

Mr. Edwards' Unraveled Life

Chapter 941

Jace swallowed whatever he'd almost said. "How long are you planning to fuss over me?"

Rhea glanced down—his hand was practically mummified. "Oops. Got distracted. Let me fix it."

She unwrapped the excess, working more gently this time. But her eyes lingered on the gash. "How bad is it? Did the dagger do that?"

He shrugged, adjusting his sleeve. "Just a scratch."

She frowned. "You can't be that careless. You're a surgeon."

"You don't need to worry," he said, lowering his hand. "It'll heal. You should get back to work—I've got surgery later."

"Surgery?" Her voice shot up. "With your hand like that? Are you insane?"

The cut was deep—too close to the tendons for comfort. Surgery required absolute control, especially vascular work. "You'll either mess up the operation or ruin your hand. Is it worth it?"

Jace was silent for a moment, his brow furrowed.

"No one else can do it," he finally said. "Only me."

Rhea's chest tightened. She saw the pressure he carried, the responsibility no one else dared shoulder. And before she could stop herself, she blurted, "I'll do it."

She froze. But then—yes, she meant it. "I can handle it. You trained me. If anyone can step in, it's me."

Jace stared at her for a long second.

Then... a faint smile. "Alright. Go. I'll be here."

He handed her the case file. Surgery was in two hours. Rhea dove into the details—an older man with coronary disease and vascular blockages. High risk. But she forced herself to stay calm.

Jace leaned over her shoulder, pointing to notes in the margins, highlighting risks. His voice was steady, guiding her.

A knock broke their focus.

A male doctor entered, stopping short. “Dr. Neufeld? What’re you doing here?” His eyes flicked to Jace. “Dean, there’s an emergency cardiac case. You’re needed.”

“She’s the lead,” Jace said, nodding at Rhea.

The doctor stared. “Her? Dean, this isn’t a drill. She’s too green for this!”

“She’s ready,” Jace said flatly.

The doctor turned to Rhea. “You do realize this is life or death, right? One mistake and the hospital takes the hit. Can you live with that?”

She hesitated, then pointed to Jace’s hand. “He’s injured.”

The man finally noticed the bandage—and paled. “But this surgery’s complicated—”

Jace cut in. “Enough. I’ll supervise personally.”

That shut him up. “You’ll be there?” he asked, relieved. “Alright. Let’s move. Time’s tight.”

Jace’s name carried weight. His support turned suspicion into reluctant acceptance. Rhea straightened, her nerves braced. This was her moment.

Chapter 942

Jace was a cornerstone of the hospital—the one name everyone turned to in a crisis. Even now, as he limped behind the scenes with an injured hand, his presence steadied the team.

And Rhea.

Her fists clenched as she walked beside him toward the OR. She’d grown, but standing next to him made her feel like a rookie again. Still, she squared her shoulders.

I won’t let you down.

Inside, the OR was tense. Staff exchanged glances. Rhea? As lead?

They didn’t say it, but she saw it in their eyes.

Jace took a seat at the monitor station—quiet, watchful.

Rhea took a breath. Focus.

Scalpel. Clamp. Suture.

Everything flowed. Until—

“BP’s spiking!” a nurse cried. “145 over 110 and rising!”

Rhea’s hand froze over the patient’s chest. Panic threatened to bloom. The numbers were rising fast. One wrong move could mean cardiac arrest.

Then: Jace’s voice, low and steady. “Don’t panic. Breathe. Remember what I taught you.”

She inhaled, grounding herself. *Think, Rhea.*

A moment passed. Then clarity.

“I’ve got it,” she said, issuing orders confidently.

An hour later, the procedure was complete. No complications.

Peeling off her gloves, Rhea let out a long breath. The team buzzed with quiet awe.

A colleague grinned. “That was close, Dr. Neufeld. I’ll admit—I doubted you. Thought you only got here through connections.”

She smirked. “Doesn’t matter now.”

Let the rumors swirl. Her hands had done the talking.

As she left the OR, a nurse told her Jace had already gone. *What?* That wasn’t like him. He usually waited. Drove her home, even.

She frowned. “Why didn’t he say anything?”

He doesn’t owe you that, she reminded herself. *You’re not—*

Still, the worry clung to her. She swung by her ruined clinic, stared at the mess lker left, then muttered, “There’s a flower shop near Jace’s building...”

