a fuse before it hits the powder keg."

An obvious question occurred to Sabree, but she bit her tongue. Charlotte, Alistair's daughter, was chief legal and compliance officer. Why hadn't her father discussed the situation with her?

Alistair said he needed someone he could trust. So what had he meant? That he couldn't trust his own children or his own executive team? Or he preferred to share confidences with a grieving, twenty-eight-year-old stranger whom he had given her



first break?

Surely he couldn't have recruited Sabree just to look into possible corporate espionage, could he? She was a scientist, not an investigator. And yet, the possibility of uncovering a major scandal that could put the company at risk before it bled into the public domain made her heart leap with anticipation. This man, this industry titan trusted her. Why?

"Well, Dr. Warner," he said. "It occurs to me I made the right call, putting you in charge of this expedition."

"And if I find something?"

"Then we decide what to do with it." He paused for a long beat before saying, "And if you can't handle this, if you're not up for it, you're free to continue with your kinase inhibitor research, no questions asked."

Sabree's pride bristled. She met his gaze, unwavering. "I'll do it."

"Good. You start immediately. I'll personally inform the appropriate stakeholders and ensure you have proper access."



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### KNOW YOUR ENEMY

It took thirty-five minutes to drive from Cambridge to Concord, yet the ride had done little to quiet the storm raging inside Charlotte Montague's head. Now, she stood in the late afternoon light streaming through the barn's high windows, feeling the weight of the meeting settling like lead in her chest.

*"Dr. Sabree Warner will be leading a comprehensive review of our archived research projects."*

"Afternoon, Charlotte." Tom Henley, the stable manager, looked up from mucking a stall. "Duchess has been restless all day. Probably sensed you were coming."

Charlotte nodded, forcing a smile.

Animals always knew. Duchess, a sixteen-hand chestnut Hanoverian with the temperament of a Supreme Court justice, had been her sanctuary for three years. The horse demanded precision, respect, and absolute honesty—qualities Charlotte valued because they were increasingly rare in her human interactions.

She made her way to Duchess's stall, running practiced hands over the mare's neck and shoulders, checking for heat or tenderness. The ritual was soothing, methodical. Unlike the chaos her father had unleashed ninety minutes ago.

He began the meeting by launching into a diatribe about change meant to elicit management support. *"The landscape of drug*

*discovery is changing. Artificial intelligence is accelerating what once took years of trial and error. Companies that don't adapt will be left behind."*

She had watched the faces of everyone around the conference room table: her brother Julian, senior vice president of global alliances, the company's chief financial officer, head of manufacturing, vice president of regulatory affairs, and chief scientific officer. Their expressions told Charlotte that this project had caught them off guard, and they weren't happy about it.

Neither was she. As chief legal and compliance officer, she had serious reservations. What her father was proposing sounded ludicrous, giving an outsider, some scientist barely out of postdoc, unfettered access to the company's old drug discovery pipeline. Risky business in Charlotte's mind.

Then he wrapped up his little speech. *"The implications for our shelved compounds are enormous. Ten years ago, we lacked the tools to move some of those assets forward. Today, with AI-assisted modeling and modern screening platforms, some of those same compounds might be viable—or even groundbreaking. But we won't know until we look."*

The archive project was either random busywork, which seemed unlikely given her father's strategic mind, or it was targeted. If targeted, someone specific was being hunted.

"That's not good, is it, girl?" Charlotte murmured, sliding the bridle over Duchess's head. The horse's ears flicked forward, attentive. "No, it's not good at all."

Charlotte first fell in love with riding at fourteen, the same summer she'd discovered *To Kill a Mockingbird* in her mother's library. She'd devoured the book in two days, then read it again, captivated by Atticus Finch's moral clarity and courtroom brilliance.

For months afterward, she'd dreamed of becoming a

prosecutor, standing before juries, fighting for justice, and making arguments that mattered.

The fantasy had lasted until her second year at Harvard Law, when she'd finally understood that criminal prosecution was a dead end for a Montague. It would provide no prestige in her family's eyes, no path to real power, and no way to prove herself worthy of the empire her father was building.

Corporate law, on the other hand, was where battles were won and fortunes were made. So she'd pivoted. Graduated *summa cum laude*, clerked for a federal judge, and methodically climbed the ranks at white-shoe firms before Alistair finally brought her home to Montague Pharmaceuticals.

Every merger, every patent fight, and every regulatory battle had been preparation for the moment he would hand her the keys to the kingdom.

She led Duchess out to the mounting block, her movements automatic while her mind churned. In the legal world, Charlotte had learned to assess threats with precision. Opposing counsel who bluffed versus those who had evidence. Judges who could be swayed versus those who'd made up their minds. Witnesses who would crumble under pressure versus those who'd fight back.

Dr. Sabree Warner fell into the latter category, which made her dangerous. Charlotte swung into the saddle, feeling Duchess gather herself beneath her, fifteen hundred pounds of muscle and intelligence waiting for direction.

She asked Duchess for a trot, posting smoothly as they circled the arena. The rhythm was meditative, allowing her thoughts to organize themselves like legal briefs.

In her role, Charlotte had access to HR records, a privilege she'd made use of by requesting Dr. Warner's file and making a quick assessment.

**Strengths:**

- Brilliant researcher.
- PhD from a top-tier program.
- Published work that had garnered international attention.
- Alistair's obvious favor.

**Weaknesses:**

- No corporate experience.
- No understanding of institutional politics.
- No allies in senior management (besides Alistair).

**Threat level? [To be determined].**

Charlotte asked for a canter, and Duchess responded instantly to the subtle shift in her seat. They moved together like a single entity, the horse's power channeled through Charlotte's will. This was what control felt like: perfect communication, absolute trust, and flawless execution.

Unlike the mess her father had created. First, he'd personally recruited a twenty-eight-year-old scientist straight out of postdoc with no industry experience. Then within two weeks of her employment, he'd handed her the keys to the company's intellectual property archive.

Charlotte had enough institutional memory to know three decades of research and development decisions had produced their share of questionable choices. Budget cuts had ended promising research. Strategic pivots had buried potential breakthroughs. Personnel decisions had been made that might not withstand modern scrutiny.

Marcus Zhao's name surfaced unbidden in her thoughts. The man had been Alistair's golden boy for years, his rise through the ranks meteoric and seemingly unstoppable.