

## **Bound love 1601**

Chapter 1601:

When the man's voice carried across the room while ordering, recognition finally clicked.

"Hardy?" Jayden rose, crossing to the man's table with purposeful strides. "What brings you here?"

Hardy's eyes flickered up at the voice, darting past Jayden to land on Elyse.

His fingers clenched briefly before relaxing as he stood, offering a practiced smile. "What an unexpected pleasure."

"Hardy?" Elyse studied his features, memory stirring. Recognition bloomed as she recalled the mercenary who had once come to her aid.

She approached eagerly. "Are you vacationing? I thought you lived for your missions."

Hardy's smile warmed slightly. "I've earned enough to take a breather, do some traveling. Running into you two was pure chance."

"Join us for dinner?" Elyse suggested brightly, glancing between the two men.

Jayden's smile grew wooden. He'd finally managed to secure alone time with Elyse, only to have Hardy materialize. The universe seemed determined to thwart his plans.

Before Jayden could formulate a polite rejection, Hardy gracefully bowed out.

"I'm just grabbing takeout for my hotel room," he explained with an apologetic gesture. "Besides, I wouldn't dream of interrupting your evening together."

Relief flooded through Jayden even as disappointment flickered across Elyse's features.

After a moment's consideration, she pulled out her phone. "Let's exchange contact information. If you need anything while you're in Watscar, don't hesitate to reach out."

Hardy's brow furrowed with momentary reluctance before he acquiesced.

As they swapped details, Elyse caught a glimpse of his phone screen.

Her breath caught. Tracy's promotional headshot graced his top chat. The same photo that had delighted her friend during their last campaign shoot.

Elyse's smile grew brittle though she maintained her composure.

Hardy hastily pocketed his phone.

"I won't keep you," Elyse managed smoothly. "Our food's arriving."

Hardy nodded. "Enjoy your meal."

Elyse grasped Jayden's hand, leading them back to their table.

Noting her sudden tension, he asked softly, "Something wrong?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm not certain, but I think... he has a connection to Tracy."

Jayden's heart raced as he absorbed Elyse's words, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face.

"Are you absolutely certain about this?"

Elyse let out a frustrated sigh, her eyes reflecting her inner turmoil.

"That's just it—I'm not sure at all. It feels far-fetched. But I can't shake the image of Tracy's profile picture being in his contacts. And it wasn't just any photo; it was her favorite."

Chapter 1602:

Jayden's gaze shifted toward Hardy, and he couldn't help but notice the unusual tension in Hardy's posture.

The moment their eyes met, Hardy seemed to tighten, quickly averting his gaze.

Was he watching them? Did he fear they were onto something?

Realizing this, Jayden's expression turned cautious.

"He appears anxious. I can't definitively link him to Tracy, but he's definitely concealing something."

Elyse piped up with a thoughtful suggestion.

"Since you haven't had any luck tracking down Tracy, perhaps digging into Hardy's background could lead us to some clues."

Nodding in agreement, Jayden lowered his voice and replied, "I think that is a smart move, but let's keep our investigation under wraps for now."

After ordering their meals, they settled in, though Hardy's order wasn't ready yet.

Calmly, Hardy sat in his chair, his silence revealing an unease that lingered in the air, waiting patiently for the staff to bring his order.

When the staff at the restaurant finally presented him with his neatly packed meal, Hardy remained silent, grabbing the bag without a word before quietly exiting through the door.

Jayden and Elyse exchanged a knowing glance, the realization dawning upon them.

Hardy's take-out order was ample enough for two.

Elyse turned to Jayden, her voice filled with skepticism.

“It seems a bit hasty to assume it’s Tracy purely based on a profile picture. Yet, whenever that image crosses my mind, my heart races... I can’t shake the feeling that it’s truly her.”

Jayden offered words of reassurance.

“You should trust your gut. Besides, I’ve hit a dead end in my investigation. If you’re right, this could be the breakthrough we need.”

Elyse nodded, appreciating his support.

“You might be right.”

“I’ll arrange for someone to look into Hardy,” Jayden said decisively. “For now, put it out of your mind and just enjoy your meal.”

Obediently, Elyse began to eat, while Hardy had already ventured outside the restaurant, making his way down the street to a sleek black car. As he settled into the passenger seat, he instructed, “Drive to your place. I’ll return to the hotel later.”

Tracy nodded, swiftly pressing down on the accelerator, and the car surged forward.

