

# Mr. Edwards' Unraveled Life

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## Chapter 921

The flower shop door swung open behind her with a chime. Rhea stepped out—then stopped short.

Of all people... him?

Iker stood in the doorway, eyebrows arching in faint surprise.

Rhea quickly masked her expression. "Excuse me," she said curtly. He was blocking her path, and she had no interest in exchanging pleasantries.

Thankfully, he moved aside.

But just as she passed, his low voice curled through the air. "Small world, huh? Jace's little assistant."

Rhea didn't respond. She kept walking.

Behind her, Iker slipped his hands into his coat pockets, watching her for a beat. Then he entered the shop and exited minutes later, holding a bouquet of carnations.

Back home, Rhea paced. The encounter sat heavy in her mind. Eventually, she dialed Jace.

"I ran into that guy who's got it out for you."

"Who?" Jace's voice was rough—hoarse.

She paused. "Dean, are you sick? You don't sound right."

"It's just the weather. Go on."

She hesitated, then continued. "It was Dr. Iker. I saw him earlier."

Jace sat up straighter, tension sliding into his posture. "Where?"

Rhea faltered. She didn't want to mention the flower shop—not with the irises arriving tomorrow. "On my way home from work," she said instead.

Jace didn't press. "Just be careful."

A pause.

“Actually, I’ll come by tomorrow.”

“No—uh, not tomorrow!” Rhea said quickly. “I’ve got... plans. Can you make it the day after?”

She needed him to be home when the flowers arrived. It wouldn’t make sense if he missed them.

Jace paused, sensing something, but didn’t question it. “Alright.”

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The next morning, she pushed the memory of Iker aside. He was a doctor, not some petty schemer—he wouldn’t really stoop to targeting her... right?

Wrong.

The dean called her into his office with unusual urgency.

“Dr. Neufeld! Great news. We’ve got a big surgical project, and you’ve been tapped to lead it.”

Rhea’s pulse jumped. What kind of surgery? Why her?

The door opened—and in walked Iker.

“Come in, sit!” the dean beamed. “Dr. Iker mentioned you’d worked on this before. I had no idea!”

Rhea’s eyes narrowed. What was he doing here?

He smiled like the cat who caught the canary.

The dean, oblivious, pushed the folder across the desk. “This is huge. And Dr. Iker personally recommended you.”

Rhea sat down, her anticipation gone cold. She didn’t trust this. Not for a second.

But then she opened the file—and her stomach dropped. She *had* worked on this before.

“I started it,” she said slowly, “but I dropped out halfway.”

Iker chuckled under his breath.

The dean clapped her on the back. “Well, now’s your chance to finish it. Don’t let Dr. Iker down!”

Rhea forced a polite smile.

The moment the dean left, it vanished.

Iker leaned against the desk. “You hide your expressions well, but not that well. Jace dumped you in this little pond, and now you’re floundering. I toss you a lifeline—and this is the thanks I get?”

“Thanks,” she said, her voice ice-cold.

He smirked. “Jace really trained you, didn’t he? You’re practically his echo.”

Rhea stood, steady. “I don’t know what you’re after, but I’m not playing along. Leave the dean out of this.”

He arched a brow, amused. His good looks couldn’t distract from the poison behind the charm. Nurses nearby stole glances, but Rhea was unmoved.

“If there’s nothing else,” she said, brushing past him, “you know the way out, Dr. Iker.”

Back in her office, she stared at the project file. It wasn’t just some task—it was *that* project. The one she’d shelved after everything fell apart.

And now it was back in her hands.

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Jace hadn’t known until that day.

“He came to you personally?” His voice was clipped, brittle.

Rhea didn’t mention the flower shop or the tension. “I think he’s targeting you. I’m just... collateral.”

She hesitated on the word *connection*, unsure what it meant to him.

To her relief, Jace didn’t challenge it. After a pause, he said quietly, “I’m sorry. I dragged you into this.”

The words stung. Not the apology—but the distance in it.

“Don’t say that, Dean. You gave me everything I needed to move forward. I’d have run into problems somewhere else anyway. This—this is just a challenge.”

He caught the fire in her tone. “So you’re taking it on?”

She nodded, eyes steady. “It’s what I was meant to do.”

