Midnight III 211

Chapter 1693 - 211: Who Do You Think You Are?

Nancy carried Clark into the dining room, and Crystal followed them. There was a high chair at the foot of the table for Clark. His mother sat to his left, and Crystal sat to his right.

As Nancy dished food onto Clark's plate, he smiled and said, "Thank you, Mommy. You are the best cook in the whole world."

"And you are the best son in the world." Nancy smiled. She kissed him on the cheek and said, "Now, eat up quick before it gets cold."

Before Clark could begin to eat, though, Paul walked into the room. He approached the head of the table and sat down. The other three watched him carefully and a little impatiently.

Now that he had joined them, they knew they could not eat until he started eating. That was one of his rules.

Paul looked over the food that Nancy had prepared, and he grimaced when he noticed that the dishes were all made to Clark's liking. He was used to eating delicious food, and he was very particular about what he ate. He typically did not eat "children's food," and because it was his birthday, he was particularly put off by it.

Did she forget my birthday? - Paul wondered. He considered flipping the table but thought better of it. Finally, he put some food on his plate and started eating. Some of the dishes were too salty, some were too light, and others were hard to swallow, and he began to think that she had intentionally prepared them as disgusting as he'd thought it would be.

After spitting out the food that was in his mouth, Paul called one of the servants over and said, "Get this food out of my sight. All of it. Throw it in the garbage."

Nancy was helping Clark with his food when she heard that, and her smile froze. She looked up and glared defiantly at Paul.

"What?" Paul hissed. "Do you have a problem?"

"I made this breakfast," Nancy replied.

"Who do you think you are?"

Paul: "This is my home, and this food is not to my taste."

Nancy: "Well, I used to cook to your taste, but you always left us waiting. The food would get cold, and I don't remember you ever coming back. You preferred to eat out, and you only ate at home once or twice a month. Clark and I went hungry every time we waited for you, so how could we have known to expect you for this meal?"

Paul stood up and pointed his finger at Nancy. "How dare you speak to me in that tone?" he shouted.

Suddenly, Clark began to cry. Nancy sighed and said, "Look what you've done, now. You don't need to yell. All I'm asking is for you to let our son eat in peace. Is that too much to ask for?"

Paul: "You want me to indulge him?"

Nancy: "Shouldn't you indulge him? He's your child."

Paul gripped his chair so hard that his knuckles turned white. "Enough," he said. Then he turned to the servant he'd summoned. "What are you waiting for?" he asked. "I am your boss. Now, get rid of this fucking garbage food!"

The servant walked around the table to get the roasted chicken wings out of the way. However, before she could get to them, Nancy picked them up and pulled them out of his reach. They were one of Clark's favorite foods, but he never got to eat them because they were not to his Father's liking. Thus, she was determined that he would get to enjoy these wings this time.

"What the Hell, Nancy?" Shouted Paul. He shot the servant a dirty look, and he flinched.

Nancy: "You've gone too far. You have no Fatherly love for our son, and you don't deserve to be a parent!"

Paul smiled coldly, and he said, "fuck that.

Now give up the food before I have my bodyguards pry it from your fingers."

"Please," begged Nancy. "Let me propose a compromise. If you let Clark eat his breakfast, I will prepare something special for you." Paul raised his eyebrows in satisfaction and said, "Okay, but don't keep me waiting."

Nancy nodded, and after handing Clark off to Crystal, she hurried into the kitchen. Once she was gone, Crystal brought a piece of grilled meat to the boy's mouth and said, "Clark, here you are. Open up for a chicken wing."

Nancy began to sweat as she stressed over what to cook for Paul. It seemed he was even pickier than he had been when they were married. He was used to professional chefs, and she didn't think anything she made would fare well against such cuisine. Why couldn't he have just been happy with what I made? - she wondered.

Nancy hesitated for a moment, and then she poked her head out of the kitchen. "What would you like to eat?" she asked.

"You don't know what I like to eat?" Paul asked. "You were my wife. You should know what I like!"

"Please," Nancy cried. "I am trying to do something nice for you. Would it be that hard for you to throw me a bone?"

Before Paul could answer, his phone rang. He checked the Caller ID, and then he left the room to take the call in private. As Nancy watched him go, tears began to stream down her face. She turned to her son and said, "Eat yup as much as you can before Daddy comes and takes it away..."

Paul walked out into the backyard with his cell phone pressed to the side of his face. As Eric explained his situation to him, he made his way to the buttonwood tree. It offered shade from the sun, and a

swing was hanging from one of the thicker branches. He sat down and kicked his feet into the air like a happy child. Once his friend was done talking, he said, "Tell me more about this woman."

"She is my wife," Eric replied. It was not precisely true, but she had agreed to marry him. Thus, he considered her his wife and a piece of property that belonged to him. He still couldn't believe what she'd done, and he felt like he'd been robbed.

Paul lit a fag and took a few small drags while his friend was talking. "I didn't know that you were married," he said. "You were always such a Playboy." Paul had also been a Playboy, and Eric had made fun of him when he married Nancy, regardless of his reasons for doing so.

"This is no time to joke around," Eric moaned.

Paul: Hey! Turnabout is fair play!"

Chapter 1694 - 212: You Don't Get It

Paul sat up in the swing. He had heard everything that Eric had said, but one question nagged at the back of his mind. "Is this woman so important to you? Why not just let her go and move on? She obviously doesn't want to be with you. She ran away, man. And several women wanted to be your wife, why her?"

Eric: "You don't get it. She means everything to me. You'll help me, right?"

Paul: "If you're sure she's in Kuerto, it shouldn't be that hard to locate her, especially if she is as good looking as you say she is."

"She is a total knockout!" Eric exclaimed. "You'll see that it's true when you see her!"

Paul laughed and said, "I'll have to take your word for it. It is still pretty nasty what she did to you, though. After what Nathan did to her, it is understandable that she used those tranquilizers on him, but you didn't deserve to be treated that way. You rescued her, and you were trying to give her a better life. That's messed up."

"It really is," Eric admitted. "I love her, though, so what else can I do...?"

Paul flicked his cigarette into the grass and crushed it with the toe of his shoe. "Well," he said. "Send me a picture, and I'll let you know if I can find her."

Eric hung up the phone immediately and sent him a picture of Crystal.

When Paul saw the photograph, he frowned. He was afraid that there might be a mistake, so he enlarged the picture. "Oh, my God," he muttered. "That was too easy!"

