

Heiress 351

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Behind Zoe was the grand door to the banquet hall. From her perspective, it seemed like Justin's gaze was fixated on her.

"Justin." Zoe's eyes lit up with excitement as she approached him.

Suddenly, a strong scent of roses filled the air-vibrant, bold, and a tad dangerous.

Click, click, click!

The sharp and forceful clicks of high heels passed by Zoe, making her heart race. The intense presence felt so overwhelming that she hesitated to even breathe.

Everyone was stunned, especially Justin, who remained frozen in place. His ink-black pupils locked onto Bella's cold and delicate face.

Her eyebrows formed a picturesque arch, and her face bore the chill of frost. Only her lips, painted in fiery red, moved like flames, dancing restlessly on Justin's heart.

Bella's tailored black suit bestowed upon her an understated elegance. Yet, with delicate features that couldn't go unnoticed, she naturally stood out in the crowd.

Those around her quickly engaged in discussions about Bella's unexpected presence. Shannon and Bethany shuddered upon seeing the appearance of this uninvited guest.

Suddenly, a low exclamation could be heard.

"I know who she is! Several well-known magazines and websites interviewed her some time ago. She's the daughter of Wyatt Thompson, chairman of the KS Group! She's now the general manager of the

KS World Hotel.”

“Yes, yes, yes! I remember now! Her name is Bella Thompson!”

“Is she the one who has been challenging Mr. Salvador? This woman is stunning, but she doesn’t seem like an easy opponent.”

“Just look at her sharp eyes. I can tell at a glance that she’s a strong career woman. She just exudes power and elegance, like a queen!”

“Yeah, I think she and Mr. Salvador make a perfect match. Why be enemies when they could be a power couple?”

When Justin heard these nonsensical words, his heart still simmered with undisclosed anger. Surprisingly, upon hearing the last sentence, his frown softened a bit. Inexplicably, that sounded pleasant to his ears.

As Bella walked past Zoe and stole all the attention that belonged to her, Zoe’s anger reached a boiling point. The corners of her eyes turned scarlet, and she felt as if her soul had

momentarily left her body.

Yet, what stung Zoe even more was the fiery intensity in Justin’s gaze, which was fixed on Bella at that very moment. In her memory, his eyes were usually as somber as a deep pool. She had never witnessed him looking at a woman with such passion and desire. ‘Did he still harbor feelings for Bella? Could he be in love with her?’

“Ms. Wang, Mr. Salvador, I hope you don’t mind me showing up uninvited.”

Bella stood before them with calm grace. Her red lips curled into a warm and soothing smile.

“Of course, I won’t mind if you join us, Ms. Thompson. I welcome your presence.” Justin responded with a hint of complexity, curling his lips slightly. “If I had known you were

coming, I would have sent you an invitation too.”

Bella, smiling with wide-open eyes, replied, “Why bother? Mr. Salvador, you should know that if I show up at this time, I’m definitely not here to attend the dinner.”

Justin’s cold and handsome face suddenly darkened.

Sweat dripped down Ian’s forehead, and he quickly took out his phone to message the security guards outside.

[Ian: What’s going on?!]

[Security: Sorry, Mr. Harris! We don’t know where Ms. Thompson came from...]

[Ian: What kind of excuse is that?! Did she pop out from the ground?!] [Security: It’s our negligence. We’ll escort Ms. Thompson out right away!]

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[Ian: Are you out of your mind?! That lady is the daughter of Hatchbay’s wealthiest man, Wyatt Thompson. She’s also someone Mr. Salvador cares a lot about! If you dare touch her, Mr. Salvador will eat you alive! Pay more attention to the surroundings and report any issues. promptly!]

“OMG!”

Ada Wang suddenly covered her mouth in a gasp as her eyes brightened. “Ms. Thompson, the brooch you’re wearing on your chest... Is that Alexa’s creation, ‘The Twilight God’?”

“Yes, it is. This brooch is indeed ‘The Twilight God’,” Bella replied with a smile.

Due to Bella’s striking looks, everyone was busy watching her and did not notice the yellow- diamond brooch adorning her chest-“The Twilight God”. It won gold in the International Jewelry Design Competition.

“Jewelry designed by Alexa?! Dazzling! I really want to touch it!”

“Didn’t you read the news before? This brooch is valued at over a billion dollars! The 10-carat yellow diamond alone is worth tens of millions of dollars. It’s a dream treasure for countless jewelry collectors!”

“This extravagance is expected of the daughter of Hatchbay’s richest man!”

“That piece of jade on Shannon’s neck is also quite valuable, but it’s lacking compared to Alexa’s work.”

Shannon was infuriated. She choked and stifled a cough.

‘Lacking?!’

Gregory purchased this imperial green jadeite for Shannon. It was the most presentable piece. among all her jewelry, but those people dare say it was lacking?!