## Chapter 922

Rhea's decision hadn't been impulsive—she'd made it long ago. Only Phillip's incident had derailed her.

If not for that, she'd be scrubbing in by now.

Jace studied her carefully. "I can tell you're serious. Go for it."

Rhea blinked, surprised. "I thought you'd try to stop me."

He smiled—unguarded, for once. "You've got ambition. I won't stand in your way."

Some people prune their flowers to grow a certain way—like overbearing parents. But that often leaves the blooms stunted or warped. That wasn't Jace's style. He let his flowers grow wild, only shielding them from the storms.

Still, he warned, "Stay away from Iker. He's not dangerous, but he *is* trouble."

Rhea nodded.

A few days later, she returned to the institute—but this time, not as Jace's assistant. She was now a visiting researcher.

In the ward, the albino patient was reading again. He glanced up and smiled faintly. "You're back."

His snow-white lashes gleamed, like frost catching the light.

Rhea smiled back. "Been a while—half a month, right?"

"Twenty-three days, seventeen hours," he corrected. "I keep track. Makes things... less dull."

The loneliness in his voice cut deep.

He held out his arm. "Here to take more blood?"

She shook her head and pulled up a chair. "Just checking data. Also, you're being transferred to our hospital."

That had been her idea. Iker had objected—he wanted to keep the patient locked away for study. But Rhea's humanitarian push had won over even Iker's teacher.

Killian—the patient—showed the barest flicker of surprise. "I'll pack. Got flowers for your new ward. You'll like them."

She tried to smile. "You're sweet."

"I'm allergic to pollen," he deadpanned. "And... my name's Killian. Thanks."

In the car, just as Rhea went to join him, Iker blocked her path. "I made a bet with my teacher."

She narrowed her eyes. He wouldn't say this without a reason.

"The bet didn't work out," he said, a crooked grin playing on his lips. "We both thought Jace would lose. You should know—it concerns his career."

A chill crept down her spine. "What do you mean?"

"If you fail this project, Jace resigns."

Her heart stopped. "He'd never quit. He loves his work—someone must've pressured him."

Iker shook his head. "No one forced him. He said it himself."

He met her eyes. "That's how much he cares. He's breaking rules left and right—for you."

The words stunned her.

*Jace cares about me.*

It landed like lightning—bright, terrifying, impossible to ignore.

She couldn't face him. For a week, she avoided every call, buried in work, paralyzed by the weight of it.

Until finally, Jace called.

"The flowers you sent wilted in the vase," he said softly.

She blinked. "You... liked them?"

"Mmhmm," he hummed. "Did I mess up keeping them alive?"

She fumbled. "Picked flowers fade fast, even in water. I can send more if you want."

He shifted. "Busy with the project?"

Grateful for the lifeline, she nodded. "Yeah. It's tricky."

"What part?" he asked gently.

Cornered, she scrambled to throw out a few questions. Jace—who could probably solve genetic code in his sleep—answered them with ease.

When she didn't reply right away, he asked, "Still there?"

His voice—deep and calm, distorted slightly through the phone—sounded like a cello at dusk.

"I'm taking notes," she said quickly. "Can you repeat the part about cell division?"

He did, patiently.

The call stretched on. A passing doctor overheard and teased, "Dr. Neufeld, chatting with your boyfriend? And taking notes?"

She stared, stunned, at her own dense pages of scribbles.

Jace kept talking. "Cell division usually takes one minute... It's key for the project. Normalize that, and theoretically, the patient could live a normal life."

Rhea ripped off her headphones. "What did you say?"

The doctor smirked. "Mid-day classes now?"

## **Chapter 923**

Rhea almost snapped, *If you want a class, go enroll*. But her colleague's grin disarmed her.

"Time to eat," the doctor said. "You've been skipping meals. I saw you taking antacids last week."

Too late—Jace had heard.

The line went quiet.

Rhea winced. When the doctor left, she mumbled, "I'm eating fine, really..."

"Can you link your meal card to the cafeteria system?" Jace asked. "I'll set one up."

He meant it. He'd get notifications when she ate—or didn't.

His tone left no room for argument. She agreed.

After that, Rhea never missed a meal. If she did, Jace would call.

