

# Mr. Edwards' Unraveled Life

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## Chapter 961

Steam filled the hotel bathroom as Rhea frowned at the underwear Harlow had lent her. It was way too big—no matter how she adjusted it, it sagged and slipped. *I have to get my own tomorrow*, she thought, frustrated.

Wrapped in a towel, her damp hair dripping onto the carpet, she was drying off when the doorbell rang. Startled, she assumed it was Harlow and peeked through the peephole. Her heart jumped—Jace stood outside, holding something, calm but expectant.

She tightened the towel and cracked the door open, cheeks flushed. “Dean? It’s late. What’s going on?”

His eyes met hers, briefly drifting lower before he looked away and cleared his throat. “You packed in a hurry. Figured you might’ve forgotten some essentials. I picked this up for you.” He held out a neatly wrapped set of underwear—her exact size.

Rhea’s face went red. *How did he know?* Mortified, she stammered, “T-thanks, but I already borrowed a pair from Harlow.”

A flicker of frustration crossed his face. “Take it anyway. You might not have time to shop tomorrow, and hers probably doesn’t fit right. Don’t be stubborn.” He pressed the package into her arms.

Her fingers brushed the soft fabric. Her heart thudded. Avoiding his gaze, she mumbled, “Thanks. You should get some rest—you’ve got to be tired.”

He nodded, his eyes lingering. “You too. Big day tomorrow. Don’t stay up late.”

As he left, Rhea leaned against the door, emotions swirling. His quiet care on the flight, this awkward gesture—they tangled her feelings into a knot of warmth and nervous excitement. She tucked the underwear away, dried her hair, and got into bed. But sleep didn’t come. His thoughtful actions replayed in her mind until dawn began to lighten the sky.

She jolted awake with a gasp. *Damn—so late!* After a quick rinse and light makeup, she knocked on Harlow’s door. Harlow opened it, eyes barely open. “Why are you up so early?”

“We need to go shopping,” Rhea said, pulling her inside. “Your underwear doesn’t fit—I’m not spending the whole day like this.”

Harlow groaned. “Ten minutes.”

They hit the streets, winding through the bustling foreign city until they found a lingerie shop. Rhea quickly picked out properly sized sets. At checkout, her phone rang—Jace. “Where are you? I’ve been waiting in the lobby. We’re meeting Hexiang Pharmaceutical soon.”

“Crap,” Rhea muttered. “We’re at a shop nearby—be right there.” She grabbed Harlow, and they dashed out.

By the time they made it back, they were both flushed and sweaty. Jace stood in the lobby, checking his watch, tension etched in his face.

“Sorry for the wait,” Rhea panted.

His frown eased when he saw her flushed and windblown. “It’s fine. The car’s outside.”

Harlow followed, muttering to herself. *The dean’s so different with Rhea. All soft and obvious. Juicy.*

In the car, Rhea reviewed her project notes, trying to steady her nerves. Jace stared out the window, lost in thought. When they arrived at Hexiang Pharmaceutical’s sleek headquarters, a receptionist guided them to a conference room. Emmitt, the chairman’s sharp-eyed son-in-law, greeted them with a warm smile.

“Dean, your reputation precedes you. Please, have a seat.”

Once introductions were made, Emmitt jumped right in, passing around data on their anti-cancer drug’s development. Rhea leaned in, jotting notes, laser-focused.

## Chapter 962

Jace and Rhea sat close, heads bent over the data, murmuring back and forth about molecular structures and trial results. Their teamwork was seamless. Harlow, sidelined, scanned the room. One of Emmitt’s assistants kept stealing glances at the pair—something felt off. *Weird*, she thought, mentally filing it away.

They outlined a rough plan, and Emmitt clapped the table. “Good progress. Let’s break for lunch. We’ll finalize the details this afternoon.”

At the rooftop restaurant, Rhea barely touched her food, still absorbed in the documents. Jace nudged her. “Ease up. Rest now, work later.”

His concern warmed her. She gave a small nod.