A flimsy excuse—but she took it. She *needed* to see him.

She hailed a cab and went straight to his place.

The door opened slowly. Mrs. Fehr, the nanny, looked startled. “Miss Neufeld? It’s late...”

“Is the dean alright?” Rhea asked, sensing something wrong.

Mrs. Fehr hesitated. “He... may not want company right now.”

Rhea's heart sank. "Is he hurt? What's going on?"

The older woman sighed. "Sometimes he shuts down. He's had... a difficult past. There are nights he doesn't sleep. He sleepwalks. Mumbles things. Scary things."

Rhea's voice dropped. "Like what?"

"Words like 'kill.' And 'escape.'"

A chill ran down Rhea's spine. "Where is he?"

Chapter 943

Mrs. Fehr glanced upstairs, worry in her eyes. "He went to bed, but... another nightmare. You shouldn't—"

But Rhea was already bolting up the stairs.

She burst into Jace's room and froze. The usually composed man was tangled in drenched sheets, his face contorted in torment, breath ragged. He looked nothing like the calm, untouchable dean. Sweat dripped down his temple. His lips moved soundlessly. His body shuddered.

She rushed to him, gently taking his cold hand. "Jace... it's Rhea. Wake up," she whispered.

He didn't stir.

She cupped his cheek, brushing away the sweat. "It's just a nightmare. You're safe now."

Seeing him like this shattered something in her. This was a man who carried the weight of the world—and had no one to lean on.

"I heard you haven't eaten," she murmured. "Come downstairs with me, okay?"

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open.

Before she could react, his arm shot out. Pain exploded as she was yanked down. In a blink, she was pinned beneath him, his hand crushing her throat.

"Jace—!" she gasped. "It's me!"

He didn't blink, didn't hear. His grip tightened.

Her vision dimmed.

Desperate, she grabbed a pillow and slammed it into his face. He froze.

Seconds passed.

Recognition flickered in his eyes. Then horror.

He recoiled, letting her go as if burned.

Rhea coughed violently, pulling in air. She sat up, dazed, her neck throbbing. Jace stood by the window, backlit by faint light, his expression wrecked with guilt.

“Why are you here?” he said hoarsely, voice cold.

“I was worried,” she rasped. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. And this is my home. I don’t want uninvited guests.” He didn’t look at her.

Her chest twisted. “I’m sorry for meddling,” she said, blinking back tears. She turned to leave, legs unsteady.

She stumbled—he caught her before she hit the floor. The contact was brief, instinctive.

“Thank you... for earlier,” he muttered. “Need a ride?”

“No, I’ll manage,” she said quietly.

She left, her figure swallowed by the night. Behind her, Jace remained at the window, watching until Mrs. Fehr appeared.

“You’re not going after her?”

“She’s fine,” he said, more to convince himself. “We still share location data from the Seguin mess.”

But his fingers curled tightly at his side.

The next day, Rhea was late—a rare thing.

In the cafeteria, Harlow spotted her instantly. “You look like hell. Late to rounds and rocking those dark circles? Spill.”

Rhea poked at her curry rice. “Didn’t sleep well.”

Harlow slid into the seat beside her. “That’s not ‘didn’t sleep well.’ That’s ‘heart shattered into confetti.’ What happened?”

Rhea hesitated.

“Don’t tell me it’s the dean,” Harlow said, eyes narrowing.

Rhea finally sighed. “Why would someone be warm one second, then ice cold the next?”

Harlow blinked. “Oh, honey. That’s textbook fear. Or guilt. Or love. When someone cares too much and doesn’t know what to do with it—they push you away. Sound familiar?”

Rhea’s heart stuttered.

Was that what Jace was doing?

Chapter 944

“You’re talking about the dean, aren’t you?” Harlow asked, grinning like a cat who’d just stolen milk.

“He’s just a friend,” Rhea replied flatly.

“Please. Try lying with your face next time.” Harlow leaned in, half teasing, half serious. “What did he do?”

Rhea recounted last night—the nightmare, the sudden attack, the distant coldness that followed.

Harlow whistled. “Yikes. Sounds like he’s hiding something big.”

“He said he was fine. But he wasn’t. And when I left, he still caught me. Instinctively.”

“There you go,” Harlow said. “If he didn’t care, he would’ve let you fall.”