After a moment of silence, Tracy broke the quiet with a question. “How does Elyse seem these days?”

Hardy responded, “She appears well. Her bond with Jayden looks strong—nothing like the conflicts you once described.”

Tracy reacted with contemplative nodding. “That’s good to hear. Their happiness is what truly matters.”

Chapter 1603:

After a brief hesitation, Hardy asked, “What about you? Don’t you miss Elyse? Don’t you yearn to talk to her again?”

Tracy's brow furrowed slightly as she replied, "I've made it clear that the timing isn't right. Once everything is sorted, I'll finally come to her."

Hardy paused for a moment, his gaze steady as he probed, "What makes you think she will still take you back after everything that's happened?"

Tracy abruptly stomped on the brakes, her tone sharp as a tack. "Why would she ever catch wind of any of this?"

Keeping his composure, Hardy replied, "Once you cross a line, there's bound to be a trail. If the truth comes to light, more than just Elyse will be in on the secret."

An oppressive silence enveloped the car before Tracy finally shot back, "So, what are you trying to insinuate? Are you wavering on your promise to help me? If you're having second thoughts, just say it plainly. No need to dance around the topic."

Hardy let out a weary sigh, noting the wild glint in Tracy's eyes. "That's not what I meant at all."

Not bothering to acknowledge him, Tracy pressed down hard on the gas, heading toward the underground garage.

Frustration bubbled within Hardy as he remarked, "I just think you might look back on this with regret one day. I promised to help you, and I won't go back on my word."

After pulling into the parking space, Tracy climbed out and declared, "Regret? That's kid stuff. I left my childhood behind ages ago. All that's left of me is a demon rising from the depths."

Hardy caught the twisted grin she wore and felt a chill of malice rise within him. He realized it was futile to reason with her, as she was already set on her path.

With a deep breath, he acquiesced. "Alright, let's get moving. I'll head back to the hotel after dinner."

Tracy's smirk widened. "No hurry. Lowell is off on a business trip."

Hardy furrowed his brow. “Even so, we can’t afford to play fast and loose. What if he decides to cut the trip short and comes back looking for you? I’ll leave after we eat.”

Tracy sulked briefly but relented, dropping the subject.

Once they were inside, Tracy busied herself unpacking the meal and setting it on the table. As she meticulously arranged the dishes, a thought flickered in her mind. Why was Elyse at that restaurant in the first place?

Then it hit her. She had mentioned before that after leaving the TV station, there was a fantastic eatery not far away, the one the staff often ordered from.

And sure enough, Elyse had visited that very spot right after leaving work.

A stirring sensation welled up in Tracy’s chest, causing her to clutch her heart as tears began to spill down her cheeks unbidden.

Hardy yanked a Coke from the fridge, popped the tab, and took a deep, satisfying swig. As he turned, he nearly dropped the can.

Tracy sat there, tears streaming down her face—big, heavy ones that glistened under the kitchen light.

Chapter 1604:

Frowning, Hardy set his drink down and strode over to her. “What’s wrong?”

She hastily wiped at her eyes, forcing a shaky smile. “It’s nothing. Just lost in thought. Feeling a little down.”

Hardy exhaled, the sound a mixture of a sigh and resignation. “I told you, I’ve got your back. You don’t have to carry everything alone.”

Tracy glanced up at him, her fingers still swiping away the last of her tears. “When you fished me out of the ocean, did you ever think I would turn into this much of a headache?” Hardy’s mind drifted back to that day.

He could still see Tracy—clinging to a broken hunk of plastic, barely conscious, her body bobbing with the waves. Even from a distance, he knew she was on the verge of letting go.

He had been out on a rented skiff, just a guy trying to enjoy a quiet day of fishing when fate intervened.

Later, he learned that she had been caught in a rip current, sucked out to sea, and left at the mercy of the elements. By some miracle, she had found that debris and managed to hold on—for four agonizing hours.

At the time, he had been awed by the sheer luck that had kept her alive. Surviving such a harrowing ordeal felt nothing short of miraculous.

He had assumed that after staring death in the face and surviving, she was meant for something extraordinary.

He hadn’t expected her to become the target of someone’s malice.

For a month, Tracy had fought to recover—physically, yes, but more than that, she had clawed her way out of the darkness that had nearly swallowed her whole.