The afternoon was intense. Tensions rose as they debated trial samples and hospital partnerships, but Jace’s sharp logic and Rhea’s timely data eased the room, bringing everything into alignment by sunset.

“Excellent work,” Emmitt said. “Here’s to success.”

Back in the car, Rhea slumped in her seat, drained. “I hope the trials go smoothly.”

Jace’s voice was soft. “It won’t be easy. But I’ve got your back.”

Harlow grinned from the backseat at the way they sounded—but her phone buzzed, wiping the smile from her face. A familiar hospital voice crackled through. “Harlow, we’ve got a critical patient tanking. Can you come back for a consult? ASAP.”

“I’ll head back now,” she said, hanging up. Turning to Rhea and Jace, she sighed. “Emergency at the hospital. I’m out. The project’s in your hands now.”

“Be safe,” Rhea said, concern flashing in her eyes. “We’ve got it.”

Jace gave a quick nod, then arranged her ride. At the airport, Harlow waved goodbye. Rhea couldn’t shake a vague feeling of unease.

Jace reached over and gave her hand a light squeeze. “It’s all good. The project’s fine.”

The following days blurred into a grind. The lab was chaos—samples got mixed up, data went missing, equipment failed nonstop. Rhea, eyes bloodshot, worked long hours in the lab. Jace coordinated nonstop, his expression growing grimmer.

One day, as Rhea wrestled with a pile of jumbled records, Jace burst in. “This isn’t just bad luck. Someone’s sabotaging us. We can’t keep taking hits.”

Rhea’s eyes narrowed. “But who?”

They reviewed everyone they’d interacted with recently. Just then, Emmitt showed up, all smiles. “Heard there were some hiccups. How can I help?”

Jace’s tone was cool. “Mr. Emmitt, this doesn’t feel accidental. Might be time to check your internal systems. We can’t afford delays.”

Emmitt’s smile wavered. “I’ll look into it.” He glanced at his assistant, whose eyes quickly darted away. Rhea didn’t miss it. She locked eyes with Jace.

Once they were alone, Jace muttered, “Watch that assistant.”

Rhea quickly arranged surveillance. That night, they caught the assistant red-handed, tampering with samples. Jace caught him in the act, fury in his voice.

The assistant broke under pressure, confessing: the vice-director, resentful over losing influence, had orchestrated the sabotage, hoping to bring down the project and push Emmitt out—regardless of the cost to patients.

Emmitt was livid. “I had no idea. He’ll face consequences. I promise we’ll protect the project.”

With the threat exposed, the trials resumed without incident. Patient responses improved. The data turned around. Hope returned.

Months later, the drug's success was undeniable—cases of recovery were steadily rising.

Harlow called, teasing, "You two are killing it! Don't forget I'm slaving away at the hospital. I better get a reward!"

Rhea laughed. "You're in! We'll celebrate and spill all the stories."

She turned to Jace, smiling. "Harlow's still a whirlwind."

## **Chapter 963**

Jace smiled softly, brushing a strand of hair from Rhea's cheek. His touch was gentle. "Harlow's the life of the hospital. We owe her big for holding things down while we were here."

He took Rhea's hand, warmth passing between them. "Come on. We've got some free time before we leave. Let me take you somewhere."

Curious, Rhea followed him through winding streets until they reached a lively old-fashioned lane lined with boutique shops. Jace's eyes sparkled. "We've been buried in work. Pick out some clothes—my treat."

Blushing, Rhea nodded. In a cozy little store, she tried on a light blue dress that twirled beautifully when she moved.

Jace's voice was warm. "It's perfect on you."

She picked a few stylish outfits, and Jace paid without hesitation, carrying all the bags while keeping her close through the crowd.

Then a retro photo studio caught Rhea's eye. Its vintage charm was irresistible. "Let's take some pictures!"

Inside, the photographer smiled. "You two look like a movie couple!" Rhea blushed. "Stop it," she muttered.

Their first few shots were stiff, but the photographer's jokes helped them relax. "Hold her closer! Imagine the beach, wind in your hair!"