In the dining room - Crystal watched Clark happily chewing on the chicken wings. He held the bones between his fingers, and sauce dripped down his hands. They were coated with the sticky stuff, and he had accidentally smeared it all over his face in a way that reminded her of a kitten.

Clark was always timid around new people, but he quickly connected with Crystal because Nancy was there. The boy was a baby -cute, and two dimples appeared on his cheeks when he smiled at her- and his soft chuckle endeared him to her heart.

Crystal didn't typically like children, but she couldn't help but like Clark. She remembered how Nathan had said that he wanted a baby. If they did have one, she wondered if it would be as cute as Nancy's? She shook her head nervously. Why do I think about him? - she wondered - Now that he has a baby with another woman and is enjoying all the pleasures of being a man, I need to let him go. It was easier said than done, though.

Clark touched Crystal with his sticky fingers and said, "Auntie, I want some more."

Crystal smiled and said, "Would you like some vegetables? If you want to be healthy, you have to eat more vegetables."

"My mom said that I would grow tall if I ate my vegetables!" the boy exclaimed. "So, I'm gonna eat them all up!"

Crystal packed a fork full of peas, corn, and carrots and let them slide into Clark's mouth.

The boy chewed and swallowed with a vigor that was slightly worrisome. "Hey! "Crystal laughed. "Slow down. I don't want you to choke, okay?"

Clark: "Okay, Auntie."

Nancy returned from the kitchen. She had two fresh dishes, and as she placed them on the table, Paul came in from outside. He smiled at Crystal and said her full name.

Crystal looked up at Paul and frowned. "How did you know my full name?" she asked. Nancy typically called her "Crystal," and she had never called her by her full name in front of her ex-husband.

What luck! - thought Paul. He had expected Eric's task to be much more complicated. But, without waiting for her to answer the question, he stepped forward, grabbed Crystal's chin, and studied her features. "You are as beautiful as he said," he muttered.

Crystal pulled away. "I'll be rude to you if you do that again," she growled. Because she had been focusing on what he was doing, she had not even heard what he said.

Paul chuckled as he took a step backward. He thought - This girl has spunk! It is no wonder that Eric is so infatuated with her.

Nancy was so angry with Paul that her lips turned white. She used to turn a blind eye to Paul's affairs for Clark's sake, but she would not allow her new friend to get hurt. And the way that he had just treated Crystal made her sick. Finally, not knowing what else to do, she stood up, grabbed Crystal's wrist, and said. "Crystal, let's go!"

When Clark heard that, he began to scream and thrash about. "Mommy!" he wailed. "Take me with you."

The highchair shook and tipped, and if Crystal hadn't been there to catch Clark, his head would have hit the floor hard. Nancy cried out in horror when she saw how close it had been, and she raced to take her son out of her friend's arms. The boy was still wailing, and she rubbed his back to comfort him. "There, there," she said. "Mommy's here."

There was food everywhere, and as Crystal knelt to clean it, Paul tried to take a few pictures of her. She saw what he was up to, and she covered her face with her hands. Paul thought that he had captured her image, though, and he slipped out of the room to send the pictures to Eric. Along with the photos, he sent a text message asking, "Is this her?"

Almost immediately, he received a reply from Eric: "How did you find her so quickly? Where is she? Put her on the phone! "

Paul thought for a moment, and then he wrote: "She is fine where she is right now. However, I suggest that you come here and surprise her.. She isn't going anywhere, and if she tries to, I'll ensure that she can't."

Chapter 1695 - 213: I'm Cooking For You

After ending the call with Eric, Paul returned to the dining room. Clark was still crying, and the ladies were distracted, so he was able to observe Crystal without attracting her attention. As she moved about with purpose, he thought - She must be unique if Eric was willing to fly all the way to retrieve her.

Luck had been on his side. Even though Crystal had tried to cover her face, Paul had been able to capture her face in full profile. To him, this suggested that luck was on Eric's side, and he smiled just thinking about it. He cleared his throat, and the ladies looked up.

Nancy stood akimbo and glared at Paul.

"What?"

Paul smirked and said, "If you leave here, I will abuse your son."

Nancy was taken aback. "Paul," she whispered. "What are you saying? Isn't my son your son?"

Paul smirked but said nothing.

Nancy turned to her friend for help. "Crystal..."

Crystal: "If you need to be here, then you need to be here. I can stay at a hotel. It's no problem."

Nancy sighed and said, "Thank you for understanding. You are a good friend."

"I will be on my way then," Crystal said. She stood up and made her way towards the front door, but as she passed Paul, he hit her over the head with a vase that he had been hiding behind his back. Crystal's eyes rolled to the back of her eyes, and she dropped to the ground like a sack of flour.

Nancy was aghast. She ran over to Crystal and cradled her head in her arms. "Crystal!" she cried. "Are you okay?" Then, when her friend didn't reply, she turned to Paul and shouted, "You dirty scumbag! You are going to pay!"

Paul snorted contemptuously as he turned to one of his guards. "Take her to the guest room," he ordered. "And keep an eye on her while I deal with my ex-wife."

The guard carried Crystal to the guest room. Nancy tried to stop him, but he was too strong. She could do nothing. That doesn't mean that I'm helpless - she realized suddenly. "Hey, Paul!" she shouted. As he turned, she grabbed a bowl off the table and threw it at his head.

Paul laughed cruelly as he caught the bowl in mid-air.

"What do you want with Crystal?" Nancy cried. "She's my friend. Please, don't touch her!"

Paul smirked and said, "In my home, I can do whatever I like." He began to inch closer to Nancy. "Maybe you should be more worried about what I have planned for you than what I've planned for your friend. Have you thought about that?"

Nancy froze. Her face turned white, and she was at a complete loss for words.

When Clark heard the menacing tone that his Father was using, he rushed forward and said, "I won't let you bully my Mommy!"

Paul knelt, grabbed his son, growled into his face, and threw him out of the room. He landed on his back in the kitchen, and his head struck the tile floor hard. He began to wail, and Nancy tried to go to him, but Paul stopped her.

"Let me go," Nancy cried. "Clark... He's..."

"He can wait," snarled Paul. He grabbed her chin and tilted it upward so that she was forced to look at him. He thought about kissing her. That will teach her! - he thought, but as he leaned in, she slapped him across the face.

Paul's face darkened as Nancy slipped out of his grip. "How dare you slap me?" he shouted.