But trauma didn’t just fade. It lingered, festered. And in Tracy, it had hardened into a smoldering anger, a hunger for revenge that wouldn’t let her rest.

Hardy sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He had saved her once, and somehow, that had tethered them together. Now, she felt like a daughter he hadn’t asked for, but one he couldn’t stop worrying about. “You’re a handful,” Hardy admitted with a sigh. “But hey, I’ve learned to live with it.”

Tracy shot him a sharp look. “I miss Elyse. And I know she misses me too.”

Hardy raised a skeptical brow. “Funny, I haven’t heard Elyse say a word about that. What makes you so sure?”

Tracy sniffled, then smirked. "It's our bond. You wouldn't get it."

Hardy chuckled. "So if you know she misses you, why not just go see her?"

Tracy got worked up. "I told you, that's a whole different problem! Don't mix things up!" She huffed, then pivoted abruptly. "Anyway, let's eat. I'm starving!"

Hardy shook his head but sat down to eat. No point arguing with her when she got like this.

Once their plates were scraped clean, Tracy stretched her arms overhead and let out an exaggerated yawn. Then, just as suddenly, her eyes lit up. "I'm getting so sleepy after meals lately! Do you think I could be pregnant?" she blurted out, excitement crackling in her voice.

Hardy's gaze flicked to the empty dishes. He exhaled heavily. "Or maybe—and hear me out here—you just inhaled enough food to feed a small village, and now you're in a food coma?"

Chapter 1605:

Tracy's expression dropped, disappointment flickering across her face. But a moment later, Hardy's eyes widened. "Hold on—you have been eating a lot more lately. Are you serious? Could you actually be...?" He trailed off, surprised by the possibility.

Tracy, still smarting from his earlier remark, blinked at him—completely blindsided by the thought.

Hardy frowned, rubbing his chin. "It's too early to tell. A test wouldn't even pick anything up yet."

"But if I am pregnant, wouldn't that be incredible?"

A dark, almost feverish glee flashed in her eyes. "This is it! This is what I've been waiting for! Carrying Lowell's child is the final piece of my revenge!"

As she spiraled deeper into obsession, a storm of conflicting emotions churned inside Hardy. But in the end, he stayed quiet, choosing instead to stand silently by her side.



After all, he had pulled her back from the edge of death. He had spent a lifetime on battlefields, taking lives—but until her, he had never saved one.

Saving her had felt, strangely, like a second chance—not just for her, but for him as well.

After a pause, Hardy said, “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Give it some time—a pregnancy test won’t even be accurate for a couple of months.”

Tracy nodded eagerly, but a flicker of uncertainty lingered in her eyes. What if she was wrong? What if she wasn’t pregnant after all?

She resolved that once Lowell returned from his business trip, she’d have to draw him in more often. The more seeds she sowed, the better the chances of one taking root.

Lost in a whirlwind of tantalizing thoughts, she finally turned her gaze back to Hardy. “When all this blows over, maybe you could sneak me out of the county. I don’t see myself sticking around.”

Hardy let out a long sigh. “Let’s not put the cart before the horse. One step at a time. And with me watching your back, you could plant roots anywhere you damn well please.”

Tracy nodded, a newfound confidence settling over her. “You’re right. I’m not that scared little girl anymore. I’ve got someone powerful in my corner—someone who doesn’t hesitate to take people off the board.”

Hardy groaned, rolling his eyes. “Let’s not talk about killing like it’s ordering takeout. It’s been a minute since I’ve done anything like that.”

Tracy pouted playfully. “Don’t you dare quit your job! If you did, you wouldn’t be able to afford me.”

Hardy was left speechless.

Brook had been immersed in his work for the past two days, his focus unyielding, but in all that time, he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Corrie. When Corrie fell into silence, he knew it often spelled the brewing of a storm.

He knew her well enough to understand that patience was key. He would wait, as he always did, for her next move.

Chapter 1606:

As the second day drew to a close, just as the night was beginning to creep in, Brook's phone rang. It was his uncle, Jordy Owen. Brook answered calmly, knowing that whatever was to come, he had learned long ago how to navigate his uncle's conversations.

"Brook, it's been far too long. My wife and I have been missing you. How about coming over for a nice home-cooked meal?" Jordy's voice rang out cheerfully.

Brook replied, "I'll be there, but I'll be about thirty minutes late."

"No problem at all. We'll be waiting for you," Jordy said, laughter bubbling through the line before he hung up.