Jace pulled her in, whispering, "Smile like that—it's beautiful."

Rhea smirked. "You're not so bad yourself."

They laughed, and the camera captured it all. Later, Rhea wore a cheongsam, unsure of herself, but Jace reassured her, "You're stunning." The photographer agreed, praising her elegance.

They also took modern, fun couple shots—playful and sweet.

Outside, the setting sun stretched their shadows across the sidewalk. Rhea scrolled through the photos, smiling brightly.

Jace wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “They’re not as gorgeous as you, but keep them for when you miss me.”

She rolled her eyes, grinning. “Who says I’d miss you?” But she held the camera tight.

Back at the hotel, she hung up her new clothes, still glowing from the day. Jace watched, smiling, then slipped an arm around her.

“Tired? Go shower and relax,” he whispered near her ear, making her blush.

“Okay,” she said, grabbing her toiletries.

Hot water poured down her back as steam filled the bathroom. She didn’t realize danger was creeping closer.

In the room, Jace was checking hospital emails when the sharp scent of smoke hit him. He yanked the curtains open—flames were rising outside, thick smoke climbing fast.

“Rhea!” he yelled, banging on the bathroom door. “There’s a fire! Get out now!”

Inside, Rhea shut off the water, heart pounding. She grabbed a towel, confused. “What’s happening?” she coughed as smoke slipped under the door.

Jace threw a coat over her and held her close. “Stay with me. We’re getting out.”

They opened the door and were hit by a wave of smoke. Alarms screamed. Guests pushed past them in panic. Flames erupted at the end of the hallway, blocking their way. The heat was overwhelming.

Rhea froze in fear. “We can’t get through...”

## **Chapter 964**

Smoke burned Rhea’s lungs. Every breath was harder than the last, like she was moments from passing out.

Even with a damp towel pressed to her face, she knew help needed to come soon—or it wouldn’t come at all.

Jace kept his arms around her, steady and strong.

Flames roared nearby, heat building fast.

He shielded her with his body, refusing to let go.

Tears welled up in Rhea's eyes.

If this was it—if this was how it ended—it felt far too soon.

She could feel herself slipping.

Still, she spoke, her voice raw and weak: "I want to be with you in the next life."

Jace's arm tightened around her waist. He didn't speak, but she could feel his anger. Not at her—at the idea of giving up.

She said no more.

The smoke stung her eyes shut. Her skin was damp with sweat. Her lungs screamed for air.

Just as she was about to faint, a blast of water cut through the smoke.

The fire hissed.

Firefighters charged in.

They were saved.

Rhea's strength gave out, and everything went black.

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When she opened her eyes again, she was in a hospital bed. White walls. A faint smell of antiseptic.

Her chest ached from the smoke. Even the clean air felt heavy.

A warm hand squeezed hers.

Jace's voice, hoarse but full of relief, said, "You're awake."

She sat up quickly and threw herself into his arms, holding on tightly.

Tears spilled down her cheeks and soaked his shirt.

Jace held her close, his voice soothing. He stroked her hair.

The fear, the relief—it all poured out.

She cried for what felt like forever.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” she whispered.

Jace gave a tired smile. “You just *had* to talk during the fire.”

“It was only a few words!” she protested. “I was afraid I wouldn’t get another chance.”

She’d been terrified, overwhelmed by love and fear. But Jace... he’d stayed strong the whole time.

He hugged her tighter. “I knew we’d make it. We’re going to live a long, happy life—together.”

Rhea’s heart skipped at the quiet certainty in his voice.

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Recovery took time.

Jace bounced back quicker than Rhea, and he took care of her like she was his whole world.

Once she was cleared to leave the hospital, she got a few days off to recover.

Jace took her out for a walk, just to lift her spirits.

They held hands as they strolled. Things felt normal again... but deeper. More real.

A cool breeze passed.

Rhea paused. “Are you sweating?” she asked, rubbing his palm.

He shrugged with a smile.

Then music started playing around them. Soft and romantic.

Dusk fell, and twinkling lights lit up around them.