Nancy gasped. She had not meant to hit him. It had been a reflex. "I... I d-didn't mean it," she stammered. "Wh-Wh-What at are you go-going to do?" She looked into the kitchen and was surprised to see that one of the servants was comforting him. The servant picked her son up and carried him away. He began to cry for his Mommy, but the sound of his wails quickly tapered off.

Nancy looked Paul in the eyes and asked, "What do you want? Tell me, and I'll do it."

Paul: "For starters, you can get me my goddamn breakfast! I'm practically starving over here."

Nancy: "I already made you two fresh dishes. They are on the table!"

Paul: "They're cold. Make me something fresh!"

Nancy was wearing a pretty sundress. It was white with a Pink Gerber Daisy pattern, and there was a decorative belt wrapped around her waist. It was a reasonably conservative ensemble that showed nothing of the black lace corset she was wearing underneath. Unfortunately, because she was so stressed out, she accidentally splashed water on herself while washing vegetables, and her dress went from opaque to translucent.

The meal would take about a half-hour to cook, and Nancy hoped it would be dry by the time it was done, but her hopes were dashed when Paul stepped into the kitchen. He took one look at her sexy underwear, and his face turned red from rage. "How dare you wander about dressed like that?" he scolded her. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

Nancy's heart sank. The desire in his eyes was so strong that even she could see it.

Without waiting for a reply, he rushed across the kitchen, pressed her body against the wall, and when he kissed her, he gnawed at her lips until they bled. Nancy cried out, pushed him away, and demanded, "What are you doing?"

"I said that I was hungry!" Paul replied.

"And I'm cooking for you," Nancy replied, flustered.

Paul chuckled and said, "Yes, you are. But that is not the kind of food I want anymore. So what do you want me to do with you? Huh?" It had been years since he had touched her body, and now, like fire, the slightest touch from her got him hard. Nancy didn't feel the flames, though.. All she knew was that she was in the kitchen, and if the servants suddenly came in, she would feel like a slut.

Chapter 1696 - 214: She Deserves This

Paul pulled up Nancy's sundress, and the touch of his hands on her thighs made her sick to her stomach. He was utterly ignorant of her discomfort, though. He only had one thing on his mind, and it wasn't the grumbles in his tummy. His hands tore her thong, and as the fabric slid down her legs, she began to sob.

Nancy was terrified. Even when they were married, Paul had never attacked her this way. Their sex had been purposeful and without passion, and it had stopped the minute that she was with child. Thus, his behavior seemed utterly alien to her.

Paul forced two fingers inside of Nancy's secret pocket, and she shrieked. There had been no foreplay, and she was as dry as a dusty old tool shed. "Stop!" she begged. "You're hurting me!"

"How can it hurt?" He pressed into her even harder and said, "That can't be. How can you be so tight when you've already had a baby? Get wet already. If you don't, then I will make you bleed!"

Nancy's face turned white from horror, and she wished that she was dead.

Paul's heart rate increased as he forced himself on her. He noted how her eyelashes quivered, and her eyes clouded over. To him, she looked very pretty, and for the first time, he found her charming. He thought about the naked photos she had sent him, and his chest tightened as he plunged into her with all his strength, going deeper and harder. He was hurting her, and he loved every minute of it. He told himself - She deserves this!

Nancy bit her lip and grit her teeth to keep from crying out. She was suffering desperately, and she felt humiliated. She thought about how she had once loved him and wondered how she could have been so blind. Now, all she cared about was Clark.

Paul was getting frustrated by Nancy's quiet submission, and he bit into her shoulder. "Let me hear you make some noise!" he growled. "I want to hear it!" When she didn't comply, he bit her again, deeper and harder than before. Even as his mouth filled with blood, she refused to make a sound. Finally, he dragged her into his bedroom and threw her on the bed. Then he assaulted her over and over again. He fucked her for the rest of the day until four o'clock in the morning.

When Nancy woke up, the overwhelming smell of their sex made her want to puke. He had fucked her in the bedroom. Then they'd moved to the living room, then the bathroom, and then they had returned to the bedroom.

She turned her head and found Paul lying next to her, which was confusing. When they had been married, once he finished, he always sent her to her room. They had never slept together like this. Maybe he was too tired to send me away... she thought. It was the only reason that made any sense.

A short hair fell off Paul's pillow, and Nancy picked it up. She held it in her hand and was careful not to drop it as she got out of bed. Then she got dressed, shoved the hair into her pocket, and began to tiptoe towards the door. She only made it halfway, though, before Paul's phone rang. He sat up to answer it, and when he saw what she was up to, he motioned for her to stop.

As Paul threw the blankets off, Nancy was startled by his enormous erection, and she began to tremble from fear. Please, God - she prayed - no more. If he tried to assault her again, she thought he might kill her.

Eric smiled when Paul answered the phone. "I'm here," he said. "Can you send someone to pick me up"?

Paul: "How did you get here so fast? Did you take a private jet!"

Eric: "Exactly. I didn't want to make too much noise. If I had used a commercial airline, it would have been easy for Nathan to track me down. Anyway, do you still have Crystal?"

Paul: "I do. But what has gotten into you? Are you that afraid of her running away? You're beginning to sound like a pussy!"

Eric: "Don't talk nonsense. I am just playing it safe. She is too smart for her own good. Now, are you going to send someone to get me, or what?"

Paul: "Why are you in such a hurry? Are you afraid that I might take an interest in her?"

Eric laughed and said, "Oh, get over yourself!"

"Someone will be on their way shortly," Paul said, and he ended the call without waiting to see if Eric had anything else to say.

Then he turned to Nancy and said, "I think it's time for Round Two."

Nancy: "No. Clark should be awake by now. I'm going to wash his face and brush his teeth."

Paul frowned and said, "He is a big boy. Let him do it himself."

Nancy: "Then, I will go and make him breakfast."

"You will make my breakfast first," Paul said as he got up. Then he ripped off all of her clothes and bent her over the bed. He gripped her ass, and just as he was about to push himself inside of her, the door opened, and Clark walked in. He ran in, punched his Father in the buttocks, and shouted, "Daddy, don't bully my Mommy!"

In a matter of seconds, Paul lost his erection, and Nancy uttered a sigh of relief. She quickly put her clothes back on, picked her son up, and ran.