Rhea’s mind reeled with details she’d missed in the moment—his haunted eyes, the way he couldn’t meet hers.

Suddenly, she stood. “Thanks, I need to go.”

“More important than lunch?” Harlow called after her. “You owe me dessert for this therapy session!”

But Rhea was already sprinting down the hall, heart pounding.

She rounded the corner near the dean’s office—and froze.

Jace was there, deep in conversation with another department head.

“If we secure this deal, it could redefine the entire infrastructure of our care units—Dean?”

But Jace wasn’t listening.

His eyes were locked on Rhea.

She stood still, breath shallow, unsure what to expect.

"I get it," Jace said abruptly, cutting the man off. "Send the proposal to my office. I've got something to handle."

Before the other man could respond, Jace was already walking toward her.

Rhea braced herself, ready for cold indifference—but when he stopped in front of her, his gaze was softer than yesterday, the edge dulled.

"Come with me," he said.

She blinked. "What?"

"You wanted to talk. Let's talk."

Without waiting for a reply, he led her out of the hospital, white coat already ditched, office door locked behind him. His keys jingled as they hit his palm.

"We're leaving?" she asked, confused but following.

"You haven't eaten," he said without looking back. "Neither have I."

Her stomach chose that moment to growl.

Instead of a restaurant, he took her home.

With Mrs. Fehr gone for the weekend, the place was quiet—too quiet. She stepped into the kitchen like she'd been there a hundred times, opening the fridge.

"Mushroom soup?" she called out.

"Sounds good," he replied from the living room.

They cooked quickly, but the air between them was thick with unspoken words. When they finally sat to eat, it was clear neither had much of an appetite.

Rhea set her spoon down. "I'm not waiting anymore."

Jace didn't protest.

"You know everything about me," she said, eyes steady. "But I don't know the parts of you that matter. You keep shutting me out—and I get it, maybe it's habit. But I'm not afraid of your past, Jace. So stop pretending I can't handle it."

Silence.

Then, finally, he spoke.

“I knew you’d come back.”

And then, almost in a whisper: “I was a test subject. A medicine slave. Controlled, experimented on.”

Rhea went still.

Chapter 945

Her breath caught. “A slave?”

Jace nodded, the weight of the word pressing into the room.

“I was used for drug trials—day after day. I was a tool. They didn’t care about pain or damage. I was just data to them.”

His voice didn’t waver, but the pain was there, buried in every syllable.

Rhea couldn’t imagine it. This strong, composed man—once stripped of autonomy, of dignity.

“How did you escape?”

“A fluke,” he said. “During a transport, their guard slipped. I ran. I didn’t stop running until I was free. Then I studied medicine—so I could reclaim what they stole from me... and maybe protect others from going through what I did.”

Tears stung Rhea’s eyes. “Your sleepwalking—”

“Side effect. Neurological damage from the drugs. And the memories.” He gave a dry, bitter laugh. “I kept it hidden. Didn’t want people thinking I was unstable. Or dangerous.”

“You’re not dangerous,” she said fiercely. “You’re incredible.”

She reached across the table and took his hand. “You survived hell and still chose to help others. That’s not something to be ashamed of.”

His eyes softened, some of the distance melting away. She reached up, gently touching his face. “You’re not alone anymore, Jace. Whatever’s haunting you—we’ll face it together.”

His breath hitched.

For the first time, he let himself lean into her touch.

“Okay,” he murmured, gripping her hand tightly.

The heaviness between them lightened just a bit.

Rhea offered a small smile. “Enough heavy stuff. There’s a new movie out—action thriller, amazing reviews. Let’s go.”

He blinked. “Now?”

She stood. “You need a distraction. So do I.”

He didn’t argue.

At the crowded cinema, Rhea struggled with a glitchy ticket machine until a cheerful staffer stepped in.

“Sorry! It’s been temperamental all day,” the girl, Xili, said with a grin.

“No problem,” Rhea replied.

“You two here for date night?”

Rhea opened her mouth to protest, but Jace answered first. “Just taking her out to relax.”

Her heart skipped.

Xili winked. “Well, good call—this one’s been selling fast.”

At the concession stand, Rhea pointed to a deal. “Free chocolate or caramel popcorn with a large bucket. Wanna try it?”