Rhea froze, heart racing, as she realized what was happening.

Jace got down on one knee.

“I know this is sudden,” he said, “but I don’t want to wait another second.”

His words poured out, full of love.

Rhea couldn’t even process them all—she just knew how she felt.

Before he could finish, she blurted, “I do,” her eyes shining with tears.

Jace laughed, half-exasperated. "I didn't even ask yet."

He was just pulling out the ring.

"I don't care," she said, wiping her eyes. "I knew what you were going to say. My answer's yes."

Jace slid the ring on her finger and kissed her hand.

Fireworks lit up the sky.

Even after being by her side day and night, he'd still found time to plan all this.

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Wedding plans moved fast.

Rhea, ever efficient, picked the venue and dress in a heartbeat.

Jace tried to slow her down. "No need to rush. I want this perfect."

She grinned. "My only regret would be waiting one more day to marry you."

He laughed and gave in.

Everything came together easily, like it was meant to be.

When she tried on her wedding dress, Jace's gaze burned with love.

She looked away, shy—but he pulled her into his arms.

"I'm thinking the same thing you are," he whispered. "I can't wait to see you as my bride."

## **Chapter 965**

Rhea squirmed under Jace's obvious stare as she tried on dresses.

Even the bridal shop staff noticed, sneaking glances at them.

Her cheeks flushed—she felt totally exposed.

While helping her with a dress, a clerk smiled. "You two are really in love."

Rhea froze, unsure what to say.

"I've worked here for years," the clerk added, "and I've never seen a guy look at anyone the way he looks at you."



Warmth bloomed in Rhea's chest. She couldn't help but smile.

"So that's how it is," she murmured.

Knowing Jace's gaze showed how deep their bond ran, she stopped being shy about it.

Picking a dress gave her a headache. Jace didn't care. "Wear them all."

She rolled her eyes. "It's a wedding, not a runway show. Nobody's got time for that."

He leaned in and whispered, "Then buy them all. Wear them just for me."

Her face turned bright red. She realized too late he was setting her up. "Who even buys that many dresses?"

He just grinned. "My wife's stunning. I'll buy her all the pretty things and enjoy the view."

She turned away, flustered, and Jace pinched her cheek, clearly loving her reaction.

After hours, they finally chose a dress. Invitations and wedding details were falling into place.

At work, Rhea noticed her coworkers whispering around her, avoiding her questions.

She cornered Harlow, who insisted, "We're just excited! Nothing shady."

Rhea narrowed her eyes. "Now you sound even more suspicious."

Something was definitely going on, but she couldn't figure it out.

Jace just laughed. "Let them plot. It's all out of love."

The wedding day arrived. Harlow, acting as bridesmaid, and the others blocked Jace at the door, demanding red envelopes stuffed with cash.

Rhea watched, stunned, as the money piled up.

Harlow grinned, patting the overstuffed bag. "Good thing we planned ahead."

The bridesmaids burst out laughing, joking about "robbing the groom" and ruining the wedding night.

Eventually, they let Jace and his groomsmen through.

Seeing him in a suit with flowers in hand, Rhea's heart skipped.

But Harlow blocked him again. "Think it's that easy to take our Rhea?"

She snapped her fingers, and the bridesmaids fired off questions.

“Who’s handling the money after the wedding?”

Jace didn’t even blink. “My wife.”

“Who runs the house?”

“I listen to my wife.”

“Who’s doing the chores?”

“Me.”

After a dozen quickfire questions, they let him through.

“You passed round one,” Harlow said with a smug smile.

But she stopped him again. “Words aren’t enough. We need it in writing.”

A table appeared, stacked with paper contracts—Jace had to sign and fingerprint every single one.

The bridesmaids grabbed his hand and pushed him through the stack like pros.

He barely had time to glance at what he was signing. On the last one, he paused. “What’s this?”

No one answered. They just pressed harder.

He glanced at Harlow. “This your idea?”

She smirked. “You think the dean should sign a bonus-doubling pledge?”

