

Unconscious 761

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The realization that Adrian held both him and Jasper in such low regard left a sour taste in his mouth. Sure, plenty of people had known they couldn't hold a candle to Theodore, but this was the first time anyone had ridiculed them to their faces.

In that instant, he found himself almost grateful for Theodore's passing. At last, he could step out of the shadow of that overbearing so-and-so. Being constantly weighed against his own son was nothing short of a cruel joke.

After what felt like an eternity, Adrian slowly lifted his head, finally showing his hand. "Well, I don't give a damn about what I've already lost on you."

Relief was just starting to bloom in Darian when Adrian dropped his next bombshell. "But, I'm out of the Anderson Group. I want you to buy back the shares I hold."

Adrian's words left Darian with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was happy that the shares of the Anderson Group would no longer be given to outsiders. But on the other hand, he was worried that he could not find any money now.

Darian was silent for a moment and then finally said, "Not now, I don't have that much cash on hand."

He was still worried about the lack of funds just now, so it's unlikely that he would be able to find the money to buy back Anderson Group shares now.

Adrian didn't seem the least bit surprised by Darian's financial situation and said offhandedly, "Based on the current market value of Anderson Group shares, the total value of the shares I hold is 2.5 billion. If you buy them back now, I can sell them back to you for another 5% off."

Darian was a little moved by the offer.

If he bought those shares from Adrian, he would regain full ownership of the Anderson Group and at the lowest cost. He would then have complete control over the company.

But at the same time, if he bought back the Anderson Group with this money, it meant that he had to abandon the Olympic Village project.

Darian was unwilling to back out of this project at this point. With an embarrassed look, Darian tried to explain. "Mr. Perkins, it's not that I don't want to, it's..."

"Well, I can still reduce the price by another 3%. That's the lowest price you can get. Think carefully. If you don't agree, you won't be able to get such a low price in the future," Adrian said causally, with his legs crossed.

Seeing that Adrian just lowered the price time and time again, Darian figured that perhaps Adrian was trying to get rid of the mess that was the Anderson Group. After all, since Theodore's death, Anderson Group shares had plummeted.

Thinking of this, Darian made up his mind.

With a smile on his face, he said calmly, "Mr. Perkins, I'm really strapped for money these days. Since you have deep pockets, you can take the shares."

As soon as Darian said so, Adrian's relaxed expression turned cold.

Seeing the dissatisfied look on Adrian's face, Darian felt a sense of satisfaction in his heart.

After a moment of silence, Adrian suddenly said, "I know you are preparing to bid for the Olympic Village project." Upon hearing this, a nervous expression appeared on Darian's face and he stared at Adrian with his eyes wide open.

Seeing the expression on Darian's face, Adrian laughed and said, "Let's just say that the BRD Group's floor price for this project is 10 billion. Can you match that?"

10 billion? Darian's heart sank upon hearing this. This sum was far beyond what he had expected.

While Darian was confused and Lost in thought, Adrian said again, "By the way, | am personally responsible for this tender project. If you are ready to buy Anderson Group shares now, | can withdraw from the bidding on behalf of BRD Group."

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"Really? Do you mean it?" Darian asked excitedly, a glimmer of hope shining in his eyes. "| promise!" Adrian replied solemnly.

Darian found himself in a dilemma again.

If the BRD Group was not also competing for this project, the Anderson Group would have been almost certain to win this tender. Of course, there were still a few other companies to deal with, but none posed as big of a threat as BRD Group.

Additionally, Darian figured that if he managed to win the tender and secure the Land, there would be a significant amount of funds needed for the development of the project. That would also be a significant expense.

With all these, he really couldn't afford to buy the shares from Adrian.

Seeing that Darian was in a dilemma, Adrian seemed to guess what he was thinking and said casually, "If you really can't come up with that much money, you can buy the shares on credit."

Upon hearing that, Darian was overjoyed. He Looked at Adrian intently and asked excitedly, "Mr. Perkins, what exactly do you mean?"

"Buying these shares on credit is equivalent to me lending you 2 billion from my own pocket. You can use that money to bid for the project and subsequently, for the project development," Adrian replied unhurriedly.