Colleagues noticed.

"Dr. Neufeld, your boyfriend's adorable. He even monitors your meals?"

"I want one like that," another groaned. "We barely have time to breathe, let alone eat. My stomach's shot."

“Where’d you find him, Rhea? Spill!”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she muttered, flustered. “He’s my former dean.”

“Male or female?” someone smirked.

No one bought it. If deans were that attentive, why didn’t theirs text reminders about lunch?

Rhea gave up and hid in her office with her lunch.

Then Jace showed up.

She’d just gotten out of surgery, lightheaded and bone-tired, when a colleague grabbed her. “Big news! A double-doctorate prodigy is here. Young, brilliant, good-looking!”

It sounded familiar... but Jace? He was swamped in the capital.

Before she could protest, her colleague dragged her toward the lobby.

It was packed. Patients, nurses, even male doctors were craning for a look. The dean stood at the front.

“Rhea!” he called. “Your old dean’s here for a lecture—great chance to catch up!”

And there was Jace.

No lab coat. Just a khaki turtleneck and trousers. It softened his sharp edges but didn’t dim his cool aura. If anything, it stirred the crowd more.

Jace shook the dean’s hand. “Dean Chartrand, you didn’t need to meet me in person.”

“Nonsense!” Chartrand beamed. “We’re rolling out the red carpet for you, Dr. Jace.”

They chatted briefly. Rhea hung back, sensing Jace wanted distance. His eyes brushed past her as he followed the dean inside.

A group of older Belourvinelle doctors trailed behind, but at twenty-seven, Jace was the outlier.

“He’s unreal—gorgeous, two doctorates, and single?” someone whispered.

The women around her perked up.

Rhea quietly slipped away. “I’ve got updates for the dean.”

No one stopped her. Only Dean Chartrand knew the truth.

She knocked on his office door. “Dean, can I report on the project?”

“Come in!” he waved her inside. “No need to knock next time.”

Jace sat on the couch, tea in hand. His eyes caught the light beneath his neat hair.

“Dean—” she began.

He frowned. “It’s just Jace here.”

“Right,” she said quickly, sitting beside him.

His cold expression softened slightly.

Dean Chartrand looked between them, amused. “How long is Dr. Jace staying? One lecture isn’t enough.”

“Three days,” Jace said, sliding a document forward. “Lectures and collaboration.”

The dean skimmed it—and lit up. “You’re sharing Belourvinelle’s equipment with us?”

City A lagged behind in tech. This could change everything.

## **Chapter 924**

The dean could hardly contain his excitement. He signed the contract immediately.

“Dr. Jace, you’re a godsend to our hospital!”

Jace stayed composed. “You helped me solve a problem. Consider this my thanks.”

The dean looked confused. *When had he helped Jace?* Then he saw Rhea’s stunned expression and understood. He laughed. “You’re too kind. Honestly, Dr. Neufeld’s exceptional. We’re lucky to have her.”

Rhea barely heard the rest. Her thoughts were spinning.

*He really did this... for me?*

The warmth in her chest was dizzying. But her rational side screamed caution. She kept her face neutral until they left the office.

Then she asked, hesitantly, “Is this... because of me?”

She caught herself. “Sorry—I forgot you’re not my dean anymore.”



"You can still call me that if you want," Jace said, voice calm with a hint of warmth. "Or something else. As for your question... let's just say yes."

Her heart raced, like a deer ready to bolt.

"Why, though?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

Jace looked at her, startled—like he hadn't considered that himself.

They stood in silence, caught in the same quiet storm.

Jace answered evenly, "Because you're the only student I've ever mentored."

*Student.*

The word hit like a splash of cold water.

Rhea felt her heart crash.

She smiled through the ache. "Then I'm lucky to have you as a mentor. I won't let you down."

Jace watched her closely but didn't push.

Later, after meeting Norah, Jace realized—someone like him shouldn't fall in love. He'd only slow her down. Rhea deserved to shine, not be tethered to him.

His gaze darkened for a moment, but he pushed it aside.

That afternoon, Harlow stopped by. "Come to Jace's lecture! It'll be good."

"I've got work," Rhea said. "Record it—I'll buy you dinner."