Chaos erupted. Even Jace’s groomsmen betrayed him, helping force his signature.

The whole room nearly fell apart—if not for the tight ceremony schedule.

Out on the lawn, friends gathered. Jace spotted Norah and Kevin approaching. Norah held out a gift box.

“Congrats! Happy wedding!” she said brightly.

“Thanks,” Jace said, taking the gift before slipping away to find Rhea.

She was teasing Harlow. “I’m married now, and you’re still single. Better get moving!”

Harlow shrugged. "Takes two. If he doesn't show up, what's the point?"

## **Chapter 966**

Rhea smiled at her bouquet.

She had a plan.

The bouquet toss was coming up.

Her white dress swayed as she raised the flowers, faking a few throws.

Everyone relaxed—then she spun and aimed straight at Harlow.

The group around Harlow scattered, leaving her totally exposed.

The bouquet flew through the air. Harlow instinctively stepped back, avoiding it.

But the flowers were about to hit the ground.

She lunged, grabbing them just in time.

Her skirt got caught, and she tripped.

Before she hit the ground, strong arms caught her. A deep voice asked, "You okay?"

Flustered, she stood quickly, brushing herself off. "I'm fine."

In the shuffle, a button had popped off his shirt. She picked it up awkwardly. "Here."

Then added, "I can't sew, though."

He chuckled. "It's okay."

With the ceremony done, the lawn buzzed with games, snacks, and laughter.

Rhea changed, while Jace hovered nearby. "We should be out there greeting people," she said.

"I'm staying," he said, then smirked. "Besides, they're planning to crash our wedding night."

Her face turned red. He leaned closer. "They're med students. They know drinking too much kills the mood."

The makeup artist returned, cutting him off. Rhea quickly changed the subject. "They've been plotting for weeks."

Jace scoffed. “If anyone takes it too far, I’ll double everyone’s bonus—except theirs.”

Speaking of bonuses, he asked, “Where’s that last paper I signed?”

“Probably with Harlow,” Rhea said. “Her idea, her win. She’ll hang it over you.”

Jace didn’t care. His eyes stayed on her. “I’m just glad I married you. They can have the bonus.”

Rhea smiled, reassured. “Good thing Harlow caught the bouquet, or my plan would’ve failed.”

She had rigged it—telling everyone else to dodge so Harlow would be forced to catch it.

“By the way,” she asked, “who caught her when she tripped? He seemed nice. Think he’s single? Maybe a good match?”

Jace frowned. “It’s our wedding, and you’re scouting guys?”

She glared. He gave in. “He’s a good guy. Works in biotech, been dealing with some stuff. I can introduce them, but no promises.”

Rhea nodded. “Love’s all about timing. We’ve done our part—bouquet and intro. The rest is up to her.”

Once Rhea was ready, they walked out together.

A group waited with wine glasses, clearly planning to toast Jace until he dropped.

But he came prepared with hangover meds and played along.

Rhea stepped in, smiling. “What’s this about?”

“Just celebrating!” they all said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

They scattered under her gaze, but she could tell—they were pacing themselves.

“They’re not rushing to get you drunk,” she noted. “They’re in it for the long game.”

Then she had an idea. “While you’re still sober, talk to your friend about Harlow.”

Jace pinched her waist. “While I’m sober? I’m going to be up all night.”

She blushed. “Focus!”

He grinned and looked across the lawn.

His smile widened. "Maybe we don't need to play matchmaker."

Rhea followed his gaze.

Harlow was at the dessert table, bouquet in hand, deep in conversation with the man who caught her.

They were standing close, totally focused on each other.

And Harlow was still gripping that bouquet tight.

## **Chapter 967**

Rhea didn't interrupt Harlow's moment. She turned to Jace and smiled softly.

The wedding finally wrapped up, and the guests began to leave.

Rhea let out a long breath. The whole day had worn her out.

Back at home—now filled with touches of her style—everything felt peaceful and new.

"Thanks for today," Jace said, gently massaging her shoulders with just the right pressure.