In her heart, Shannon cursed Rosalind and the Gold family. If she had not paid off the Gold family’s debts, she would not have suffered such mockery tonight.

“Ms. Thompson, I’ve always been searching for ‘The Twilight God’. Two years ago, after witnessing its charm at an exhibition, I just couldn’t forget about it. I never expected to find it in your possession!” Ada could not help but sigh with admiration.

Zoe’s anger filled her chest. Her sharp gaze was like a dagger that almost pierced through Bella.

She could not decide what to envy about this woman first-Bella's beautiful features or the fact that she wore jewelry that even international superstars couldn't obtain. Or perhaps Zoe envied the intense gaze from Justin that Bella received.

"Two years ago, I was at a low point in my life and couldn't get over the grief, so I thought about buying some jewelry as a pick-me-up."

Bella gently smiled and said nonchalantly, "Coincidentally, I saw this piece at the exhibition and fell in love with it the moment I saw it. My bad mood was instantly healed. So I bought it without hesitation."/

Her words stirred Justin's heart and lungs like a knife, to the point he dared not look into

Bella's bright eyes.

Two years ago was precisely when he was busy running around for Rosalind, creating "The Flaming Heart".

Whatever Rosalind desired, Justin would eagerly present it to her as a surprise, even if she did not ask for it.

Yet Justin remained indifferent to whatever Bella desired.

Justin continued to gaze deeply at Bella, but she never spared him more than a glance.

It seemed that she still resented him.

Her resentment toward him meant that she had not gotten over him.

"Jewelry personally designed by Alexa is something you can't buy with money!"

Ada looked at Bella with admiration and said, "This is evident that you must be passionate about charity and public welfare, Ms. Thompson."

Bella smiled gracefully, lowered her gaze, and took off the expensive 'Twilight God' from her chest. She pulled a silk handkerchief from her pocket, placed the brooch in her palm, and offered it to Ada with both hands.

"Ms. Thompson, what are you doing?"

"I think 'The Twilight God' suits your heroic and unquestionable temperament better, Ms. Wang. I hope you don't mind me gifting this brooch to you at our first meeting."

Shock and astonishment spread among the crowd.

Bethany, Shannon, and Zoe gaped in disbelief.

This was jewelry worth millions of dollars, yet Bella did not even flinch when she gave it away casually.

Only a crazy rich person would do this!

Justin tightly pursed his lips together. The palm of his clenched fist oozed sweat.

'Bella, what kind of trick are you playing this time?!

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Ada felt a surge of surprise and excitement, almost at a loss for words! She had pleaded with everyone she knew to help her get a piece of jewelry designed by Alexa, but so far, nothing has

worked out.

In a surprising turn of events, Bella presented her with Alexa's brooch as a gift. Thus, Ada was thrilled.

"No, no, no... Ms. Thompson, I appreciate your kindness, but this gift is too precious. I really can't accept it," Ada expressed. Despite genuinely liking it, she hesitated out of pride and politely declined.

"The brooch once consoled my wounded soul, but now I have completely emerged from the shadows, and in the future, I will never tread the same path again."

Bella smiled lightly, her gaze incredibly resolute. "So, this gift is more of a beautiful wish. It once helped me overcome my sadness, and I hope this little thing will bring you the best of luck in the future."

Justin's pupils contracted. He felt a piercing pain, as if his chest had been struck. His heart ached and went numb.

The fleeting hidden joy from moments ago was ruthlessly extinguished by Bella with a bucket of icy water, chilling to the core.

"Oh! Well then... Ms. Thompson, I'll accept your generous gift. Thank you so much! I really appreciate it." Ada exclaimed, cradling the brooch that Bella had once again bestowed with sacred value. Her grin was so wide that she could not close her mouth.

Goodness, was this still the aloof international superstar? What a drastic transformation!

"Why?!" Bethany could not contain her anger as she turned to Shannon and said, "Mom, our family has spent a fortune to set up this stage. Why should we let this wretched woman show off here? It's just a worthless brooch. We can afford to give her the same! You should think of a solution to get that bitch out of here!"

"A solution? Why should I bother coming up with a solution?"

Shannon's eyes darkened as her lips curled into a sinister smile. "Bella is a jinx. Just now, that bastard used Ada to mock me. Now, he's getting what he deserves."

Though Bethany felt annoyed, she could not help but be suspicious.

Before the divorce, Bella used to be terrified of Justin, like a startled bird. A slight furrow in his brows would make her feel troubled for days. Now, after the divorce, it seemed like she had completely turned the tables, toying with Justin at her fingertips.

If Bella had displayed this skill earlier, Rosalind might not even be in the picture.

“Ms. Bella Thompson!”

Zoe finally became indignant, thinking herself righteous as she stepped in front of Bella. With a fake smile, she said, “Of all the times you could present Ms. Wang with your gift, why choose tonight at the Salvadors’ welcoming banquet? Are you trying to steal the limelight?”