Once they had escaped the room, Nancy set Clark down. He looked at her for a minute, and his eyes went wide when he saw her many wounds and bruises. "Mommy," he said. "Did you get hurt? Did Daddy hurt you?"

Nancy took a deep breath, and then she said, "No, baby, Mommy was just careless. Now let's get your teeth brushed.. Then I will make you your favorite; chicken with noodles, okay?" Clark's eyes lit up, and he nearly forgot about his Mother's injuries.

Chapter 1697 - 215: Who Are You Looking For?

As Clark was eating, he looked up thoughtfully and said, "What's wrong with that weird Aunt? She smokes, she never brushes her teeth, and they're all black and stinky?"

Nancy covered her mouth so that he wouldn't see her smile. She knew he was talking about the woman that Paul was sleeping with. It was the same person that bullied her and her son. She was a model, and she was on an overseas photoshoot now. If she were home instead, she would have made everything even worse than it already was. Nancy hated that woman, but she knew that it was important for her son to be respectful, so she gently scolded him.

Clark nodded his head and apologized, but Paul wasn't satisfied. He looked at Nancy and said, "Who taught him to talk like this?"

"I d-don't know," Nancy stammered. "Honestly..."

Paul picked up Clark's breakfast and threw it across the room. "You didn't teach him?!?!" he hissed. "Am I to believe that he taught himself? He is too young. If this is how you are going to behave, I am going to have to rethink whether or not I will let you see him."

When Clark heard this, he began to throw a fit. This only made Paul angrier. "Quit coddling him!" he roared. "It's no wonder he is always acting like a baby. It's because you treat him like a baby!"

"He is acting like a baby because he is a baby!" Nancy snapped back. "What do you expect?" Without waiting for a reply, she pulled her son out of his chair. Then she carried him into the room where Crystal was being held as a prisoner.

Crystal was sitting up in bed, having just woken up, and when she saw them, she smiled. "Good morning," she said. "What's up?"

Nancy handed Clark to her and said, "Can you keep an eye on him? Paul and I got into a fight, and he threw his breakfast across the room, so I have to make him some more."

Crystal's ire began to rise. "That guy is no good," she said. "But... yeah. I can watch Clark. He is a good boy. You do what you need to do, and we'll be here waiting for you."

"Thank you," Nancy said. Then she turned, and as she went down to the kitchen, she thought about how much she envied Crystal. The girl was there to find her father, and once she did that, she was free to do or go anywhere she wanted. It must be nice to be free- she thought wistfully. Of course, without her son, she would have been just as free, but the best she could hope for from life was custody of Clark. If she could get that, though, she would take him as far away from his Father as humanly possible, and that would be free enough for her!

Nancy was finishing up the second batch of chicken soup when Crystal walked in with Clark in her arms, and as she entered the kitchen, her eyes lit up. "Crystal!" she exclaimed. "It smells delicious." She took a deep breath and said, "It has been too long since I last had such a delicious breakfast. Is it chicken soup?"

Clark: "It's shredded chicken noodle soup. Mommy promised to make it."

Crystal: "Do you like it?"

Clark: "I love it! I like my Mommy's shredded chicken noodle soup best."

Crystal rubbed his fine soft hair and said, "That's sweet."

Once the soup was done, Nancy showed her friend Paul's hair and said, "It's Paul's. I want to get it tested as soon as possible."

Crystal put her arm around Nancy's waist and said, "You are such a good friend. Even with everything that is going on in your life, you are still thinking about others."

Just then, Paul walked in, and he laughed wickedly. "Two women are cuddling in front of a little boy!" He gasped. "Aren't you afraid the kid will be perverted?"

The ladies both looked away, and neither replied.

Serenity was mid-way through her shift at the Merah Club when she was called into the President's office. She had been doing well recently, but she was not stupid enough to think that the President

would acknowledge the fact. Thus, when she arrived at the door, she was nervous. She knocked twice, and when she walked in, she was startled to find Nathan sitting in the President's seat.

"Prof-f-fessor D-Davis?" she stammered.

Nathan glared at her and said, "Tell me where she is!"

Serenity: "I don't know... Don't you know where she is? I was going to ask you..."

Nathan: "Don't fuck around. You know where she is."

Serenity: "I really don't know. I can't get through to her, and she won't reply to my texts..."

Nathan: "Serenity, I don't want to play tricks on you, but if I can't find her, I can't be held responsible for what I will do to you!"

Serenity's body began to tremble, and she was too frightened to speak.

Nathan: "I heard your father was in the hospital. Is he all right?"

"You won't..." Serenity clapped her hands over her mouth. "I mean... You wouldn't... Right...?" She thought that he was threatening her Father.

Nathan: "Tell me where she is. If you do, I will find your father the best doctors that money can buy. If you do not... Well... Who knows what might happen to him..."

Serenity hated herself for what she was about to do. She had made a promise to her friend, but she could not let harm come to her family. After taking a deep breath, she pulled out her cell phone, clicked on Nancy's number, and handed it to Nathan. "Maybe you can find Crystal through this phone number," she said.

Nancy was dishing up the fresh soup when the doorbell rang. Nodding to Crystal, she said, "Can you get that?"

"Sure," Crystal replied, and as she walked towards the entrance, Nancy's phone rang.

"For Christ's sake..." Nancy muttered. She turned to her son and said, "Clark, can you take the cell phone out of Mommy's pocket and answer it?"

Clark was a toddler, and he was curious about everything. When Nancy used to play on her cell phone, he would secretly watch her and even learn to answer the phone. Like an adult, he scratched open the phone screen and said,

"Hello, who are you looking for?"

The man on the other end said, "I am looking for Crystal. Is she there?"

"Aunt Crystal?" Clark asked, and before the man could reply, he began to shout Crystal's name excitedly.

By then, Crystal had already reached the front door. She quickly opened it, and when she saw who was standing on the other side, her face turned white.. "Wh-Wh-What are you doing here?" she gasped.

Eric Bush smiled at Crystal and said, "I just thought I'd come and surprise you here. You are surprised, aren't you?" Crystal was dumbstruck.

Meanwhile, Clark had been about to hand the mobile phone to Crystal, but he accidentally hung up the phone. Before being cut off, though, Eric's voice was heard on the other end of the line.

Damn it!- thought Nathan - Eric is always one step ahead of me!

Clark didn't want to admit that he had accidentally hung up the phone, so he quietly slipped it back into his Mother's pocket. Then he hurried back to get a second look at the stranger at the door.