Brook said nothing more, choosing instead to dive back into his work. Only after wrapping up the final task did he leave his office.

When he arrived at Jordy's house, his aunt-in-law, Zoe, greeted him with warmth that could melt the coldest of hearts. "Brook, it's been so long! And I must say, you're looking even more handsome than the last time I saw you!"

Brook offered a small smile, his tone gentle. "Zoe, you're looking radiant. Seems like you've been taking life easy, and it's agreeing with you."

Zoe chuckled lightly. "Well, now that I'm retired, I have all the time in the world to enjoy life, and it suits me well."

The two of them moved to the living room, chatting away like old friends. Jordy, noticing their arrival, rose from his seat. "Brook! It's good to see you. How are things at the company?"

“Everything’s going smoothly,” Brook assured him.

Jordy patted Brook on the back, a proud smile on his face. “I’m really proud of you. You’re growing into a fine man. You make an old man like me feel hopeful for the future.”

While Zoe went to prepare drinks, Jordy led Brook into the study, his demeanor shifting subtly.

Curious, Brook asked, “Uncle Jordy, is there something on your mind?” Jordy hesitated, his words seemingly caught between his lips. After a long pause, he spoke. “I’ve watched you grow, and now that your career is on solid ground, I think it’s time you start considering marriage. Your mother mentioned it as well. You’re almost thirty now. It’s high time you thought about it.”

Brook’s face remained unchanged, his expression a mask of calm. He had seen this coming. After all, he had long heard of Jordy’s affair with Corrie.

“I’m not in a rush,” Brook replied, his voice steady. “Yes, I’ve just taken the helm of the company, and while things are improving, there are still challenges to tackle. My focus needs to be on the business for now.”

Jordy, growing a bit anxious, leaned in. “The company’s not as difficult as you make it out to be. You’re just stalling. How long do you plan to put this off? Corrie won’t wait forever. And her family is getting anxious too. They’ve come to me asking when you’ll marry. They’re worried about the engagement falling through, and if that happens, how will that look for Corrie? She’ll be humiliated.”

Brook remained unfazed. “I appreciate your concern, but I believe marriage is a serious commitment that requires thoughtful consideration. Once I’ve cleared the company’s hurdles, I’ll be in a better position to give Corrie the life she deserves.”

Jordy sighed, his tone tinged with frustration. “You’re a grown man now, with your own ideas. I can’t force you, but I will remind you—delaying marriage too long can be unhealthy.”

Chapter 1607:

Brook, intrigued by the shift in conversation, asked, “Uncle Jordy, when did you get married? Were you both older when you tied the knot?”

Jordy paused, a bit caught off guard by the question. After a moment of reflection, he answered, “Zoe and I married right after university, due to family arrangements. But I consider myself lucky. I found a kind, cheerful wife. We’ve been through a lot together over the years.”

A faraway look crossed Jordy’s face as he reminisced, his emotions stirring.

Before Brook could respond, Zoe entered, her voice cutting through the moment. “What are you two talking about so seriously? I’ve made coffee. Let’s enjoy it while we chat.”

With that, any further discussion about marriage was put on hold.

Jordy stood up, gesturing for Brook to follow him back to the living room. Once they were settled, the topic of marriage surfaced again. Noticing the hesitation in Brook’s eyes, Zoe, with a playful glint in her eye, teased, “Brook, are you having second thoughts about Corrie? If you really care for her, why are you dragging your feet?”

Jordy quickly interjected, his voice defensive. “What’s wrong with Corrie? She comes from a good family, she’s beautiful, hardworking, and knows how to handle herself.”

Zoe shot him a pointed look before replying, “She was chosen by Enzo for Brook. Now that he’s gone, if Brook isn’t happy with her, he could consider ending the engagement. The Bates family may have influence, but in Watscar, they’re not exactly a heavyweight.”

Zoe said with quiet assurance, “After all, in the world of elite families, being beautiful, capable, and well-connected is the bare minimum, isn’t it? Corrie, in the grand scheme of things, is hardly irreplaceable. Brook, you must be cautious when choosing a life partner. It’s essential that you choose wisely.”

Jordy quickly countered, “But Enzo picked Corrie. Surely, she must be a suitable choice. And doesn’t marriage depend on the heart’s inclination? What if Brook does have feelings for her? Are you suggesting we break apart a relationship built on affection?”