“Up to you,” Jace said, his smile faint but real.

She chose chocolate. Back in their seats, she popped a piece in his mouth.

“Still warm,” she said brightly. “It’s good, right?”

He nodded, and for the first time all day, he looked... lighter.

During the film’s intense moments, she inched closer without meaning to. Their hands brushed in the popcorn bucket, each touch sending tiny jolts through her. At one point, he fed her a piece of popcorn without a word. Her heart swelled.

By the time they left, she could sense a shadow had crept back over him.

So she nudged him playfully. “Hey, how about an escape room next? The new horror-themed one just opened. Supposed to be so scary people don’t make it out.”

Jace raised a brow. “Is this a trap to see me scream like a child?”

She grinned. “Maybe.”

He chuckled, a low sound that made her chest ache with something warmer than relief.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s escape.”

Together.

Chapter 946

Jace looked up, meeting Rhea’s eager eyes. “Sure—if you’re into it.”

At the escape room venue, a staff member explained the themes: horror, adventure, or mystery. Rhea chose “Lost Tomb” for its mystique.

“That one’s tough,” the staff warned.

Jace just shrugged. “We’ll take it.”

The fee was \$150 per person—but if they cleared the room in time, they’d receive a prize. Rhea’s competitive streak flared. “We *are* getting that gift.”

Before she could reach for her wallet, Jace paid. “My treat,” he said, brushing off her protest.

Wristbands secured, they stepped into the dark, cavernous set of the “Lost Tomb.” The puzzles were brutal. Rhea’s initial excitement faltered as she struggled with a complex mechanism.

Jace placed a hand on her shoulder. “Hey—we’ll figure it out together.”

He noticed a hidden lock behind a dusty painting, but the symbols etched into it were baffling. Rhea’s eyes lit up—she remembered seeing similar marks on the map at the entrance. With her guidance, Jace began testing combinations. After several tense attempts, the lock clicked open.

A glowing passage appeared behind a sliding panel.

Rhea stepped forward but tripped over a concealed ditch. Jace caught her, arms tightening around her waist. Their faces hovered inches apart, breaths mingling in the low light.

“Careful,” he murmured, voice shaky.

“Thanks,” she whispered, flushed and breathless.

In the next chamber, surrounded by ancient tomes, Rhea triggered a hidden mechanism. A stone table rose, revealing a puzzle box. Jace studied a nearby mural depicting a ceremonial ritual and guided her in aligning the symbols. When the final piece clicked into place, the box opened, revealing a glowing key.

Their teamwork sharpened as they dodged infrared laser traps, Jace instinctively steadying Rhea with each step. At the final chamber, Rhea turned the key—*creak*—and the heavy door opened.

Staff cheered from the observation room and handed them star-patterned couple's bracelets as their reward.

Rhea shyly extended her wrist. "Could you... fasten it for me?"

As Jace clasped the bracelet, a girl across the room—his former patient—watched them from the shadows, tightly gripping her milk tea. She had long considered herself a match for Jace, dropping hints he always seemed too polite to acknowledge.

Seeing him like this—with *her*—lit a fuse.

She approached, voice sugary-sweet but her eyes sharp. "Dr. Jace! Fancy seeing you here."

Jace's brow furrowed. "Quite the coincidence."

Chapter 947

Rhea caught the girl's sharp stare and instinctively stepped closer to Jace. He rested a hand gently on her shoulder—a calm, protective gesture.

The girl's eyes narrowed. Forcing a smile, she asked, "And who's this?"

Jace answered before Rhea could speak, his voice steady. "This is Rhea—my... friend."

He glanced at Rhea as he said it, a warmth in his eyes that most people would have missed.

The girl scoffed. "Dr. Jace, you're always buried in work, and now you finally unwind—but without me? I thought we were *close*. You took such good care of me when I was your patient."

Her tone dripped with injured sweetness and veiled resentment.

Jace kept his expression neutral. "I'm just here to relax. I didn't overthink it. I'm glad you're doing better."

Rhea, sensing the edge in the girl's voice, maintained her composure. "Hi," she said warmly. "If you were one of Dr. Jace's patients, you were in great hands. I hope you're continuing to heal well."

The girl ignored her completely, turning back to Jace. “Actually, I’ve been feeling kind of off lately. Could you take a quick look?”

She coughed dramatically, leaning closer.