Eric chuckled at the startled look on Crystal's face. "Well," he said. "You certainly look surprised!" He was wearing a black locomotive suit, and as usual, he looked tall and strong. He squeezed through the gap between Crystal and the door, and once he was inside, he said, "You didn't think that you could escape from me, did you?"

Crystal shrugged and asked him, "Are you going to marry me?"

"Obviously," Eric replied. Then he held her hand and kissed it. "From now on, I will go where you go. No one can separate us."

Eric's confession gave Crystal goosebumps. "Please tell me you're not serious," she said.

Eric: "I couldn't be more serious."

Suddenly, Nancy called from the dining room: "Crystal, who's there?"

"I'm her fiancé," Eric replied.

"Fiancé?" Nancy was surprised. She came to the entrance to check Eric out. "Crystal, you didn't tell me you were engaged. He is quite the looker. Why don't you invite him to join us for breakfast?"

Crystal and Eric replied simultaneously. She said, "He has already eaten," but he said, "I would love to!"

Nancy gave Eric a cheeky look and said, "I've made a lot. Come in. We will all eat together." Then she hurried into the kitchen to set out a place for him at the table.

"Let the servant do that..." Crystal shouted behind her.

There were servants in the house, but Nancy always liked to do everything herself, which was why Paul treated her like a servant.

Before Nancy could change her course, though, Paul walked in, and when he saw her serving another man, his ire began to rise.

Eric went to hug Crystal, but he froze when he noticed that she wasn't wearing the collar he'd given her. In its place, she wore a simple string necklace with a bullet for a pendant. He took a closer look at the shell, and he saw that it had Nathan's exclusive pattern on it.

He reached out to pull it off, but Crystal blocked his hand. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

Eric: "Don't you know that a bullet is not a pendant? You can't wear it. If you do, it will get you into trouble. Besides, I do not want my fiancée to wear another man's necklace. You can remove it yourself, or I can remove it for you."

"You don't get to control what I wear," growled Crystal.

"Is that so?" Eric asked. Then, without waiting for a reply, he tore the necklace off and threw it on the ground. "How do you like those apples?"

Crystal sighed and said, "You're littering!" Paul was pleased with Crystal's answer, and he smiled. Then he made his way to the dining room and sat down at the table.

Crystal had lost her appetite, though. She had thought that her getaway had been a success, but in a short amount of time, everything had turned to shit- and she had no idea what had led Eric to Paul's door.

To distract herself, Crystal put her hand in her pocket, and she was startled by the strand of Paul's hair that was there. With everything that had happened, she had forgotten about the DNA test she intended to have done on it. To get the test completed, though, she would need to find a way to get Eric off her back.

Thankfully, Nancy had her back, and after everyone was done eating, she told Paul, "I want to take Clark to Sea World this afternoon." Conveniently enough, there was a hospital next to Sea World, and a genetic test could be completed there.

Paul: "No. It's not going to happen."

Nancy: "But you promised me last night."

Paul: "When?"

Nancy: "At around midnight. We were in the bedroom."

Paul: "What were we doing? And please be specific with the details."

Nancy: "Why does it matter?"

Paul: "Perhaps it will help jog my memory."

Nancy: "You remember just fine, so quit playing these games with me. You promised me! Are you going to break your promise? Is that the type of man you are?"

Paul: "Don't be so dramatic. I didn't say you couldn't go."

Nancy: "But you said that it wasn't going to happen...?"

Paul: "Had you let me finish my sentence, what I was saying is: It's not going to happen... without me!"

Crystal's face went white. There was no way that they could get the DNA test done if Paul were there with them.

Nancy: "You're going with us?"

Paul: "Is there a problem? I am his Father."

Nancy: "I don't think that it's a good idea. We're not used to going out together like that." Paul had never accompanied them anywhere before, so they were used to having fun without him.

Paul: "What about Crystal? Is she going with you?"

Nancy: "Yes. But that's different."

"How is that different?" Eric interjected. "If Crystal is going, all five of us should go together!"

Well, this is FUBAR - thought Nancy- I guess that we had better make the best of it - She sighed as she stood up. Then she said, "Fine. I will take Clark upstairs and change his clothes. Crystal, would you like to get changed?"

Crystal nodded and followed Nancy and Clark.

Once they were upstairs, Nancy turned to her friend and said, "What should we do, Crystal? If they come, you won't be able to get the hair tested.

Crystal: "Don't worry. A chance will present itself. If need be, I can pretend to be sick and have Eric bring me to the hospital. Then I'll find a way to shake him off..."

Nancy: "Is he really your fiancé?"

Crystal: "It seems so. If I can't get rid of him, I will have no choice but to marry him.. You don't need to worry about me, though. What's going on with you? Do you have a plan to get your son out of here?"

Chapter 1699 - 217: You'll Marry Me No Matter What

When Nancy looked up, there were tears in her eyes. Crystal knew Nancy was reluctant to walk away from Paul. If she did, it would most likely mean walking away from her son as well. She wanted to take Clark and run, but her ex-husband was a badass, and it was unlikely that he would let the boy go without a fight.

"I don't have a plan," Nancy admitted. "Just let me get dressed. We can talk about this more later." She wanted to change her clothes, but she hadn't brought anything with her, so she walked to Paul's bedroom to see if there were any of her old clothes still there. When she opened the wardrobe, she was startled by all the limited-edition clothes from luxury brands.

When Crystal saw them, she said, "Paul doesn't treat you that bad, not if he bought you all of these beautiful dresses."

Nancy: "They're not mine. He never bought me anything like this. They belong to his mistress. She's a model."

Crystal: "I can see he loves her very much. Nathan used to buy me this kind of clothes... But then he stopped loving me...."

"Well, I don't care about that right now," Nancy said. "I'm sorry if that sounds harsh, but I don't have time to care." She was a little depressed, but she quickly adjusted her mood and changed the topic. "Crystal, when all this is over, will you go home with Eric?"

Crystal: "Um probably."

Nancy: "I wish that Clark and I could go with you..."

Crystal sighed. Then she dragged all of the clothes out of the closet, threw them on the ground, and began to pour out her frustrations on them.

"Crystal?!" Nancy shouted in surprise.

"Why do mistresses always live a better life than us?" Crystal asked. "We can't beat her, but we can vent our anger by torturing her clothes!"