When Justin saw Zoe unnecessarily defending him, his eyes darkened.

“If presenting a gift is stealing the limelight from Mr. Salvador, I think that you might be underestimating Mr. Salvador’s charm, Ms. Hoffman.”

Bella narrowed her beautiful eyes. “The Salvadors are the hosts of this welcoming banquet. Mr. Salvador is right here to witness everything, and he hasn’t objected to anything. Ms. Hoffman, don’t you

think that you are overstepping your boundaries as a guest?”

Zoe was so enraged that her eyes seemed ready to spew fire, but with so many people watching, she could not afford to lose her composure.

Bella let out a faint sigh and said apologetically to Ada, “Ms. Wang, it seems I’m not very welcome here, and I understand completely. After all, Salvador Corporation and KS Group have always been business rivals. My appearance is indeed abrupt. Since I’ve delivered my gift, I won’t intrude any longer. I’ll take my leave now.”

With that, she turned to leave.

“Ms. Thompson, wait!” Ada hurriedly approached Bella. “I would like to have an in-depth discussion with you about Alexa Jewelry. Do you have time tonight?”

“Of course. KS World Hotel has prepared exquisite Savrow cuisine and fine wine for you, Ms. Wang. Why don’t we chat over dinner?” Bella replied.

The crowd was stunned. Bella Thompson’s audacity was astonishing. She was openly poaching the star of the show at the Salvadors’ event!

Justin felt a pang in his chest. Just as he was about to stop Ada, Ada happened to glance at him and offer him a slightly apologetic smile. “Mr. Salvador, I have some unexpected matters to attend to, so I’m afraid I have to leave early tonight. I wish you all a pleasant time ahead.”

Everyone was dumbfounded.

Was that all Ada had to say?! This woman, just as rumored, only did as she pleased.

“Mr. Salvador, I don’t mind arranging another seat at the table for you. Would you like to join the feast?” Bella smiled and extended an invitation to Justin, but there was no hint of warmth in her eyes.

Justin clenched his teeth, his heart pounding against his ribs. Just as he was about to say something, Bella suddenly laughed. “Well, with so many guests here tonight, it seems you already have your hands full, Mr. Salvador. Perhaps next time, if there’s a chance.”

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In front of all the attendees, Bella left the banquet hall with Ada Wang as if they were long-lost friends. The entire venue fell into an awkward and suffocating silence.

Justin stared intensely at Bella's delicate figure with red

eyes.

Last time, she snatched his project. This time, she snatched his guest.

He thought, 'Bella, you're not at all like a wealthy heiress, but rather like a bandit who forcefully takes what she wants! You're really something!'

Justin instinctively covered his chest, feeling an emptiness inside, as if Bella had also taken something on the inside.

At the entrance of the Salvador Hotel, a few reporters remained gathered.

Logically, Ada would have already checked in, and after the banquet, she should have gone straight back to the presidential suite to rest. These reporters waiting here seemed to be wasting their time and should have gone home long ago.

However, the number of reporters did not seem much less than before the banquet started, which was unusual. The reason being that these reporters were all tipped by Steven under the pretext of "a guarantee of shocking news".

Some reporters had become impatient and complained about waiting.

"Why are we waiting here in this freezing weather? What other big story could happen tonight?"

"I guess KS Group isn't going to give up and wants to make some last-ditch effort."

"What can they do if they don't give up? This is Savrow, not Hatchbay. A foreign behemoth can't necessarily suppress a local top dog. Anyway, the Salvador family is the top dog in Savrow, and KS Group is just an outsider. They're bound to face difficulties. Moreover, how could Bella Thompson compete with Mr. Salvador?"

“Tsk, you’re spot on! Mr. Salvador might be a fool in matters of the heart, but in business, he’s top-notch. KS Group can’t hold a candle to Salvador Corporation in Savrow!”

Suddenly, a loud honk startled everyone. The reporters turned to look in the direction of the headlights, only to see a dark green, top-of-the-line Rolls-Royce slowly approaching. It smoothly came to a halt in front of the hotel entrance.

Seeing this fancy car, the reporters thought another celebrity had arrived and began vigorously taking photos.

When the car door opened, Steven, dressed in a well-fitted suit, descended. The flashes abruptly stopped, leaving the journalists disappointed. Although this man was quite handsome, good looks alone couldn’t make headlines.

“Ah! Ada Wang! Ada Wang is coming out!” Someone in the crowd shouted. The reporters’ attention once again focused on the hotel entrance.

Steven had opened the door to the backseat. His gaze was focused in the same direction

everyone else was staring.

Bella and Ada strolled side-by-side as the camera flashes became frantic.

“What?! Ada Wang left the Salvadors’ party for Bella?!”

“The banquet hasn’t even started yet, but their guest of honor has already been stolen away. Mr. Salvador must be so embarrassed!”