"Not the same as being there."

She smiled faintly. "You go. I'm good."

When they left, she tried focusing on her files, but her thoughts kept drifting. The noise outside snapped her out of it.

"Get it together, Rhea," she muttered. "Don't fall for what's not real."

She almost believed Jace felt something more. Better to wake up now than fall harder later.

Love wasn't for her. She'd stick to her career.

While others drowned heartbreak in distractions, Rhea buried herself in work. She skipped the first lecture, powered through her medical plan, and worked through the night.

Buzzing with adrenaline, she called Jace to share her results.

His voice was calm. “You pulled an all-nighter?”

Even through the phone, it felt like a silent scolding.

“I wanted to finish fast. I’m off today—I’ll rest.”

A soft sigh came through. She almost missed it.

“Then we’ll push today’s lecture.”

“What? Why?” she blurted. “It’s only three days!”

“I know. But you missed yesterday. Today’s topic overlaps with your project—it would help. Skipping it would be a shame.”

He’d delayed it. For *her*.

Rhea’s emotions tangled—regret, gratitude, embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Dean. I’ll attend tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow,” Jace said. “Rest today. You’ve been up all night. Have you eaten?”

She hadn’t.

“Meet me for lunch. Then I’ll take you home to rest.”

He’d already cleared it with the dean.

Rhea had no excuse left.

She waited in the parking lot to avoid gossip. When Jace arrived, he wore a long coat, face unreadable.

He unlocked the car with a soft click.

## Chapter 925

Jace glanced at her. Without a word, Rhea climbed in. She moved toward the back seat, but he stopped her.

“Passenger seat. It’s easier.”

She hesitated, recalling the old saying—the front seat’s for girlfriends. But Jace didn’t seem to care, so she played it cool and sat up front.

As she buckled in, he handed her his phone. “I haven’t looked at restaurants. I’ll drive—pick something.”

She scrolled through options, torn between three. “Steak, grilled fish, or bullfrog?”

“Bullfrogs are parasite magnets,” Jace said without looking over. “Grilled fish is usually basa—only survives in poor-quality water. Clean water kills it.”

Classic doctor—dissecting everything, even dinner. Rhea smirked to herself. “Steak, then?”

He paused. “Steak it is.”

She wondered what that silence had been—was he debating the menu or something else? Better not ask. No need to dig for what he wasn’t offering.

The restaurant was on the third floor of a sleek mall, soft Western music playing in the background. But when Rhea opened the menu, her hands trembled. A steak cost hundreds of dollars. She’d never spent over two hundred on a meal.

Jace ordered without hesitation. “Medium-rare steak. Black pepper pasta.”

The waiter leaned in. “Would you like to pair that with wine? We’re offering twenty percent off bottles with steak.”

Rhea perked up. She didn’t drink, but a good bottle made an excellent gift. And she’d need one—hospital networking was brutal, and a solid mentor for her master’s wouldn’t fall out of the sky.  
“How much?” she asked.

The waiter rattled off a five-figure price.

Her jaw nearly dropped. A few thousand she could rationalize. Tens of thousands? No way. “We’re driving,” she said quickly. “No drinks.”

The waiter’s face dimmed, hope fading with her commission.

Then Jace spoke. “We’ll take the bottle.”

The waiter brightened instantly. Crisis averted.

Rhea blinked. “You don’t drink.”

Jace sipped his tea. “You just started at a new hospital. As your half-mentor, I owe you a congratulatory gift.”

“For me?” she asked, startled.

"If you don't like it, we can return it. Or I'll get you something else," he said, casually signaling the waiter.

"No—no," she said quickly. "I love it."

Another shopping trip with Jace would feel too much like a date. And knowing him, he'd spend even more. Better to stick with the wine.

Since her heartbreak, she'd kept her distance—carefully, intentionally. She couldn't afford another misread moment.

Jace studied her, unreadable, then nodded. "If you want anything else, just say so."

Her heart fluttered—but his calm, almost clinical tone grounded her. *Don't overthink it*, she told herself. *It's just a gift. Nothing more.*

After lunch, he drove her home. At her door, he paused. "I'm staying with a friend—10 Huayuan Road. If you need anything the next two days, call or drop by."