"You're right!" Nancy exclaimed. "Why should mistresses always get to live better lives than we do? It's not fair!" Then she began to follow Crystal's example, even going so far as to cut the dresses with scissors.

After venting for a while, they finally went back downstairs in their original clothes. When Eric saw them, he got up off the couch and asked why they hadn't changed.

"There wasn't anything right for us," Crystal explained.

"I'll have someone bring in all of the latest collections to you." As Eric spoke, he took out his mobile phone, but Crystal stopped him.

Nancy was dumbfounded because she had never been treated like this. He is so handsome and generous! - she thought. "Your fiancé is very good to you," she said with envy.

"Is your husband bad to you?" Eric asked.

Nancy: "I don't have a husband. We've been divorced for some time now."

"And yet here you are," said Paul with a shark-like Cheshire grin on his face.

Nancy: "If you let me have our son, I would disappear, and you wouldn't see me again for the rest of your life!"

Paul: "In your dreams!"

Nancy: "Why? You had that other woman, and I am sure that she would be willing to have a child with you. And besides, Clark doesn't matter to you. You have made that abundantly clear! If you loved Clark, you would not mistreat him, and you would not let that woman abuse him!"

Paul: "You don't get it, do you? He is Burnett. Do you think I would actually let one of my own out of my sight?"

Nancy frowned and said, "This isn't going anywhere, and the day is wasting away while we squabble. Let's go to Sea World.

They parked the car at a mall that was down the street from Sea World. Nancy and Paul were still quarreling, and no matter how hard she tried, Crystal could not block them out.

Paul glared at Nancy and said, "You could get with another man and give birth to another baby. I'm sure that in time you'd forget all about Clark."

"Don't worry," Nancy snarled. "I will do just that. As for who I get with, that is none of your business. I won't stay at your house shamelessly."

Paul was confused suddenly. He thought - She said that she wanted Clark back, but now she is ready to leave? Only a heartless woman would give up their child so easily!

While they were arguing, Eric whispered into Crystal's ear," Does your friend want to get custody of her child? It's hard to tell right now..."

Crystal: "She wants custody. Why? Do you have an idea?"

Eric put his arm around Crystal' shoulder and said, "It wouldn't be easy, but we might be able to pull it off. If you want my help, though, you need to choose to marry me."

Crystal: "What if I don't?"

Eric: "You'll marry me no matter what, but if you don't do it of your own volition, I won't help your friend."

Crystal's face turned white. Eric chuckled when he saw that, and he said, "You can think about it. Marry me happily or marry me in tears. It is all the same to me. Once you figure it out, pick out the clothes for me. I want to wear a lover's clothes with you!"

Crystal looked at Nancy, who was trying to take Clark away from Paul. She was cruelly pushed away, though. Crystal's heart went out to her friend. If Eric didn't help, she thought that the situation was hopeless.

"I'll think about it," Crystal said. "I'm not happy about the situation that you've put me in, though..."

Eric: "You'll get over it. Just don't keep me waiting for too long."

Eric tried to hold her hand, and this time she did not reject him. This gave him a measure of hope, and he smiled. Maybe next time I will try to kiss her - he thought. He looked at her delicate pink lips, and he began to salivate. Her lips were like a delicious honey peach, and he was drawn to their pink sweetness.

Crystal followed Nancy into a family clothing store, and Clark jumped for joy when he saw all the available animal-themed outfits. There were ones with rabbits, kittens, elephants, and a plethora of others. But it was the zebra costume that he was most drawn to.

"I can see that you like this one," Nancy said. She kissed him on the forehead and asked him, "Can Mommy wear one that matches yours?"

Clark began to clap and cheer, but there was a sneer on Paul's face. What about me? - he wondered - Am I not good enough for a zebra costume?

Chapter 1700 - 218: Everyone Is Waiting For Us

Paul pointed to the zebra costume and asked the salesperson, "Does this come in a large size?"

Nancy gave him an incredulous look. "You're going to wear this?" she asked. Just the thought of it made her chuckle.

Paul: "I'm Clark's Father. What's wrong?"

Nancy didn't want to argue with him, so she stopped talking with him and turned to see what her friend was up to.

Crystal was pointing to a Tee-shirt printed with a panda and asked a salesperson, "Is there a parent-child clothing section?" As she spoke, she pointed at Eric.

Does she want me to be her son? - Eric wondered - If so, that could be fun! He smiled, but he did not speak. When the salesperson went inside the warehouse to get the clothes, he approached Crystal and whispered, "Mommy, I want to drink your breast milk." While he was speaking, his eyes swept over her breasts, and she glared at him. Instead of getting angry, though, Eric gave her a cheeky smile.

Crystal pointed to another set of clothes and said, "I think that those are more suitable for you."

Eric turned and was surprised to see that she was pointing at a dog costume.

Crystal chuckled and said, "That one suits you."

"That one also suits Daddy," Clark suddenly chipped in." Mommy always said that Daddy is a yellow dog."

Eric rubbed Clark's hair gently and asked, "What else does Mommy say about Daddy?"

Clark wrinkled his nose and giggled. "Daddy is a dirty, no-good rat!" he shouted gleefully.

Suddenly, Eric began to laugh. "A rat!" exclaimed. Then he turned to Paul and said, "You do look like a rat!"

Paul scowled and told them all to fuck off. Then, when he turned his attention to Nancy, the dirty look he gave her scared her so much that she grabbed Clark and ran for the store's exit.

"Stop!" Paul shouted.

Nancy was terrified that if she kept running, he would play hardball, and Clark would suffer because of her. Thus, she stopped running.

Clark had begun to cry, so Crystal took him from Nancy and comforted him. The little boy began to rub Crystal's breasts, and Eric felt hot jealousy wash over him. He gave the child an angry look, and he began to cry harder than ever.

Crystal glared at Eric and said, "You're freaking him out! Why are all men the same? You guys have no fatherly love!"

Eric: "Paul and I are different..."

Nancy: "Where's the difference? You can always judge a person by their friends." In her eyes, the two men were both bastards, and that was the bond that held their friendship together.

Eric looked Crystal in the eyes and said, "I've changed. On the day I fell in love with you, I swore an oath that I would be good to you and our children."

"Mommy," Clark murmured. He was worried about Nancy, but he could do nothing, and he was forced to watch as his father forced her into a dressing room.

"So," Paul hissed. "I'm a yellow dog, am I? Or was that a rat? Woman, you are getting too bold for your good!"