Jace sighed. “If you’re feeling unwell, make an appointment at the hospital. I’m off-duty.”

The girl’s eyes flicked to the matching bracelets on their wrists. Her expression soured. “Cute bracelet. Couple’s style, huh? Since when do you wear cheesy little trinkets, Dr. Jace?”

He paused for half a second before replying. “We won them in the escape room. Just a fun keepsake.”

Her lips curled in a bitter smile. “A *keepsake*, huh? Don’t let someone play you, Doctor. Who knows what she’s really after.”

Rhea’s eyes flashed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The girl lifted her chin. “Don’t act clueless. Cozying up to him, batting your lashes... It’s obvious you’re chasing status. Girls like you always have tricks.”

Rhea’s hands clenched at her sides, her voice trembling with fury. “Watch it. I respect Jace for the man and doctor he is. And I won’t stand here while you insult me.”

Jace stepped between them, his expression stormy. “That’s enough. I’ve been patient. Don’t test me.”

The girl flinched. Her bravado cracked. Her lips parted as if to say something—but nothing came out.

She wanted to scream *I love you*.

But her voice failed.

Tears welled in her eyes.

Rhea watched, heart twisting with sympathy. She opened her mouth to say something, but Jace gently pulled her behind him.

His voice, though calm, was ice. “No more drama. Don’t come near us again.”

The girl staggered back as if slapped. Her voice cracked. “I... I just...”

She broke into sobs, shoulders trembling.

Jace didn’t respond. He took Rhea’s hand and walked away.

Behind them, the girl's voice rang out, raw and desperate. "Jace! I've loved you since the moment you first spoke to me. You were so kind, so gentle... I fought to get better, just so I could stand beside you. But then she showed up—and everything changed!"

Jace stopped—but didn't turn. His voice was cold. "I was your doctor. Nothing more. My heart belongs to someone else. You knew that. Holding on won't change it."

Tears spilled freely down the girl's face.

By the time she looked up again, Jace and Rhea were already walking away.

She sank to the pavement, clutching her head, shoulders heaving.

After a long moment, she stood. Her face was streaked with tears, but behind the pain, something flickered—resolve. Gritting her teeth, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Rhea hesitated, eyes tracking the girl's retreating figure. Her chest tightened.

Without thinking, she broke free from Jace's hand and chased after her.

Jace caught her arm. "What are you doing? She crossed a line. Let her go."

Rhea's eyes were wide with worry. "She's not okay. What if she does something reckless?"

Jace exhaled, tension in his jaw. After a pause, he said, "Fine. We'll check on her. Together."

Rhea nodded, gratitude flashing in her eyes.

They slipped into the crowd, retracing her steps. The streets bustled with people, but eventually, in a quiet park, they found her. She sat on a bench, head buried in her hands, body shaking with quiet sobs.

Chapter 948

Rhea exhaled in relief and knelt beside the girl. "Hey. Are you okay?"

The girl stiffened at her voice. Slowly, she lifted her head—eyes puffy, cheeks streaked with tears. She saw Rhea and Jace, then turned away with a bitter sob.

"What are you doing here?" she croaked. "Did you come to gloat?"

Rhea inched closer. "Of course not—"

The girl suddenly turned on Jace, voice cracking. "Dr. Jace, just leave! Seeing you... it hurts. I want to talk to *her*. Alone. Please."

Caught off guard, Jace studied her for a moment. Then he nodded and stepped away into the trees, giving them space.

As soon as he disappeared, the girl deflated. She wiped her cheeks with trembling hands. Rhea sat beside her and offered a handkerchief.

“Here. Crying this much can’t be good for you.”

The girl accepted it, wiping at her face. Her voice came in a broken whisper. “Rhea... what do you have that I don’t? I’ve been in love with him since the first time he treated me. Why won’t he see me?”

Rhea’s reply was gentle but honest. “Love doesn’t work like that. It’s not about who’s better. Jace and I—we’ve been through a lot together. That bond just... happened. It wasn’t planned.”

The girl sniffled. “I know I can’t force him to love me. But it hurts so much. Watching him care about *you*... it’s like being stabbed.”

Rhea rubbed her back gently. “I get it. Letting go feels impossible at first. Like you’re losing a part of yourself. But clinging to pain won’t make it better. Focus on yourself. Meet new people. You’ll heal—and one day, you’ll realize your world can still be beautiful without him.”

