

## Chapter 53

[Caden]

"Caden, don't be like this. I just want to spend some time with you. Isn't that what your mom and dad want?"

Sasha insists, her voice rising in that whining tone that makes me want to slam my head against the steering wheel.

"Enough!" I cut her off. "I'm not in the mood to play nice right now."

She stares at me, wide-eyed, as if I've just slapped her. But she does me a huge favor when she grabs her purse, flings the door open, and steps out onto the pavement.

"I thought you'd be happy about this, now that she's gone out of your life," she says, trying to hold back tears. "Isn't that what you always wanted? You treated her like shit so she would leave you. And now when she's finally gone, you're acting so weird—"

I don't wait for her to finish.

I slam the door shut and peel out of there before she can say anything else.

When I return home, I toss the car keys to the guard and head inside.

The moment I'm in, I'm surrounded by mom and Avery.

"How did it go?" Mom asks. "Did she drop the case? Is Avery safe now? Say something, Caden. I'm dying here. "

"Mom!" Avery cries, tugging on mom's arm. "I'm so scared. What if Vivienne proceeded with the investigation and my name comes up? I don't want to end up in jail, mom. Please, do something. Please, please, please."

My head hurts like hell.

I shove past them and head for the liquor cabinet. I need something strong to drown out the noise and the thoughts banging around in my skull.

"Caden, talk to us," Mom presses, trailing behind me like a shadow. "What happened? Did she agree to stop this madness or not?"

I pour myself a stiff drink and down it in one go, ignoring the burning sensation as it slides down my throat.

"Yes, she did."

And I didn't even have the courage to hand those papers to her myself.

"Oh, God! Oh, thank God. For a minute, I thought...anyway, we don't have to worry about that now do we?"

She turns around. "Did you hear that, darling? Your brother took care of it. He must have shown her who's the boss here. Good for her. She needed to learn her place. She couldn't just go around throwing accusations at people when her own acts are questionable as hell. Isn't that right, Caden?"

I pour another drink for myself.

Avery breathes a sigh of relief, and before I know she's standing right next to me.

"Thank you, big bro. I knew you'd handle it. I'm so relieved to hear that. So damn relieved. But..." she trails off, as if she has something in mind but doesn't know if it's the right time to say it out loud. "... how did you convince her? She must have made it really difficult for you, didn't she? She must have asked you of something..." she gasps. "Did she demand more money from you? Or something else?"

I glare at her, and for a second, she backs off.

Mom touches my shoulder, and I flinch, not wanting to be touched. "You did the right thing, Caden. You did what needed to be done for the family."

"Thanks, big bro," Avery says, her voice softening. "I know I can be a pain sometimes, but I really appreciate what you did."

I scoff, not bothering to hide my disdain. "You have no idea what I had to do to get her to back off. So don't think this was easy."

Avery's eyes widen, but she doesn't say anything more. She probably thinks I had to bribe Vivienne or worse. Let her think that. It's better than the truth.

Mom watches me for a moment, then turns to Avery. "Come on, dear. Let's leave your brother alone. He's had a long day."

They finally leave me in peace.

I sink into the couch, the drink still in my hand, and stare at the

ceiling.

My phone buzzes, snapping me out of my thoughts. It's a text from Johnathan: "Car's being tracked. Will update."

I finish my drink and pour another, hoping the alcohol will numb the thoughts running through my head.

If Vivienne thinks she can escape and start over, she's got another thing coming. I'm not done with her yet. Not by a long shot.

My phone chimes again, this time it's a call from Ashton, the only person I can halfway tolerate.

"Done with him already?" I ask, hearing him pant like he's been through hell.

"Not yet. Just calling out of courtesy, in case you want a turn. He's good for venting, you know, and you sounded like you needed to blow off some steam.

Oh, hang on, this idiot's trying to say something..." He pulls the phone away and uses that condescending tone that makes me cringe. "What's that? You want more of our loving? Oh, Ricky boy, don't worry, Daddy's gonna be here soon to make your day." He gets back on the line, and his tone is back to normal. "You're coming, right? He's all hyped up for you."