Nancy opened her mouth to defend herself, but Paul kissed her before she could say anything, and he bit her lips crazily. Nancy's mind went blank. She had not expected this. She was not about to take it lying down, though. Once she came to her senses, she bit down on his tongue, and his blood tasted like a fishy sweet.

Paul: "Behave yourself. Or do you want me to fuck you right here?"

Nancy gradually gave up her resistance. At this point, she did not dare to defy him. Not in such a public place. Being bullied always made her feel embarrassed.

Crystal also felt somewhat embarrassed. So, to break the tension, she took the clothes from the sales assistant, threw the large-sized one to Eric, and pushed him into the fitting room to get changed. Then she went into the room next to his to change into her costume.

By the time Crystal came out, Eric was already done changing. He took her hand, and when she looked at them in the mirror, she had to admit that they looked cute in their matching panda suits. Though they were both adults, Eric was playing the child's role, and she was playing the part of the Mother. He was very fond of her appearance, and when she tried to pull her hand away, he would not let her.

Now that Paul was in the fitting room, Nancy helped Clark into the zebra costume he had picked out, and then she changed into her matching costume. The suit was too big for her, though, and when she came out, Paul said, "Your legs are too short for that, and it looks stupid. Aren't you afraid of tripping?"

Nancy's face flushed, but she did not dare to roll her eyes or stare at him. She was afraid that he would do more excessive things to her if she did.

Clark was his Mother's advocate, though. He didn't allow others, including his father, to say anything bad about his mother, and this would be no exception. He scowled at Paul and said, "Don't listen to Daddy. Mommy is beautiful no matter what she wears."

After receiving comfort and kindness from Clark, Nancy hugged and kissed him. "My little Clark is the most adorable kid in the world!" she exclaimed. "You are Mommy's little knight." She smiled as she lifted his face and kissed him on the mouth.

When Paul saw Nancy kissing their son, his face turned red from rage. "Stop it!" he growled.

Clark: "Why?" Clark asked.

Paul: "Men and women should not kiss like that."

Clark: "But Daddy kisses Mommy like that "

Nancy cleared her throat to interrupt the conversation, and once she had their attention, she said, "Everyone is waiting for us. Let's go."

The minute they arrived at Sea World, Crystal began to look for an opportunity to slip away from the group. It seemed that Eric had gleaned her intention, though, because he stuck to her like glue. Nancy and Clark were not having a good time either.

Paul rarely took Clark out, and he hadn't taken Nancy out much when they were married, so their atmosphere was awkward.

Near the entrance, there was an undersea tunnel, and all kinds of undersea creatures swam overhead. There was even a whale, and when it passed by, Clark was terrified. He began to cry, and he buried his face in his Mother's bosom.

Nancy patted him on the back and said, "There's no need to be afraid, honey. They are locked up, and they cannot get out."

The toddler stopped crying and smiled. "Mommy, do you think that shark looks like Daddy?" he asked.

When Nancy heard that, she could not help but laugh. She regretted it immediately, though. She knew that if Paul thought that she was laughing at him, he would be mad.. Thankfully, he was too busy looking at the animals to pay attention to what was being said.

Chapter 1701 - 219: You Have No Right To Say No

After going through the long tunnel, they walked to the dolphin performance pavilion. The dolphins were Clark's favorite animal, and there was a show starting soon. When they got there, there weren't many people. It wasn't long, though, before the bleachers began to fill up, and they were full by the time the show started.

Eric had stepped out to buy popcorn and drinks for everyone, and when he returned, Nancy gently hit Crystal's arm with her elbow and said, "You need to marry this guy. I can tell that he is a good man. I don't understand why you ran away from him?"

Crystal sighed and said, "You don't know him as I know him. Can you drop it? I don't want to talk about him,"

Nancy nodded and apologized, and they turned their attention to the show.

The dolphins jumped out of the water, and each trick was rewarded with cheers and excited applause. Clark was delighted, and he asked his Mother if the animals were going to dance.

"Maybe," she replied. "Just wait and see."

The trainer gave two of the dolphins a treat, and then he gave them each an end of a banner to carry in their mouths. They swam side by side to the middle of the pool, and then when they jumped in opposite directions, the flag opened to reveal four words. It took a moment for the audience to read what was written, and then everybody began to hoot, holler, whistle, and look about. The words were

'Crystal Smith, marry me!' and they were anxious to see who it was addressed to.

Crystal was in shock.

"Oh, my God!" Nancy exclaimed. "It's so romantic. If I were you, I'd say yes immediately."

Crystal didn't answer her. She was looking at the words on the banner, and she was dumbfounded.

Suddenly, Eric took out a bundle of red roses and a small jewelry box. He knelt on one knee, revealed a ring, and said, "Crystal Smith, will you marry me?"

Crystal began to feel dizzy. All around her, people were chanting. "Say, yes! Say yes! Say yes!" But she couldn't think straight, and her vision was beginning to blur.

Nancy squealed. "Say yes, girl!"

Crystal felt like she was in a dream. It seemed as if she had an out-of-body experience, and her body was numb. "Stand up," she said coldly.

"If you don't say yes, then I won't get up," he said. Then, without waiting for her to reply, he tried to force the ring on her finger.

Crystal jerked her hand away. "I did not say yes," she shouted.

"You have no right to say no!" Eric exclaimed. "If I want to marry you, then you have no say in the matter. I only asked as a formality because I was hoping you could come to me willingly. So why are you acting this way? I will do everything you want and give you everything I have. What more could you desire?"

When Crystal heard this, her heart was moved, but she was still reluctant. She valued her autonomy. But how can I get out of this situation? - she wondered. After all, she still wanted Eric to help Nancy with her problem. Finally, she said, "I'll marry you, but you have to get us out of here."

Eric smiled and said, "That's not a problem. Our wedding will be held in a week. At that time, it will be up to you whether you want to stay here or go back home."

Crystal did not answer him directly, but she reached out her left hand and allowed him to put the ring on her middle finger, and when the audience saw this, they cheered louder for them than they had for the dolphins.

The only person not impressed was Paul. He glared at Nancy and said, "It's just a proposal. So what's the big deal?"

Nancy: "What's the matter?"

Paul huffed and said, "Never mind." He was appalled by what he had just witnessed, but he did not think that Nancy would understand. Eric had always declared himself a top-quality bachelor, and he laughed at Paul for giving up his wonderful bachelor life so early. But now, Eric was going to get married, and he had already gotten a divorce.