“OMG! This is a huge headline! The competition between Salvador Corporation and KS Group is truly sensational. Hurry, take pictures!”

The flashes turned the night into day. Tonight, the spotlight on the Salvador Hotel completely shifted to Bella.

The trending topic online had quickly changed from #AdaWangCheckingInAtSalvadorHotel to #BellaThompsonWithAdaWang.

Just as Bella was about to get into the car, a reporter loudly asked a pointed question.

“Ms. Thompson! You’re taking away Mr. Salvador’s distinguished guest so openly. Isn’t this unethical interception?”

Bella paused. Her sharp and fierce gaze lifted and instantly intimidated the reporter who had asked the question. Although she looked demure, she was actually quite imposing.

“Just because Ms. Wang chooses to stay at the Salvador Hotel doesn’t mean I can’t invite her to dinner.” Bella smiled and continued, “Mr. Salvador is magnanimous and open-minded. He has shown no objection to this, so you all speculating about this just makes it seem like he’s quite petty, doesn’t it?”

With that, Bella entered the car. The Rolls-Royce’s engine roared to life and left everyone in the dust.

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At the ballroom, the banquet proceeded. However, Ada Wang’s departure with Bella somewhat dampened the guests’ enthusiasm.

Initially, Zoe had dressed extravagantly to showcase her talents in front of an international superstar. Now, with Ada gone, she had no stage to perform on, and all her preparations were

in vain.

‘This is all Bella’s fault!’ Zoe thought.

Outside the banquet hall, Justin stood by the French windows, an icy aura emanating from him like a frozen sculpture. He stared intensely in the direction the Rolls-Royce departed. Breathing heavily, his fists clenched tightly in the shadows.

“Mr. Salvador, I hate to say it, but it seems like we have been outplayed by Ms. Thompson,” Ian said cautiously as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “The trending topics now are all about KS Group. Plus, the news of Ms. Thompson taking Ada Wang away has already spread. Even the chairman knows about it.”

“Now, everyone is questioning the Salvador Hotel, saying we should not have taken on something beyond our capabilities and doubting whether the overall standard of our hotel has declined,” Ian continued.

The anticipated outcome of Bella’s clever move had come to fruition. Bella’s strategy left her opponent with no breathing room.

Justin gazed wistfully at the tail lights of the Rolls-Royce until they were no longer visible. He asked in a hoarse voice, “Why the sudden change? Weren’t you used to calling her ‘Young Madam’?”

Ian took in a sharp breath, looking a bit flustered. “I call her ‘Ms. Thompson’ because she’s bullying you... ‘Young Madam’ is reserved for when she’s not bullying you.”

“It’s just a title. Call her what you want.”

Justin sighed. His gaze deepened. “Besides, I’m not really upset. Bella has always been like this, hasn’t she?”

Ian was surprised. Every time Justin faced off with Bella, Justin always gritted his teeth in anger. This time, why was he so calm after such a significant incident?

Ian thought, ‘Does Mr. Salvador have some hidden masochistic tendency?’

“Every guest needed an invitation to enter the banquet hall, and the hotel had strict security surveillance. How did Bella manage to get in?” Justin could not help but feel curious.

“Um... I heard that just before the Young Madam entered, there was a brief malfunction in the surveillance system. But the hotel’s network equipment was serviced a few days ago, so it couldn’t have gone bad so quickly. We suspect it might be a hacker attack or some kind of virus.”

“A hacker?” Justin frowned.

Justin thought, ‘Could Bella have been behind this too? Did she have that capability? Or had her brother, once again, played a part in making things worse?’

“Justin!” A sweet voice disrupted Justin’s thoughts. Seeing Zoe rush toward him, he frowned even harder. His mood did not improve, even when he turned to face her.

“Bella is outrageous! How dare she take Ada away in front of you? It’s almost like she wants to humiliate you. She clearly doesn’t have any regard for you!” Zoe stomped her foot and took the opportunity to vent her frustration about Bella.

She understood that men, especially those with high status like Justin, were sensitive about their reputation. They couldn’t tolerate anyone challenging their authority.

However, Justin’s response drained the color from her face.

“You just met her yesterday, so you don’t understand her. Bella has always been like this. She never really cared about my position.”

“Justin, what are you saying...?”

“It doesn’t matter to me. I don’t mind it at all.”

Justin turned to look at Zoe coldly, a hint of displeasure in his eyes. "Ms. Hoffman, I find your actions tonight rather puzzling."

The two words 'Ms. Hoffman' felt like iron rods stabbing her heart, rendering her almost immobile. Justin felt so distant from her.

Was he trying to distance himself from her?!

"This is the Salvadors' banquet, and I am present. Regardless, you shouldn't have been the one standing up for the Salvadors."

"But Justin, I was just trying to help you out!"