She tensed up at first, her hand instinctively covering his.

He slid her hand away. "Relax, it's just me."

Right... they were married now. Husband and wife.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

Jace raised an eyebrow. "Still so formal?"

Her cheeks turned pink as she met his teasing gaze. His eyes darkened with emotion.

"Bath's ready," he whispered, leaning closer. "Join me?"

She couldn't speak, but her arms wrapped around his neck—it was answer enough.

He picked her up and carried her like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Marriage changed everything. Now she shared her space with someone else.

At first, seeing his things on her side of the bed startled her. And every time it reminded her of the night before, she'd blush like crazy.

But bit by bit, that awkwardness faded. They started to settle into a rhythm.

Back at the hospital, everyone was quick to offer congratulations.

Two nurses greeted her at the entrance. “Morning, Mrs. Dean! Back already?”

The title caught her off guard. “Just call me Dr. Neufeld.”

She dove into work, picking up where she left off like she’d never been away.

At lunchtime, she skipped the cafeteria and waited outside.

Jace showed up right on time. “Cafeteria or out?”

She handed him the coat he left that morning. “Cafeteria. We’ve got to save money now.”

“Save?” he repeated.

“We’re married now,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Time to think about the future. Every dollar counts.”

He didn’t mention the money he had. He already knew she was careful with spending and didn’t argue. “Alright.”

Before they walked off, she brought up something serious. “Let’s talk about the charity—helping the kids in the mountains and that orphanage project. Now that I’m back, we should get it moving.”

They had talked about this before the wedding—a hospital-led charity that others had signed up for too.

“I already picked an orphanage,” Jace said.

“You did?” she asked, surprised. “Weren’t we planning to build a new one?”

“It would’ve been too expensive,” he said. “Plus, new places don’t have staff or credibility. I found one that’s bankrupt. They have kids and caregivers already but no funds to reopen.”

Her eyes lit up. “So we’d be helping them get back on their feet?”

She grabbed his face and kissed him quickly. “That’s amazing!”

She was too happy to notice how intensely he was staring at her.

Then, without warning, Jace pulled her into a deep kiss.

She gasped and clutched his collar. “Jace, we’re at the hospital! Chill!”

He didn’t stop. He’d been working nonstop too, and now he wanted her close—really close.

When he finally let go, her cheeks were bright red. She wiped her lipstick. “You’re impossible. Can’t we wait till we’re home?”

Honestly, one reason she returned to work early was to get a break from how clingy he’d become. Marriage had turned him into a full-on romantic, and it was overwhelming.

“If you keep this up,” she warned, “I’m setting rules.”

He just hugged her tighter. “So unfair. Already tired of your husband?”

His low voice was full of charm. “I just want to be close to you. Is that so bad?”

She almost melted—but held her ground. “There’s a time and place. Come on, let’s go to the cafeteria. We’ll talk about the plan later.”

She wrapped a scarf around her neck and walked out fast before he could pull anything else.

## **Chapter 968**

The orphanage plan came together quickly, but Rhea and Jace knew they needed to visit in person.

They drove out one day.

The location was decent, but the building looked abandoned—cracked walls, rusted gates, and faded paint.

“This place looks like it could collapse,” Rhea said. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

A woman in a worn wool coat stepped out and gave a tired smile. “You’re right. It was supposed to be torn down this fall. But we’ve got more than thirty kids here—plus the staff and me, around forty people. Nobody’s figured out where we’d all go. So for now, we’re still here. Small miracle, I guess.”

She introduced herself as the director.

Rhea apologized for being blunt. She hadn’t expected the director to be so kind—or so worn down.

“It’s cold out here,” the director said. “Come inside.”

Inside, the poverty hit hard. There was nothing fancy—just old furniture and chipped walls. The director handed them warm water.

“Sorry, no real tea,” she said.

Rhea took a sip and smiled. “This is fine. I’m not much of a tea drinker anyway. Let’s talk.”

She went over the plan they had drawn up. It wasn't complicated, but it covered everything that mattered.