The girl gripped her hand tightly. “Do you really think I can forget him?”

“You can,” Rhea said firmly. “You just have to take the first step.”

For a moment, something shifted in the girl’s eyes—something like hope. Then suddenly, she doubled over, clutching her stomach.

“Rhea... it hurts. My stomach—I think I got too worked up. My condition might be flaring up again. Can you take me to the clinic nearby?”

Rhea’s eyes widened. “Yes, of course!”

She helped the girl to her feet and quickly moved toward the park exit.

From a distance, Jace spotted them and hurried over. “What happened?”

“I’m not feeling well,” the girl snapped, eyes sharp. “I just want *Rhea* with me. Stay back. You’ll make it worse.”

Jace frowned, concern etched across his face, but nodded. “Alright. Be careful. Call me if you need anything.”

He hung back as Rhea helped her toward a nearby clinic.

The waiting room smelled faintly of antiseptic. A middle-aged doctor came forward. “What’s the problem?”

“She’s having severe stomach pain,” Rhea said urgently.

The doctor examined her, palpating her abdomen and asking routine questions. The girl winced and answered faintly—but her eyes flicked to the door every so often.

As the doctor reached for his stethoscope, the girl suddenly sat up, all signs of pain vanishing. “Actually, I feel fine now. No more pain.”

The doctor blinked, confused. “Wait—you were in severe pain just now. We should still run a few tests.”

“I’m fine,” she said, grabbing Rhea’s hand. “Let’s just go.”

She stood up quickly, tugging Rhea toward the exit.

Rhea hesitated. “But shouldn’t we—”

The doctor sighed. “If she gets worse, come back. Don’t ignore symptoms.”

Outside, as they walked away, the girl’s expression turned blank again—but behind her hair, something darker flickered.

Something calculated.

Chapter 949

Outside the clinic, the girl seemed to shed a heavy weight. She took a deep breath, but uncertainty still flickered across her face. Turning to Rhea, she forced a shaky smile. “Hey, can you wait here a sec? I just need to grab something from the convenience store nearby. I’ll be right back.”

Rhea, puzzled, nodded. “Sure. But don’t take too long.”

The girl nodded quickly and jogged off.

Minutes ticked by. She didn’t return.

Rhea stood at the curb, craning her neck, worry creeping in—until a figure suddenly burst from a nearby alley, charging straight at her. Before she could react, a bucket of liquid splashed over her, soaking her from head to toe.

The sharp, acrid stench hit her instantly. Her heart dropped.

Gasoline.

She spun around—and there was the girl, her face twisted in rage, eyes wild with fury. Gone was the meek, pitiful act. All that remained was hatred.

She clutched the empty bucket, panting hard. “Didn’t see that coming, did you?” she snarled, voice unhinged. “You should’ve known this would happen the moment you stole Jace! I love him! I’d crawl through hell for him—but he won’t even *look* at me! Then you show up, and suddenly everything changes!”

Soaked and stunned, Rhea fought to steady her voice. Her eyes burned with tears. “This isn’t love. You can’t force it. You don’t know what Jace and I have been through. I never meant to take anything from you. Everyone’s path is different—you just haven’t met the right person yet.”

Jace arrived just in time to see it all.

He started forward—but froze when he saw the lighter in the girl’s trembling hand.

“Don’t,” he warned, voice tight. “Put it down. You’ll ruin your life. You’ll ruin *hers*. This isn’t the way.”

But she didn’t hear him.

She raised the lighter, the flame trembling in the breeze. “I don’t care anymore! I have *nothing* left! If I can’t have you, *neither can she!*”

Rhea’s gaze flicked to a nearby sprinkler truck. The driver was napping in the cab, the window half open. Keys still in the ignition.

A desperate plan formed.

She steadied her voice. “Please, don’t do this. Let’s talk. I’ll walk away from Jace—if you just calm down.”

The girl hesitated, her eyes narrowing. “You mean that?”

“Yes. I just want everyone to be safe. We can talk it through.”

A tense beat passed. Then the girl bit her lip. “Fine. But if you’re lying, I’ll light it.”

Jace opened his mouth, but Rhea shot him a look: **Don’t.**

She took a cautious step forward. “Let’s move to that corner under the streetlight. It’s quieter there. Safer.”