Zoe's anxiousness almost made her voice tremble. She clutched Justin's arm. "Are we really going to let that wicked woman run wild at your banquet, let her take away your guest, and turn the Salvadors into a joke in Savrow? She's too arrogant. Why does she think she can act so recklessly? Just because she's your ex-wife?!"

As her words trailed off, Zoe panicked, realizing she might have said too much.

Sure enough, Justin's brow twitched. "I've been married. That's not a secret. But who told you that Bella is my ex-wife?"

"Ryan did!" Zoe lied, her voice sounding strained.

"Bethany told you, right?"

Zoe did not dare answer and bit down on her lips.

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“That is Bella and my private matters. No one else has the right to interfere. She’s started a new life, so please stop bringing up her past connection to me,” Justin said sternly.

Zoe’s heartbeat pounded like a drum, resentment building. The undertone of Justin’s words. was clearly speaking in defense of Bella. ‘He was protecting her privacy, wasn’t he?’

“Ada Wang has left. If you don’t want to perform for the guests tonight, I can send you home. at any time.”

Justin looked away from Zoe’s pale face, pulled back his arm, and left without as much as a second glance. Ian clicked his tongue twice, contemptuously stealing a glance at Zoe. He could not help but wonder if this girl with a sharp tongue was really Ryan’s younger sister. Somehow, she seemed a bit irritating, almost like she was asking for trouble.

“Justin! Justin! Justin Salvador!”

The first two calls went unanswered. Justin did not stop until Zoe used his full name.

“Are you defending Bella because you’ve fallen in love with her? Are you still not over her?” Her voice trembled with anger.

“No, I don’t love her,” Justin replied without hesitation, as if he were afraid that even the slightest delay would reveal some truth he was not aware of.

“Then why do you keep speaking up for her? She doesn’t love you. She toyed with you, took what belongs to you, and then ruined the banquet you’ve worked hard to arrange!”

“She’s rotten to the core! She’s caused nothing but harm to you. Why do you side with her?” Zoe’s voice became increasingly hysterical as she spoke.

She did not have Rosalind’s skill at disguising her emotions. After all, being the cherished daughter of the Hoffman family, Zoe had always gotten whatever she desired. So, she spoke her mind and did as she pleased. Now, for the first time, she had a taste of frustration.

The closer she tried to get to Justin, the more he seemed to retreat, distancing himself from her. When he turned to look at her, his gaze was almost devoid of any warmth.

“You’ve never been married. You probably don’t understand the respect that couples have for each other. Bella was my wife once, so I showed her mercy. What’s the problem with that?” His words pierced through Zoe like an arrow to the heart.

“Even if I don’t love her, she was once my wife. I’m the only one who can speak poorly of her. No one else has that right.”

Cold rain began to fall from the night sky. Carrie sneaked out of Tideview Manor, holding a small teddy bear close to her chest. She walked in the wind and rain before finally hailing a taxi.

By the time she made it to the Salvador Hotel, Carrie’s thin white cotton dress was already soaked. However, the little bear in her arms remained perfectly dry, untouched by the rain.

Suffering from severe social anxiety, Carrie dared not enter through the front door and could only sneak in through the back door of her family’s hotel.

Carrie avoided all the elegantly dressed guests, fidgeting as she hurriedly walked through the corridor.

“Stop right there!” Carrie abruptly halted, her heart pounding in her chest. Despite being Gregory Salvador’s youngest daughter, at that moment, she felt like a thief.

Two patrolling bodyguards approached, disdainfully scrutinizing Carrie for her disheveled appearance and plain clothing.

“This hotel is hosting an important banquet tonight. Stay away!”

“I... I want to see Ada Wang... Please, let me see her. Just one look, and I’ll leave!” Carrie pleaded pitifully.

“No! You’re not allowed to enter without an invitation. Hurry up and leave!” The bodyguard said harshly, reaching out to shoo her away.

“Look around you! Do you think this is a place for poor students like you? Hurry up and get lost!”

Carrie truly liked Ada Wang, so she was extremely determined. Whatever she set her mind to, she would do it, no matter how difficult. Gritting her teeth, Carrie hugged the teddy bear tightly, took a few steps back, and rammed into the bodyguard.

“Ah!” The fragile Carrie was caught by the burly bodyguard. He flung her, along with the teddy bear, away. Carrie closed her eyes and braced for impact, but she did not fall to the ground.

Instead, she landed in a firm and familiar embrace.

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Carrie’s little face paled as her entire body flew straight into the man’s arms. Ryan lowered his eyes, feeling a coolness in his chest. His long lashes trembled slightly.

The dampness from her body blended with his warm skin through his thin black shirt. His breath grew heavy as his arms instinctively tightened around her.

“Carrie?” Ryan called to her in a low and hoarse voice.

Carrie tightly shut her eyes, clutching his smooth lapel and not saying a word.