The director's eyes lit up as she read. "You're really going to fund this? Fix the building? Keep the staff and kids here?"

"Absolutely," Rhea said. "It's hard enough to find good caregivers. And those kids deserve a real home."

The director clutched the papers, tears running down her face. "Thank you. I don't even know what to say."

Rhea's heart tightened. The woman wasn't even 45 but looked so much older. She'd run the place for twenty years with almost nothing.

"I admire you," Rhea said gently.

Once the director calmed down, Rhea asked if she could meet the children.

"Of course," the director said. "But... there's one boy. He's not very social. Don't take it personally."

Rhea followed her to a classroom where a few caregivers were teaching. They couldn't afford real teachers or materials.

She stopped in the hallway, watching from a distance.

Most of the kids were chatting, focused on the lesson.

But one boy sat alone in the corner, quietly staring at a building block.

"Is that him?" Rhea asked.

The director nodded with a soft look. "His name's Joaquin. His mom died after divorcing his dad. Then his dad had a heart attack. No family left. He came here. He used to be such a happy kid... now, he doesn't talk. Just holds that block."

Rhea's chest ached. It looked like trauma-induced autism.

"Does he respond to you at all?" she asked.

The director shook her head. "No. Won't even take candy. Just sits with that block all day."

Rhea was almost certain now. Some kids are born with autism, but others withdraw because of deep trauma. Either way, they shut down, trapped in their own world.

She couldn't ignore it.



“Can I spend some time alone with him?” she asked. “I want to get a better read on his condition.”

The director hesitated, then agreed.

Class ended. The kids went to play. Joaquin stayed, silently clinging to his block.

A caregiver pointed him out. “He’s still eating. He can’t feed himself. Just a heads-up—dinner’s soon.”

## **Chapter 969**

Rhea walked up to Joaquin’s desk and squatted down to his level. “I know some cool block tricks. Want to see?”

Joaquin froze, glancing at her.

She kept her tone light. “Blocks can be tough. Got more of them somewhere?”

To her surprise, Joaquin mumbled, “Yeah, in my room.”

Just a few words, but they lit her up—he could communicate.

They grabbed more blocks and played together all afternoon.

When food arrived, Joaquin ignored it. His stomach growled, but he didn’t react.

Rhea didn’t let it slide. She held up a block. “I’ll teach you this trick—but only after you eat. Deal?”

“I’m not hungry,” he muttered, right as his stomach rumbled again.

She didn’t call him out. “Well, I’m hungry. Mind if I eat first?”

Joaquin thought about it, his little face oddly serious.

Rhea knew autistic kids could be incredibly smart, just locked inside their own world.

Joaquin eventually put the block down and ate.

By evening, their block structure was done. Applause startled him—kids, caregivers, and the director had gathered around.

“Wow, that’s awesome!” a girl shouted. “Can I play too, Aunt Dean?”

The director smiled. “Ask Joaquin first.”

The girl ran up to him. Rhea held her breath, worried he'd shut down—but he just tightened his grip on a block, then relaxed.

More kids joined in, drawn to the blocks.

Rhea stepped back and let them take over.

She kept visiting, playing with Joaquin regularly. Slowly, the other kids warmed up to him. They realized he wasn't distant—just didn't know how to connect.

Bit by bit, he started talking to them.

The director smiled warmly. "You made this happen, Dr. Neufeld."

Rhea waved it off and took a sip of water—then froze. A strange smell of food hit her, and her stomach flipped. She ran to a trash can and dry-heaved.

The director looked concerned. "Are you okay?"

Rhea went still. Her period was late.

Her hand rested on her stomach as her heart started racing.

"Go get checked," the director said gently.

Rhea tried to brush it off, but she left soon after, too shaken to stay.

Back at the hospital, she skipped seeing Jace and went straight to OB-GYN. A doctor she knew ran some tests.

"Congratulations, Dr. Neufeld," she said with a grin. "You're three weeks pregnant."

Rhea's world spun. She touched her belly, still in disbelief. "Really?"