She nodded. "Got it."

As he walked away, her shoulders finally relaxed. She dropped onto the sofa, drained. The gift bag sat on the table, the wine gleaming like a trap. She tucked it into a cupboard and shut the door.

Then she slapped her cheeks. "Get a grip, Rhea. You almost fell for it again. If he's not into you, don't make it up."

The self-talk helped. Her thoughts stilled like a lake after a storm.

The next day, she showed up for Jace's lecture.

Harlow did a double take. "Didn't think you'd come. What changed your mind?"

Rhea shrugged. "Heard it's useful. I'm prepping for my master's exam—I'm here for the content."

She settled in, calm and focused.

While others swooned over Jace's looks or pedigree, Rhea was all business. Harlow stared. "You're *seriously* into studying. It's... impressive."

## Chapter 926

Rhea checked the time and nudged Harlow. They took their seats—but before they could settle, a woman stormed up, eyes gleaming with arrogance.

"I want that seat," she said flatly.

Rhea blinked. She didn't recognize her, but everything—from her LV bag to her diamond-studded earrings—screamed money.

"There are open spots over there," Rhea offered, polite but firm.

The woman sneered. "I said *this* seat."

She reached down and grabbed Rhea's arm, trying to yank her out.

Rhea's patience snapped. She pushed her off. "I was here first. There's no assigned seating. Why are you fixated on *me*?"

The woman shoved a bank card into her hand. "There's two hundred grand on it. No password. Take it and go. That's more than your salary—don't be an eyesore."

Rhea stared at the card.

There was a time she might have taken it. She'd done worse for far less—she remembered the shame of snapping secret photos of Jace. But not anymore.

She pressed the card back into the woman's palm. "I'm a doctor with a modest salary. But I don't take handouts. Keep it. I'm not moving. Try some dignity."

"You—!" the woman sputtered, red-faced. "Do you even know who I am? You're finished here!"

Harlow whispered, tugging her sleeve. "That's Giuliana Bowman. Eldest of the Bowman family. The *Bowman* family. City A royalty. You're poking a tiger."

Bowman. Rhea froze—not in fear, but recognition. Killian Bowman. The albino boy.

Giuliana mistook her pause for submission. "Move, and I'll let it go. Or I'll have you kicked out."

"Why this seat?" Rhea asked, voice flat.

Giuliana flinched. It was the closest seat to the podium. The best view of Jace.

"None of your business," she snapped. "Are you moving or not?"

"No," Rhea said calmly, her tone like steel.

Giuliana looked ready to erupt—until footsteps echoed. Jace entered, white coat crisp, expression unreadable.

Giuliana scowled, stalking off to another seat. But the glare she shot Rhea promised this wasn't over.

Jace's eyes scanned the room, pausing ever so briefly on Rhea.

"Today's topic is cell structure," he said, turning on the projector. "We'll begin with my doctoral thesis."

He was sharp, articulate—outshining even the most seasoned professors. Rhea listened, jotting page after page of notes.

Harlow peeked at her writing. "If you get a promotion or a doctorate, I won't even be jealous. You *earned* it."

Rhea grinned. "Want to borrow my notes?"

Harlow shook her head. "I'm not suicidal."

After the lecture, a nurse she barely knew approached her.

"Can I borrow your notes?" she asked, fidgeting.

"You're a nurse," Rhea said, puzzled.

"Please," the nurse pleaded. "Just a peek. I'll give them back soon."

"Alright," Rhea said, handing them over. "But I need them back today. Seriously."

The nurse's eyes flickered with something—guilt?—but Rhea missed it. She packed up and left.

Behind her, the nurse handed the notes to Giuliana. She skimmed, sneered, tore out pages, and crumpled them like trash.

"Good work," Giuliana said coldly, handing over the same bank card.

By afternoon, the notes still hadn't returned. Rhea searched high and low. Panic rising.

"I'll help," Harlow said. "We'll find her."

They split up, combing the hospital until Harlow finally found the nurse in a bathroom stall—hiding.

"What are you doing here?" Rhea demanded, breath tight. "Where are my notes?"

The nurse bit her lip, trembling.

“Are they okay? You *promised* to return them,” Rhea pressed.