Ryan could not help but suppress a chuckle. He softly inquired, “Did I hurt you?”

She rested her forehead against his chest and shook her head.

A sense of pity welled up in his heart.

The two security guards, upon witnessing Ryan's grand arrival, immediately straightened up. They hurriedly bowed respectfully and greeted, "Good evening, Mr. Hoffman!"

"What was the meaning of that?" Ryan asked in a lazy tone, still holding Carrie..

"Ah, it's nothing, just a minor issue." The security guard, who was previously rude toward Carrie, now smiled with great enthusiasm. "This young lady is a fan of Ms. Ada Wang, and she insisted on entering without an invitation. We tried to persuade her, but she wouldn't listen, so..."

"So, you resorted to brute force?" Ryan scowled.

"Well, not exactly. We were just doing our job by keeping her out." The bodyguard evaded the question, not willing to admit they had bullied a young girl.

Ryan smirked, then whispered softly into Carrie's ear, "Do you want me to help you settle the score?"

Carrie, still not daring to look at Ryan, nodded slightly but quickly shook her head.

Ryan gave a slight smile as his right hand slipped into his wine-red velvet suit, retrieving his phone to dial Justin's number.

"Hey Justin, can I deal with your employees?" Upon hearing that, the two bodyguards exchanged confused glances.

Ryan slowly moved his hand to the back of Carrie's neck, gently stroking her damp hair. " Good, I'll handle it then."

After ending the call, Ryan steadied Carrie on her feet and raised his hand, gesturing forward.

Suddenly, the well-trained bodyguards from the Hoffman family stepped forward, surrounding the two confused Salvador Hotel bodyguards.

Carrie, unaware of what was happening, stared blankly as Ryan put his hand into his pocket. With a blank expression, he walked into the circle as the Hoffman bodyguards closed in around him, obscuring him from view.

“Ah-!”

“Oof-!”

The Hoffman bodyguards formed a seamless and impenetrable barrier, so Carrie could not see what Ryan was doing, but she could hear screams that made her shudder.

After what felt like a lifetime, Ryan finally stopped and coldly glared at the two battered men kneeling before him. He took a handkerchief from a bodyguard and casually wiped the blood off his hands.

“If you can’t even recognize Ms. Salvador, then what’s the point of keeping your eyes?”

The two terrified bodyguards trembled as they looked toward Carrie. Then, in unison, they bowed in front of Carrie with their heads touching the floor.

“Ms. Salvador, forgive us! Forgive us, please! We’ve been ignorant! Please spare us!”

In Savrow, everyone knew that the Hoffman family was involved in both legal and shady dealings. Offending the Hoffman family meant a bleak future in Savrow.

“I’ll take care of this small matter. There’s no need to trouble your boss,” Ryan declared.

His eyes still held a hint of amusement as he casually tossed the soiled handkerchief onto their faces. “Leave Salvador Corporation and get out of Savrow. If my people catch sight of you in this territory again, you won’t be leaving with your limbs attached.”

“Thank you! Thank you, Mr. Hoffman! Thank you!”

The two men were escorted out by the Hoffman bodyguards, who sobbed and thanked Ryan profusely. Carrie pressed her lips together, standing timidly in place.

Ryan approached her again, bending down to meet her eyes with a mischievous look on his face. “Carrie, you’re quite mysterious. Even your family’s employees didn’t recognize you.” “Did you have to go that far?” Carrie murmured softly, taking a small step back.

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“Did I push it too far?” Ryan questioned, his eyes narrowing.

Carrie glanced downward and nodded in response.

“Well, I still think it wasn’t sufficient.”

Observing her pitiable expression, Ryan couldn’t help but pat her head. “You’re Justin’s sister, and they were mistreating you! Of course, I had to stand up for you. That was me being gentle because I didn’t want to frighten you.”

‘So warm. So comforting.’ Carrie, feeling the warmth of Ryan’s hand on her head, could not resist shrugging her shoulders and purring like a kitten.

Coincidentally, Bethany walked out of the banquet hall and witnessed the entire incident. She never expected her usually obedient sister to come all the way here.”

Bethany thought, ‘That little slut! I turn my back for a moment, and she’s already trying to seduce my man. How audacious!’

Bethany, furious and wide-eyed, took a step forward but hesitated when she noticed Ryan still present. She did not want to act impulsively and risk further alienating her crush. After all, she had picked up a few tricks after spending all that time with Rosalind. At the very least, she was more composed than before. Thus, she hid in the shadows and observed them.

Ryan noticed Bethany's damp hair and the mud-spattered white dress. He removed his luxurious red velvet suit and draped it over Carrie's slender shoulders. Bethany gritted her teeth, seething with jealousy at the sight of Ryan's caring gesture toward that fool. Her face was twisted with jealousy.