Zoe paused, her brow furrowing ever so slightly. Jordy's words carried weight, and she contemplated them for a moment. She turned to Brook, her voice steady. "If you truly care for Corrie, then what I said earlier is irrelevant."

Brook exchanged a knowing glance with Jordy, who appeared to hold his breath, eagerly awaiting his answer. With a gentle smile, Brook responded, "Corrie isn't the one for me. In fact, I find her rather unappealing."

Jordy's face darkened, the words striking him like a blow. "Why such animosity towards Corrie? To dislike someone without cause is utterly inappropriate!"

Brook sighed and replied, "Firstly, my union with Corrie was orchestrated by my grandpa. There's no emotional bond between us; I agreed to it out of respect for his wishes. Secondly..."

He hesitated, a shadow crossing his face. Zoe noticed the hesitation, sensing there was more to the story. "Is there something you're holding back?" she asked.

Brook shifted uncomfortably. "Corrie leads a rather chaotic life. Her personal affairs are... numerous."

Chapter 1608:

Zoe's eyes widened in shock. "What? Is she really that kind of person?" Jordy, on the other hand, went pale, anxiety creeping over him as he focused intently on Brook.

Brook, seemingly enjoying the discomfort he was causing, let the silence stretch between them before finally continuing, "If I were to marry her, I'd be constantly wondering how many times she would betray me. Marrying her would only bring me misery."

Zoe, incensed, slammed her hand onto the table. "How could she behave this way? This is utterly scandalous!" Her voice was sharp, like the crack of thunder in a storm. "In all the women who've married into the Owen family, none have ever displayed such disgrace!"

Jordy opened his mouth, but the force of Zoe's fury left him speechless. He lowered his gaze, his discomfort palpable.

Zoe's indignation was still simmering. "She's not even married yet, and she's already shown such a lack of decorum. One can only imagine what she would be like after marriage."

Jordy, his voice barely a whisper, ventured, "But... what if Corrie changes once she's married? What if she stops her... affairs?"

Zoe's tone was scornful. "Change? Do you honestly believe that a woman who has lived a certain way for so long will suddenly transform after marriage? Trusting such a woman to become faithful is like hoping a leopard will change its spots!"

Jordy, though taken aback, tried to argue, "But isn't it common for people to settle down after marriage?"

Zoe let out a humorless laugh. "As if marriage could be a magic cure! If it were that simple, there wouldn't be cheating or divorce. Everyone would be the epitome of a perfect couple!"

Jordy fell silent, unable to muster a response.

Brook, watching the exchange from the sidelines, couldn't suppress a grin, though he tried to remain composed.

Zoe took a deep breath, her tone softening somewhat. "Brook, now that your grandpa is no longer here, and with only your mother by your side, the Bates family might try to take advantage of your situation if you try to end things with Corrie. How about this? When you're ready to put an end to it, let me know. Jordy and I will step in and handle the negotiations with the Bates family on your behalf."

Brook was taken aback by her offer, a surge of relief flooding through him. He tried to temper his gratitude. "Thank you so much!"

Zoe smiled warmly. "You're welcome. We're family, Brook." She glanced at the clock. "Now, let's not linger here. Come on, wash up and get ready for dinner. You must be starving, aren't you?"

"I am indeed," Brook replied, exaggerating slightly as he clutched his stomach. "I came straight here from work, and I'm famished!"

Zoe's expression softened in sympathy. She patted him on the shoulder, a reassuring gesture. "You've had a lot to shoulder at such a young age. It's no small feat, taking on the responsibilities of the family. Among the younger generation, there are few who stand out like you."

Brook gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. I'll manage the company. I won't let you down."

Chapter 1609:

Zoe's eyes lingered on him with a mixture of pride and affection. Among all the younger generation, Brook held a special place in her heart. He was more approachable than Jayden, more composed and perceptive than Greg or Debora.

Brook headed to the restroom.

At that moment, Jordy recalled the real reason he was supposed to meet Brook—to convince him to marry Corrie. But everything had gone sideways once Zoe got involved. Instead of securing the engagement, he was now left to negotiate its cancellation with the Bates family. The mere thought of it sent a pounding ache through his head.

"How could you just agree to end Brook's relationship with Corrie?" Jordy asked Zoe. "Corrie and Brook aren't married yet, but they're financially tied. If their relationship ends, what happens to all that?"