The nurse mumbled, “I... accidentally destroyed them.”

Rhea swayed. It felt like a punch to the chest.

Chapter 927

Rhea stood frozen, heart pounding.

“You *accidentally* destroyed them?” she said, voice low.

The nurse cracked, spilling everything—Giuliana, the bribe, the plan.

Rhea’s anger burned cold. Over a *seat*? Rich people really thought money fixed everything.

She found Giuliana minutes later, still lounging outside the lecture hall, smug and unapologetic.

Without a word, Rhea grabbed a nearby glass and splashed water across her face.

Giuliana screamed, loud enough to stop conversations.

The room stilled. Jace turned, expression hardening when he saw who was involved. He strode over, placing himself in front of Rhea like a shield.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“She assaulted me!” Giuliana shrieked. “Threw water on me!”

Rhea’s hands clenched at her sides. “You offered me money to give up my seat. When I refused, you paid someone to destroy my notes—work I spent weeks on. You think water’s bad? You got off easy.”

“You’re lying!” Giuliana barked.

“Check the security footage,” Rhea snapped.

Jace nodded. “We’ll pull it.”

“No!” Giuliana panicked.

Rhea smirked. “What’s wrong? Something to hide?”

A sharp voice cut in. “Awan.”

Rhea turned to see a man in a black suit and mask. But even disguised, the white lashes and pale eyes gave him away—Killian Bowman.

“You?” Killian blinked at Jace, then Rhea. “What’s happening?”

Jace didn’t mince words. “She needs to apologize. Publicly.”

Giuliana faltered. Then, to everyone’s shock, she bowed her head. “I’m sorry. I was out of line. Please forgive me.”

Rhea blinked. *Did that just happen?*

Killian looked just as stunned.

“I forgive you,” Rhea said coolly. “But others might not be so kind. Clean up your act.”

She turned to go. Killian was her patient, but Giuliana? Not her problem.

Jace walked beside her. “Thanks for backing me up,” Rhea murmured.

He frowned. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You stood by me.”

“But your notes...,” he said quietly, “that’s what hurts.”

Her throat tightened. “They were everything. And now they’re gone.”

“Notes are just paper,” Jace said gently. “Your mind is what matters. If you forget something, call me. Or stop by. I’ll walk you through it.”

Her eyes widened. “You’d really do that?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

Her heart swelled. Jace looked striking in that moment—confident, calm, steady. The thought slipped in: *Could this be more?*

She shook it off. *Don’t be ridiculous.*

“Let’s go back to the hospital,” Jace said. “I’m not your dean anymore.”

“What do I call you, then?” she asked. “‘Dean’ is habit.”

“Jace,” he said simply.

“That feels... wrong. You’re still above me.”



He gave her a faint smile. “You’re not at my hospital anymore. We’re equals now.”

## **Chapter 928**

With the surgery looming, Rhea worked late, triple-checking every detail.

She paused at the operating room doors and took a deep breath.

“You’ve got this,” a nurse said, trying to encourage her.

But the team inside wasn’t hers—they were Iker’s people, not hospital staff. No familiar faces. No one she could trust. Her nerves spiked. She rarely led surgeries, and now she was alone.

Still, there was no turning back.

She slipped on her gloves and glanced up—someone was standing nearby, watching her quietly. His eyes were unreadable, but steady.

Jace.

When their eyes met, his lips curved into the faintest smile.

Her fears dissolved. That small gesture hit like adrenaline, flooding her with courage. She wasn’t alone.

The surgery was brutal—heart and bone marrow procedures demanded absolute focus. Rhea didn’t blink. A single misstep could unravel everything.

Time dragged. The room was silent except for the hum of machines and the faint rustle of movement.

Finally, a soft clink—the scalpel hit the tray.

Rhea peeled off her mask and gloves, a tired smile breaking through. “We did it.”

Outside, the “In Surgery” light still glowed. Jace stood waiting, still as stone—calm, ever-present.

When Rhea emerged, beaming, he already knew. Iker approached, smirking. “Took you long enough. I thought I’d win the bet. What do you say?”

Jace’s face darkened. “Don’t pop champagne at halftime. Same goes for surgery.”