"Why are you in such a state? Didn't your driver bring you here?" Ryan inquired with concern. "I came here secretly. No one knows," Carrie replied honestly.

"Secretly?" Ryan frowned, perplexed.

"Sir..."

Carrie did not know Ryan's name, nor did she remember the passionate kisses under the starry sky that night on Nigel's birthday.

"Carrie, my name is Ryan Hoffman. I'm your brother's best friend."

Ryan's smile deepened. "You can call me Ryan."

'Ryan... Ryan?!'

Carrie recalled Bethany's threats and abuse, every word circling this man's name. 'Is he that Ryan?!'

Fear struck her like lightning, but Ryan remained oblivious to her unease. Instead, he firmly held her cold hand and smiled. "I'll get someone to bring you a change of clothes."

"No, No need..."

“Don’t be shy with me. Your brother and I are best friends, so his sister is like my sister. Come on, let me find someone to help you change.”

Ryan guided her forward, still holding her hand.

‘Ryan... Ryan.’

Carrie was not naive. Being led by an unfamiliar man made her uncomfortable, yet she did not dare to resist.

She tightened her hand in his palm and asked, “Do you treat my sister the same way you treat me? She’s also Justin’s sister...”

“Bethany? Is she worth it?” Ryan thought.

“No.” Ryan lowered his gaze, looking at her intently with a bright smile. “I’m only like this with you.”

Bethany heard every word and felt ready to explode. Her gaze turned into knives, slicing through Carrie.

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Ryan booked a presidential suite at the hotel and instructed his female secretary to swiftly purchase a discreet evening gown for Carrie to change into as soon as possible.

As Carrie entered the room to change, he remained seated on the sofa, crossing his legs and tapping on his knee. If he had opted for a black suit for the evening, he might have resembled a groom patiently awaiting his bride to try on wedding dresses.

Before long, the door opened.

The secretary warmly smiled as Carrie shyly emerged from the room. "Mr. Hoffman, Ms. Salvador is ready."

Ryan lazily turned his head and observed Carrie approaching him hesitantly, elegantly dressed in a wine-red lace evening gown. Her eyes sparkled with innocence, subtly tinged with a hint of confusion.

He was momentarily taken aback, and his gaze subtly deepened.

In Ryan's world of extravagance and debauchery, he had encountered a myriad of women, but never before had he beheld eyes so untainted.

Ryan's gaze appeared to linger for a moment too long, staining her innocent eyes.

"Tsk, why did you choose such an old-fashioned color? She's so young! Shouldn't she wear something more youthful?" Ryan chastised his secretary, though his gaze was fixed on Carrie's face. "You've been with me for so long. Why is your taste still so unrefined?"

The secretary knew that Ryan was seemingly laid-back but meticulous about the smallest details. She blushed shyly and was about to apologize.

Carrie spoke candidly. "Ryan, I really like this color, but red doesn't suit you at all. It makes you look dark..."

The female secretary behind Carrie looked visibly startled.

Ryan's expression darkened at that moment. Apart from Bella, no woman had dared to openly critique him in such a manner.

Truth be told, he was confident in his looks and considered himself second to none.

nationwide. Only Justin dared to claim the top spot!

“Considering you’re Justin’s little sister, I’ll let it slide,” Ryan admitted, feeling uneasy. His voice was slightly stiff.

“Ryan, are you angry?” Carrie asked, genuinely concerned.

Feeling a bit flustered, Carrie timidly continued, “So, if I were to say that you look like a ball of coal in red, would you scold me or hit me?”

The female secretary could no longer contain herself and covered her mouth before bursting into laughter.

Ryan, the heartthrob of countless women, had been dubbed a ball of coal in the eyes of this girl. How audacious of her!

Ryan widened his eyes, struggling to catch his breath. He was so furious that he almost choked.

He approached Carrie calmly, his tall figure casting a shadow over her. It made her and her teddy bear seem small and helpless.

Bending down slowly, he raised his hand. Carrie instinctively closed her eyes and tightened her grip on the teddy bear.

A gentle smile spread across Ryan’s lips, and he lightly flicked her forehead with his fingertips. “You’re right. I’m going to hit you. Did that hurt?”

“Uh...” Carrie rubbed her forehead with her hand and shook her head.

“Next time, if you dare mock me again, I won’t go easy on you,” Ryan playfully scolded, as if teasing a child.

The chaos caused by Bella required Justin to step out and handle it. Thus, he left the banquet in Ian’s capable hands and temporarily left the hotel.

With Ada Wang taken away by Bella and Justin absent, Zoe felt her carefully laid-out plans fall apart. Frustrated, she downed two glasses of wine. Then, with an annoyed huff, she walked up to the stage and sat at the piano.

Initially, the guests were engaged in casual conversation, paying no attention to this resentful woman. Suddenly-

A loud “clang” echoed as Zoe angrily pressed down on the piano keys, startling everyone. All eyes turned to the stage, some with frowns on their faces.