The girl looked around—saw frightened faces peeking from shop windows, children huddled behind their parents.

“Please,” Rhea urged gently. “No one else should get hurt. You don’t want that, do you?”

Her voice softened further. “Think about it. A fire won’t fix anything. You’ll only hurt people—yourself included. And even if I disappeared... it won’t make Jace love you.”

The girl trembled. Her teeth dug into her lip hard enough to draw blood.

Jace stepped in, voice low but firm. “You’re right to be angry—but don’t take it out on her. This is my fault. I should’ve seen how you felt. If you want to blame someone, blame *me*. But don’t ruin your life over this. Please.”

The girl wavered, her grip on the lighter loosening—

Then she snapped.

“Easy for you to say!” she screamed. “I gave you *everything!* And you want me to just let go?!”

With a cry of fury, she hurled the lighter at Rhea.

It flew through the air—

Rhea dove out of the way.

The lighter clattered to the ground, unlit—but it was enough.

Chapter 950

“Jace—hold her!” Rhea shouted.

Jace lunged, grabbing the girl before she could flee. She thrashed wildly in his arms, shrieking, “You won’t get away! Neither of you!”

He pinned her arms. “Calm down!”

Ignoring the gasoline clinging to her skin, Rhea sprinted for the sprinkler truck. The cab door slammed open. Her hands trembled as she fumbled with the keys.

A sudden cough startled her.

The driver, jolted from sleep, blinked in confusion. She didn’t waste a second. “Please—there’s a fire. If we don’t put it out now, someone’s going to get hurt!”

The driver leaned out and saw the small flame already licking up a trail of gasoline. His face paled. Without a word, he jumped into the driver’s seat.

The engine roared to life.

“Hold on!” he shouted, yanking the lever.

A jet of water burst from the sprinkler, arcing over the pavement and slamming into the growing flames. Steam exploded on contact. In seconds, the fire was out—leaving only scorched asphalt behind.

Rhea collapsed back in the seat, gasping, heart pounding.

Nearby, Jace still had the girl restrained. Her rage had crumbled. She was sobbing now, her fight gone.

The driver turned to Rhea, bewildered. “What the hell just happened?”

Before she could answer, sirens wailed in the distance. Police cars screeched to a halt. Officers swarmed the scene, cuffing the girl and loading her into a patrol car.

A female officer approached Rhea, draping a blanket over her shoulders. “You’re safe now. You’ll need to come down to the station to give a statement, then you can rest.”

She turned to the driver. “Sir, we’ll need you too.”

In the back of the police car, Rhea clutched Jace’s hand. Her whole body trembled.

Jace wrapped his arms around her, his chin resting gently on her head. His hand rubbed slow, soothing circles on her back. The steady beat of his heart calmed her racing thoughts.

Red and blue lights flickered across their faces. Rhea buried her face in his chest. “We made it... we *almost* didn’t...”

Jace brushed a tear from her cheek. “It’s over. I’ve got you.”

The female officer handed them bottled water. “Drink. After your statements, go home and rest.”

Rhea took a sip. Her fingers stayed wrapped around Jace’s.

At the station, the bright fluorescent lights felt harsh. They gave detailed statements, Rhea’s voice faltering at the worst parts. Jace never left her side, his presence grounding her.

By the time they were done, dawn had broken.

Jace hailed a taxi and helped her inside. She leaned against him, eyes watching the city blur by.

“After all that,” she whispered, “just being safe, being *with you*, is everything.”

Jace squeezed her hand. “I’ll protect you. For the rest of my life.”

At home, sunlight poured through the windows. Rhea went straight to the shower, peeling off her gasoline-soaked clothes. The hot water washed away the grime, and slowly, her mind began to clear.

In the kitchen, Jace made two bowls of noodles. He topped them with soft-boiled eggs and a handful of chopped green onions.

When Rhea returned in clean clothes, the bowls were waiting.

He pulled out a chair. "Eat. You need the energy."

She picked up her chopsticks, eyes misting. "Thank you, Jace."

He reached over to ruffle her hair—but his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen and frowned.

"It's the police station," he said, answering quickly.

When he hung up, his expression was heavy.

"They think the girl may have an undiagnosed mental illness. Her outburst triggered something deeper. She wasn't in control."