He stepped aside, not wanting to share space with Iker. His distaste was obvious—a rare crack in his usual calm.

Iker usually avoided provoking him, but today he pushed. “Jace, why are you so stubborn? Being a doctor isn’t just about saving lives. Your paper last week—didn’t get published, did it?”

Jace’s eyes flashed. “So it was you.”

He’d written about a rare disease he’d successfully treated—hoping to share the treatment freely. But the paper had been blocked for allegedly containing “illegal content.” Even Jace, ever composed, had laughed in disbelief.

He’d suspected Iker and his mentor, Mr. Lussier.

“You’re part of the association, yet you hoard knowledge for profit instead of saving lives,” Jace said, voice sharp. “You think I’ll stoop to your level? Dream on.”

Iker’s smirk faded. His voice went cold. “I hate your holier-than-thou attitude. I’m warning you out of kindness. If the surgery fails—”

The OR lights flicked off.

The doors slid open, and Rhea bolted out, ignoring everyone but Jace. She threw herself at him, heart pounding. “Jace, I did it! The surgery worked!”

He steadied her with one arm, his voice soft. “You did great.”

Those words—so simple, so warm—filled her with pride. All the stress, the fear, the exhaustion—it was worth it. She had proved to herself she could do this.

All the doubts that had chipped away at her for years—they were gone. A new chapter had begun.

“I have so much to tell you,” she started, then froze. Iker was staring.

She realized she was still clinging to Jace—her former dean, not hers in any other way. Blushing, she stepped back. “Sorry, I got carried away.”

Normally, Iker would’ve mocked the awkwardness. But he was stunned. “You actually did it? My teacher wasn’t even sure it could work. How did you—a nobody doctor with barely any experience—pull this off?”

He grabbed her wrist, hard.

Rhea winced but held her ground. “I just did. If fame matters so much, why didn’t your famous teacher try? Even a thirty percent chance is something. You’re just scared.”

His eyes blazed. “You dare talk about my teacher like that?”

She flinched under his glare—but didn't back down. Not anymore. She was done letting bullies like him take up space in her head.

## Chapter 929

Iker's glare was venomous, but Jace stepped between them and pulled Rhea back. "You don't get to touch her," he said, voice like ice.

"Jace—" Iker began, but Jace ignored him.

He turned to Rhea, gaze softening. "You okay? Does it hurt?"

Her wrist was red, but his concern dulled the sting. "I'm fine. He wouldn't dare with you here. Let's go."

Jace nodded, casting Iker one last, frigid look. "I won the bet. Tell your teacher to keep the association's claws out of Belourvinelle and City A. Or I'll make sure he regrets it."

They walked away. Rhea didn't look back.

Outside, she hesitated. "Jace... what you said to Iker—are you sure you want to burn that bridge? Mr. Lussier's a big deal."

She worried he'd stepped into trouble. Even she knew Lussier's power in the medical world.

Jace's expression softened. "Don't worry. That bridge burned years ago."

His calm eased her nerves.

After surgery, Killian needed months of meds and regular checkups to control his cell division, but he was thankful.

"Thanks to you, I'm not stuck in that institute forever," he told Rhea with a rare smile.

It was the first time she'd seen him smile—cool and luminous, like a snow-elf. It left her briefly stunned.

Killian coughed to snap her out of it.

Jace walked over, holding a blood test report. His face was tight. "Red blood cells are back in range. Division rate's down. Slower than before."

He seemed tense, but Rhea didn't push it. "That's great! Killian, stay a few more days. If these numbers hold, you'll be discharged."

Killian looked from Jace to Rhea. "I'm the CEO of a securities firm. I've been gone too long. I need to get back."

“But you’re not fully recovered,” Rhea said.

Jace cut in. “He can recover at home—with a good family doctor and hospital follow-ups. No need to stay here.”

Rhea smacked her forehead. “Right! I forgot that’s an option.”

She didn’t notice how out-of-character Jace was being—or how he didn’t want Killian hanging around City A Hospital. Around her.

Jace’s expression turned frostier.

Killian’s discharge was quick. Rhea paused her work to see him off.

He glanced at Jace, then asked Rhea, “Dr. Neufeld, may I get a hug?”

She froze, tempted to check Jace’s reaction—but stopped herself. Since when did she need his permission?