Zoe retorted, "What's your deal? Why are you so obsessed with the money? Shouldn't Brook's happiness come first? If he stays with Corrie, he'll be miserable for the rest of his life!"

Jordy felt cornered.

He did care about Brook's future happiness, but his promise to Corrie weighed just as heavily on him.

What was supposed to be a simple nudge toward marriage had spiraled into a mess he couldn't control.

Unable to voice his frustration, he sat silently, pushing his food around his plate while Zoe chatted aimlessly.

Holding on to a tiny bit of hope, Jordy tried to discuss the possible benefits of Brook and Corrie's marriage. But Zoe quickly shut him down. The way Jordy was acting made no sense to her—how could he be so indifferent to Brook's happiness? She didn't hold back; a long, pointed lecture followed, each word sharper than the last.

Once dinner was over, Brook couldn't get out of there fast enough. Staying a moment longer would've been too much—he felt the laughter bubbling up, ready to spill over.

When he first found out about Jordy's affair with Corrie, he had imagined him to be a calculating genius, cool under pressure. But now, he saw the truth: Jordy was just a coward, hiding everything from Zoe and too afraid to expose his secret.

Alone in his car, Brook finally allowed himself to laugh. The sound filled the space, and soon, tears of amusement streamed down his face.

Brook couldn't help but imagine Corrie's reaction when Jordy, of all people, showed up to call off the engagement.

Corrie had wasted so much time and energy on Jordy. After everything, she was probably ready to strangle him.

Eventually, the laughter faded, and Brook, still shaking his head, fastened his seatbelt before driving off.

As he approached his neighborhood, something on the side of the road caught his attention—a figure, swaying unsteadily, as though ready to collapse.

She seemed on the edge, as if one more step might bring her down.

This was an affluent area, far from where someone who looked like she had nothing should be.

Chapter 1610:



With sharp focus, Brook eased off the accelerator, using his headlights to get a clearer look at the figure ahead.

As he drew closer, the woman seemed to sense him, glancing up, her gaze meeting his as he approached.

What he saw next completely threw him off guard—a face that had haunted his thoughts for far too long.

Jennie turned slowly, her face unreadable. Her hair was tangled and wild, but it couldn't hide the beauty that still shone through.

The moment Jennie appeared in his line of sight, Brook's heart skipped a beat. Without thinking, he slammed on the brakes, leaped out of the car, and rushed to her, his hands trembling as he desperately searched for any visible injuries.

"Jennie! I'm so glad!" His voice cracked with excitement, oblivious to Corrie watching from a distance.

Seeing him, Jennie's lips curled into a faint, weary smile. "It's so good... to finally see you."

Her words faded as her eyelids fluttered, and with a soft sigh, she collapsed against him.

Brook's arms shot out to catch her, feeling the heat radiating from her fevered skin. His eyes dropped to her feet, where the worn, nearly shredded shoes barely clung to her battered soles, exposing raw, bleeding blisters.

"Damn that Corrie!" Brook hissed, his voice laced with fury.

He knew Corrie was getting restless and would eventually release Jennie, planning to use her as a pawn. What he hadn't expected was the extent of Corrie's cruelty, as Jennie appeared to have been deeply tormented by her.

Without thinking twice, Brook lifted Jennie into his arms and raced to the hospital, his mind focused solely on getting her help. It wasn't until he'd handed her over to the doctors that he realized he still needed to call Jayden.

As soon as Jayden was alerted, he mobilized a team to gather security footage, determined to figure out what had happened.

The cameras around Brook's villa had turned up nothing, but other footage painted a clearer picture: Jennie had been walking for an entire day just to reach him.

"This was no accident," Jayden said. "Corrie set this up. She wanted to see how you'd react. I wouldn't be surprised if her car was waiting somewhere close when you found Jennie."

Brook's jaw clenched. "Let her watch all she wants. I'm the one pulling the strings here, not her."

As the first light of dawn streamed through the window, Jennie blinked awake, her gaze settling on the stark white ceiling above. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if she had ascended to heaven. But as her surroundings came into focus, reality set in—she was in a hospital.

Before she could piece together how she had ended up there, the door to her ward swung open. Elyse stepped inside, wearing a smile.

"You're finally awake, Jennie," Elyse said, her tone light and friendly.

Trailing behind her was Driscoll, carrying a breakfast tray. His smile was just as kind, radiating a sense of familiarity Jennie couldn't quite place.