Once the show had begun again, Crystal turned to Nancy. "Eric promised to help us," she whispered. "Just hold on for another few days."

Nancy: "If it is too much trouble, don't worry about me. I don't think that Clark and I are going to have the Happily Ever After that I had hoped for."

Crystal: "Don't talk that way. Now that Eric is on board, it should be no problem."

Nancy: You are a good friend. Thank you. And Eric seems nice. I think you'll be happy with him."

Suddenly, Nathan's face flashed into Crystal's mind, and she shook her head to drive the image away. She did not know whether she would be happy or not. The thought of being happy seemed very alien to her. She had been happy before, but she did not think that she had deserved it. Any happiness she had ever known had ended with pain, so she tried not to think about the future.

When the Dolphin performance was over, Clark wanted to interact with the dolphins, so Nancy followed him to the stage. A dolphin trainer said something to Nancy that made her smile and jump for joy. When Paul saw that, he became so angry that he ran to the stage and kicked the trainer into the pool. Then he turned to Nancy and shouted, "You're dead! How dare you flirt with the dolphin man?"

"I can flirt with whomever I want!" Nancy. shouted back. "We are divorced. I'm not your wife anymore, so you don't get a say in what I do!"

Paul stood akimbo, and in a stern voice, he said, "Fine. Flirt.. But not in front of our son. Aren't you afraid that he will be affected by your whorish ways?"

Chapter 1702 - 220: You Are Unbelievable

Nancy crossed her arms beneath her breast and glowered at her ex-husband. "You are unbelievable!" she growled. "I am so glad that we aren't married anymore. You are a real brute!"

As the couple quarreled, Clark squatted by the side of the pool and began to feed the dolphins. The dolphins were anxious to snatch the food out of the boy's hands, and they somehow managed to drag him into the water.

Nancy saw what had happened right away, and she began to panic. She didn't know what to do, so she took off her coat and prepared to jump into the pool. But then she remembered that she could not swim. Luckily, some of the people in the audience had seen what happened, and they began to call for help. Some of them even rushed towards the pool to save Clark.

The trainer who had been kicked into the pool was swimming towards the shore, and when he saw Clark, he immediately swam over to rescue him.

As Nancy pulled her son out of the water, Crystal ran over. "Is Clark all right?" she asked.

"He's fine," Nancy replied. "Luckily, the trainer saved him." As she spoke, she turned to the trainer. "Thank you. Can I have your name?" She felt terrible that he'd been kicked into the water, but she was grateful that he had been there when Clark needed him.

"My name is Noah Laurent," the trainer replied. "But please, call me Noah. The child's clothes are all wet. Let me bring him a towel."

People who work in water usually have tanned skin, but Crystal noted that Noah's skin was relatively pale. When he returned with a towel, he offered it to Nancy, but Paul snatched it out of his hands. Then he threw it at Clark's head, and Nancy quickly dried the boy's hair.

Once Clark was as dry as he would get, Nancy smiled at Noah and said, "Can I bring the towel home? I'll return it after washing it." The boy's clothes were still wet, and she was afraid that he would catch a cold. All she wanted to do now was wrap him with the towel and get him home.

Paul took out a few notes from his wallet and threw them to Noah in an insulting way, but instead of accepting them, Noah let the money fall to the ground.

"You can borrow the towel," Noah said. "And I don't need the money. That isn't why I helped the boy."

Nancy: "Thank you. I will get it back to you ASAP."

Suddenly, Paul picked up Clark, and he began to carry him towards the front entrance. When Nancy didn't follow right behind him, he shouted, "Clark is cold. Hurry up!"

Nancy had wanted to ask Noah for his contact information, but with Paul up her ass, she did not get the chance. Crystal knew her friend well, though, and she said, "He probably is single."

Eric knew what she was thinking. "Do you want to set him up with Nancy?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Crystal replied. What she wanted to do was use Noah to provoke Paul.

Eric: "What do you want to do?"

Crystal: "Guess?"

Eric: "I guess you'll find a way to use Noah to make Paul angry and envious."

"Hey!" Crystal exclaimed. "You're not as stupid as you look!"

Eric: "That's why I can be your fiancé. Here, let me run Nancy's number back to Noah, and then I'll catch up."

Crystal laughed as she watched him run back towards the dolphin enclosure. Then, when he returned, he wrapped his arm around Crystal's waist. She sighed but offered no resistance. "I wish you would spend more time thinking about how to help Nancy get custody of Clark," she said. "And I don't like it when you put your hands on me. You know that!"

Eric: "Do you want to burn your bridge before you've even crossed it?"

Crystal: "You're right. I can burn it later."

Eric: "You are a savage woman. I look forward to taming you."

Crystal: "We'll see about that ... "

When they got in Paul's car, Nancy took off Clark's wet clothes and wrapped him up in the towel. Then she hugged him tightly and asked if he was cold.

"Cold..." Clark murmured.

"We'll be home soon," Crystal said. "Hold on, baby." As she spoke, she took off her coat, gave it to Clark, and motioned for Eric to do the same. He didn't want to do that, not because he was not a gentleman, but because Nancy was his friend's ex-wife. Because Paul had not offered his jacket, he didn't think that he should either.

Crystal scowled when she saw this, but then she smiled. She leaned into Eric and whispered into his ear: "You promised me that you would do whatever I asked. Now, give the kid your jacket."

Eric was taken aback, but he knew that she was right. "Alright," he said as he handed Nancy his jacket. Paul glared at him, but all he could do was shrug.

Finally, Paul took off his coat and threw it to Nancy. "It's for my son," he said, "It is not for you."

As soon as they arrived at the villa, Nancy rushed into the house with Clark in her arms. Then she ordered the servants to fill the tub with warm water, and she bathed him personally. She put bubbles in the bath, which he loved, and as he played, he said, "Mommy, the dolphins were so cute, but they were a little fierce. They wanted the food too much!"

Nancy: "That's because they were hungry. They put on a good show, though. Right? Are you hungry?"

Clark shook his head. His mind was distracted. After a minute, he said, "Mommy, can I have a dolphin toy? So that I can sleep with it every night."

Nancy: "Fine, I'll buy one for you."

Clark: "But I'm a bad boy...."

Nancy was shocked to hear her good boy say such a thing. "No!" she said.. "Never. Why do you think you are a bad boy?"