“Sure,” she said.

The hug was brief and friendly. But Jace’s eyes darkened. Before she could step away, he grabbed her collar.

“Dean?” she said, startled.

He froze, realizing he’d overreacted.

Killian stepped in smoothly. “Dr. Jace is probably worried about rumors. My bad—I wasn’t thinking.”

Rhea bought it and waved it off. “No big deal. I don’t care about gossip.”

Jace’s face darkened again. He let go reluctantly.

“Don’t care about what?” he asked, voice low.

She blinked. “You said you didn’t care,” he pressed. “Didn’t know my student was so carefree about her reputation.”

Her face fell. Seeing it, Jace sighed and rubbed his brow. “Forget it. I’ve got work. Head back.”

He turned and left. His mood was off. Rhea thought he was mad.

She wanted to follow—but didn’t. Gossip wouldn’t hurt her, but Jace? He’d stayed single all these years—maybe he wasn’t interested in anyone. She couldn’t risk tarnishing his reputation.

Heart sinking, she sent him an apology text.

His phone buzzed. He frowned, resisting the urge to look.

Then another call came in.

“Dr. Jace, it’s me,” said a familiar voice.

## **Chapter 930**

Jace recognized the voice immediately—Killian.

His tone turned cold. “Why are you calling?”

Killian stayed calm. “To thank you—and to remind you. Not everyone can handle how distant you are. Sometimes, you have to show up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jace gripped the phone. He was seconds from hanging up.

But Killian pressed on. “Ever think she might not be unwilling?”

The words hit like a blow.

Jace had always known Rhea’s feelings. But he’d shut them out—hardened by a past he never talked about. He’d always seen himself as a dead tree. Unlovable. Unchanging.

Rhea was light. Life. On a completely different path.

So he’d stayed silent. Distant. Pretended there was nothing there.

Now Killian had shattered that illusion.

“If you want her, make a move,” Killian said. “Someone like Dr. Neufeld won’t wait forever.”

He hung up.

Jace leaned back in his seat, stunned. Few knew he and Killian were close enough to speak like that. And that honesty—it stuck.

The next day, the hospital buzzed with news of Rhea’s success. She was a sensation.

The dean gave her a raise. Harlow rushed in, grinning. “Rhea, you’re famous! The association forum is blowing up. Guess who’s trending?”

Rhea’s stomach sank. “Not me.”

“Why so grim?” Harlow teased. “Be proud!”

But Rhea wasn't thrilled. "I'd rather keep things low-key."

Harlow frowned. "You're applying for grad school. Fame helps. Mentors will line up to work with you."

A mentor was vital—books alone weren't enough. Hands-on training mattered, especially for publishing papers.

Rhea softened. "Let me see the post. I don't have forum access."

She'd never joined the association. It was a closed group run by people like Lussier and Iker. Jace had once been the rare exception—admitted by skill alone—but he'd walked away.

Harlow handed over her phone.

A red headline blared: *"How Did a Nobody Pull Off a Groundbreaking Surgery? Click for the Inside Story!"*

Harlow yanked the phone back. "Just clickbait. Don't let it get to you."

But Rhea was already hurt. "I had hope for the association. But this? Now I get what kind of place it is."

Harlow's eyes widened. "You're crazy to say that out loud!"

Rhea pulled her hand away. "Why not? I earned that surgery. And they're still trashing me? I didn't even read the post—I already know it's garbage."

Even the calmest people break eventually. Rhea wasn't weak—she'd just kept quiet too long. Now? She was done being passive.

Harlow gaped. "What are you going to do—take on the association? You need them for grad school. One word from them, and you're done."

Rhea clenched her jaw. She hated that Harlow was right. Her disgust for the association deepened.

Trying to shake it off, she turned to her inbox—and froze.

New email.

Sender: The Association.

Harlow pointed, gasping. "They emailed you?"

Rhea hesitated, still reeling from the post. Part of her expected a fight. But it was just a message.

She clicked it.

Polite. Formal. Nothing strange—except for the signature.

Jacob Lussier.

“Holy crap,” Harlow whispered. “Mr. Lussier himself emailed you. And left his number. Is he... offering to mentor you?”