The report confirmed it. Her legs felt weak.

They hadn't used protection—they'd both wanted kids—but it was happening faster than she expected.

She decided to surprise Jace.

She texted him, saying she felt sick and was going home early.

Jace, fresh from surgery, passed his afternoon cases to a colleague. "You take over—I need to check on my wife."

He rushed home, worried.

But instead of finding her sick, he walked into a cozy scene—food on the table, flowers, and cake. Rhea untied her apron and smiled. “Wash up. Dinner’s ready.”

He didn’t move. “What’s going on?”

She sighed and handed him the report. “I wanted to surprise you.”

His serious look disappeared as he read the paper. His face lit up, and he lifted her off the ground. “Is this for real?”

## **Chapter 970**

Rhea yelped, clinging to him. “Put me down, Jace!”

He quickly set her down, sheepish. “Sorry—forgot you’re pregnant.”

She waved it off. Hugs weren’t dangerous in early pregnancy. They just had to be careful.

Once the excitement settled, Rhea remembered something. “What about the welfare home?”

Jace looked at her. “You still want to go?”

“Of course,” she said right away. Renovations weren’t done yet, and she couldn’t just disappear on Joaquin after everything.

She expected him to object and was ready to argue.

But he simply smiled. “Then go. Just be careful.”

Her surprise showed. He chuckled. “I’d never stop you from doing what matters. Marriage isn’t a cage—I want you to stay true to yourself.”

Her heart swelled. She was glad she chose him.

To stay safe during the pregnancy, she cut her visits down to every three or four days instead of every other day.

The next time she came, something surprising happened. Joaquin, usually quiet, walked right up and grabbed her hand, leading her inside.

He brought her to his classroom and pointed at the table. The block structure they’d started together was finished.

Rhea crouched down, smiling wide. “You finished it? All by yourself?”

He shook his head and pointed outside.

The other kids and caregivers were watching. She hadn't even noticed.

Rhea stood up, a little embarrassed. "Sorry I haven't come as often. I've been busy."

A caregiver smiled. "It's okay. Joaquin's been waiting for you, always looking out the window. He's never done that before."

Guilt tugged at her. With his parents gone, who else would he wait for?

"Joaquin," she said softly, "I'll visit more, okay?"

He held up his pinky. "Promise?"

"Pinky swear—for a hundred years," she said, smiling as she linked her pinky with his.

She was about to head home when a voice froze her in place—a voice she never thought she'd hear again.

Her smile faded as she turned. "Phillip?"

It was him. In a wheelchair.

She hadn't seen him in years. That part of her life felt buried. If he hadn't shown up now, she might've forgotten him completely.

He wheeled closer, like he wanted to talk.

Before he could speak, a black car pulled up. Jace leaned out the window. "Get in, let's go."

His tone was calm and gentle. He didn't even look at Phillip—just focused on her.

Rhea had already called him earlier, so his arrival wasn't a surprise.

She glanced at Phillip. "You look better. Clean now, I guess. But I have nothing else to say."

She turned to leave. She wasn't someone who went back to what she'd already walked away from.

But Phillip called out, "I know you hate us. But we were your family for over twenty years. Your sister's memorial is coming up. Will you come?"

Rhea froze.

He went on. "Just one meal. I know we messed up. But we still think about you."

In the car, Rhea twisted her fingers—a sign she was torn inside.

Jace glanced at her. "If you want to go, go."

"I don't know," she said quietly. Some people in that house still mattered to her. But the dead couldn't come back. And the cruelty of the Seguin parents was hard to forgive. Her only soft spot was her sister's memorial.

"It's too soon to decide," she murmured. "I've got a lot on my plate right now."

Jace nodded. He didn't pressure her.

And it was true—between work and the orphanage, she was busy.

Three days later, the renovations at the welfare home began. The residents were temporarily moved out, and the engineers took over. That gave her some space to think.

After going back and forth, she made her decision.

She'd go—but only for her sister.

Jace didn't say much. He simply grabbed the car keys. "I'll drive you and wait downstairs."