Chapter 360

“What’s going on?”

“Yeah, seriously. How can she behave so rudely? Doesn’t she have any manners?”

Zoe Hoffman was indeed arrogant, unruly, and spoiled. The more she thought about Justin’s words, the more furious she became. She did not care about the occasion and just wanted to throw a tantrum.

However, she was surrounded by Savrow’s upper society at the moment. Being a Hoffman, Zoe should not disregard her image.

Thus, she gritted her teeth, feigned composure, and coughed lightly. Then, she skillfully began to play Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 in C minor to ease the awkwardness.

Zoe was a top student at the Royal Academy of Music in Inalia. With her agile fingers, the piano piece flowed with delight, and accompanying it was the release of her fluctuating emotions. The audience was immersed in the music, forgetting her earlier gaffe. Bethany, holding her long gown, stormed back into the banquet hall. She returned to Shannon’s side. “Mom! Carrie is here!”

Shannon was surprised. “What? Where?”

“I just saw her with Mr. Hoffman. He even patted her head and gave her his own jacket!”

Bethany’s eyes were bloodshot and were about to shed tears. “Mom, do you really think Carrie is a fool? She’s sharp, but she pretends to be innocent to deceive us. She’s set her sights on Mr. Hoffman from the start! Why is she so despicable?!”

“You’re a fool. Did you throw away all the etiquette and ladylike qualities you learned in elementary school?” Shannon frowned, discreetly pinching her. “Carrie is your sister! You’re both my daughters, so

don’t speak ill of her in the future!”

Bethany was infuriated. Trembling with anger, she bit her lip and remained silent.

She felt that Shannon’s words were not necessarily in defense of Carrie but rather a refusal to admit she had given birth to an autistic daughter.

“Mom, what should I do?” Bethany anxiously asked, clutching Shannon’s arm. “I finally got Bella to break up with Ryan, and now my sister is coming to undermine me! He doesn’t like me much to begin with, and now there’s even less hope for me to marry into the Hoffman family!”

“Don’t worry, Carrie won’t get in your way. I think you’ve misunderstood her. She wouldn’t have such intentions. Later, go call Ian and ask him to quickly send someone to find Carrie and bring her back.” Shannon did not really see this as a serious matter. After all, she had tight control over her daughters for so many years.

Carrie’s mental state made it challenging for her to marry well. However, Shannon was determined to present her in the best light and find her a match from a higher social class. Ideally, this would also benefit Shannon, ensuring her efforts in raising her seemingly foolish daughter were not in vain.

“Ms. Hoffman doesn’t seem to have a good temper,” Shannon remarked casually as she

watched Zoe passionately play the piano on stage.

“Mom, honestly, her temper stinks like a pile of crap!” Bethany, no longer pretending in front of her mother, whispered, “Compared to Rosalind, she’s far worse. She’s like a powder keg, ready to explode at any moment!”

“Good,” Shannon said, as she gazed at Zoe on the stage with cold eyes.

“Good?” Bethany questioned. “What’s ‘good’ about this?”

“People with a strong temper and outward emotions tend to be less cunning. They’re easier to manipulate. Plus, Zoe only wants to be Justin’s wife. She’s been pampered since she was young and lacks nothing. She has a simple mindset and is just a bit possessive,” Shannon explained, coldly snorting. “On the other hand, someone like Rosalind, who sweet-talks you while harboring deceit, is much harder to deal with.”

As Shannon spoke, the heavy doors of the banquet hall were pushed open.

Zoe was immersed in her own piano performance, completely unaware that the guests’ attention had shifted away from her toward the entrance. Carrie, under the protection of Ryan’s bodyguards, walked in hesitantly with her head lowered.

“Oh, my! Who’s the petite lady beside Mr. Hoffman? Why have I never seen her before?” Some gossip-loving elite women observed Carrie and murmured to each other.

“Probably a new love interest. After all, Mr. Hoffman changes women like he changes his clothes. I heard the longest a woman stayed by his side was a month, and nobody has broken that record yet.’

“She’s quite pretty, but I remember Mr. Hoffman always prefers the sexy and glamorous type. She seems different from his usual taste...”

“Personally, I think this girl is more beautiful than Zoe Hoffman on the stage and definitely better-looking than Bethany Salvador. You men not only lack Mr. Hoffman’s wealth, but you also lack his taste. The lady by Mr. Hoffman’s side is a top-quality gem, not some fake!”

“Now that I think about it, Mr. Hoffman’s taste in women is definitely much better than Mr. Salvador’s. This young lady looks quite honest. She definitely won’t be cheating on Mr. Hoffman...”

Bethany, hearing the discussions about Ryan and Carrie, turned red in anger. Her gums even hurt from clenching her teeth too hard. Meanwhile, Shannon’s expression had turned to disdain.