I down the drink, letting the burn hit hard. "Yeah, I'll be there in twenty."

Nobody touches my wife and lives to tell about it.

## Chapter 54

[Vivienne]

It's been a month since Caden signed the divorce papers, and today is the hearing for the final decree.

To say I'm nervous is an understatement. Not because I'm unsure about the divorce anymore, but because it will be the first time in a month that I see Caden, and I don't know how that's going to go.

"Stop biting your lips, for God's sake!" Rosita groans, reminding me for the hundredth time during the ride from my new place to family court.

"I know, I know. I just can't help it. It's like my body's on autopilot or something."

She rolls her eyes. "Well, autopilot's about to run you into a wall. You need to focus. Today is about closure, not reopening old wounds."

I nod, trying to convince myself of that. The closer we get to the courthouse, the more my stomach feels like it's tied up in knots. I've done everything I could to move on—new place, new routine, new me. But facing Caden again is like standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the wind to push me over.

We finally pull up in front of the courthouse.

Ro and I step out while Marcus drives away to park the car.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself as we walk towards the

entrance.

"You've got this, Viv," Ro says and I can't help but feel myself warming at her words.

I smile at her and she opens the door for me.

We head to the courtroom where the hearing is scheduled, and I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. I scan the room, my eyes landing on Caden, who is sitting on one of the benches, staring straight ahead. His presence is overwhelming, a reminder of everything I'm trying to leave behind.

He turns his head slightly, and our eyes meet. 1

I force myself to look away, focusing on the judge's bench at the front of the room. This isn't the time to get caught up in the past.

The judge enters, and everyone rises. The hearing begins, the legal jargon flying back and forth. My attorney speaks on my behalf, detailing the terms of the divorce.

"Ms. Sinclair, do you have any final words before I issue the decree?" the judge asks, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

I take a deep breath and stand up. "Yes, Your Honor. I just want to say that I'm ready to move forward, to start a new chapter in my life. I wish Caden all the best, and I hope he can find happiness too."

The judge nods, and with a bang of his gavel, it's over. The final decree is issued, and just like that, my marriage is officially dissolved.

When I step outside the courthouse, surprisingly, the world doesn't

feel any different. Strange. I thought I would feel relieved, but I don't. And it makes no sense.

"So, how does it feel?"

A voice comes from behind me, and my heart stops beating for a second. Heat rushes to my face, but I try my best to calm down. I turn to face him, putting on a smile that I really hope reaches my eyes.

"Fantastic, as it turns out," I say, meeting Caden's gaze. "Better than I expected. How about you? Your girlfriend must be over the moon, right?"

He doesn't say anything, just stares, his dark eyes boring into mine in a way that makes me slightly uncomfortable. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, trying to keep my smile steady.

"So, this is it, huh?" I ask, slightly miffed. "Are you going to say something, or just keep staring?"

His eyes narrow a little, and for a moment, I wonder if he can see through the act.

But then the moment passes, and I'm done.

"I don't have time for this..." I say and decide to leave, but he grabs my arm and turns me around. I want to say that it was forceful, but it really wasn't. It was more like a strong request.

"You didn't ask for anything during the proceedings. No money, no assets." He sounds incredulous, like I'm insane for letting it go that easy. "Why?"

"Because I don't want any of it. They mean nothing to me. I want to move on with my life, and having those things just remind me of you."

His eyes soften slightly, but just for a split second. The hardness returns so quickly that I'm almost sure it was my imagination. "So, you just want to forget about me?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I want."

He steps closer, invading my personal space in a way that makes it hard to breathe. "And you expect me to just forget about you?"

I feel the heat rising in my cheeks at his words. My heart starts to race, and my mouth goes dry.

"I don't think it will be difficult for you. You were always good at forgetting, remember?"

I'm surprised at how calm I am.

Maybe because I'm telling the truth. I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

"Is that what you think?"

I try to look away, but his fingers curl around my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"Yes, that's what I think. And because that's true."

He's silent for a moment, as if contemplating my words.

Then his hand drops to his side and he steps away.



I watch him leave without another word, my chest tightening with a familiar ache that I've felt so many times before.



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