Darian was delighted and exclaimed, "Mr. Perkins, you're truly a good person!"

But before he could finish his flattery, Adrian interrupted him with a look and said calmly, "However, I demand 150% interest, which means you will have to repay me 3 billion, principal and interest."

Darian's smile froze on his face. He felt a violent anger welling up inside him and snarled, "Are you serious? That's too much!"

"Is that it? Just this little money?" Adrian cast a glance at Darian, who was fuming. He held some trinkets in his hand, toying with them absentmindedly.

"I see your point. But with BRD Group pulling out, it stands to reason that Anderson Group's odds of securing this project increase. If my calculations are right, this project could be a gold mine. Anderson Group could reach new heights, and you'd regain control of SJ Entertainment. It seems like a fair trade."

Adrian's words got Darian thinking. He trusted BRD Group's foresight when it came to investment. This project promised a handsome profit

However, why would Adrian give up this potential cash cow just for him to take back the Anderson Group?

Taking note of Darian's expression, Adrian smirked inwardly at his prudence. "So, what's your verdict? My investment in the Anderson Group was a blunder, endangering my standing at the company. If you're smart, take back those shares quickly. In that case, I can recoup some of the loss."

As Adrian's meaning dawned on him, Darian realized that securing his position was of greater importance to Adrian than the project itself.

Adrian feigned that he was about to make an exit. "I've given enough ground. If you're not interested, so be it. I'm out of patience."

Seeing him about to leave, Darian called out in a rush, "Hold on."

Adrian halted but didn't turn around.

After a moment's hesitation, Darian agreed, "Fine, let's get that contract signed."

Ten minutes Later, Adrian exited the building, contract in hand, and made a jubilant phone call.

"Perfect, the bait's taken. Time to reel in the catch."

Meanwhile, Ariana, having completed her resignation formalities, chose not to return to Sarah's house but retreated to her own rented apartment. She was fearful that her secret might come to Light, so she feigned devastation and sought solitude in her own place.

Chapter: 763 Once home, Sonia rang her up. Despite Sonia's reassurances and offers of company, Ariana declined. There were also comforting messages from Sarah, Tyler, and others.

Ariana let out a sigh. She was able to quickly get a grip because she knew Theodore was alive and he had plans in motion. However, Sarah and Sonia were in the dark, and she intended to keep it that way. She didn't want to make matters worse.

With guilt tugging at her, Ariana had a sleepless night. She was fraught with worry for Theodore.

To distract herself from her thoughts, she woke up early the next day to attend an online prenatal class. While engaged with that, she received a call from Marge.

"Ariana, are you feeling any better today?" Marge sounded uncertain on the line. "I'm doing okay." She sensed that Marge had something on her mind, so she prodded, "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much," Marge sighed. "I was upset about what happened yesterday. I've submitted my resignation, but I still have to pass on my duties. I'll be Leaving in about a month."

After a moment of silence, Marge added, "Also, Sarah, her team, and Tyler are thinking about cutting ties with the company. They're currently hashing it out in the conference room."

The conference room was saturated with a tangible strain; various individuals found themselves at odds with each other. One faction consisted of Jasper, joined by the HR chief, while the other consisted of Sarah, her squad, and Tyler

A collective frown of displeasure spread across every face present, a mirror to the discordant talk of contract termination. Jasper, freshly minted as CEO, was experiencing firsthand the bitter taste of rebellion.

His authority was challenged, creating a ripple of negativity throughout the corporate sphere. This first wave of defiance led by Sarah and her team had spurred on the undercurrent of anticipation within the company, where others awaited his downfall with bated breath.

Unable to suppress his frustration, Jasper aggressively slapped the papers he held onto the table. A conceited sneer marked his face as he stared down at Sarah and her comrades. "You'd do well to reconsider," he warned, brimming with self-importance, "Your significance outside the Anderson Group is questionable. Remember who helped you be where you are now."

Sarah held her stance, unwilling to give in. "Your contribution or Lack thereof in our rise is irrelevant," she countered, her gaze not wavering from Jasper's. "What matters is that we've decided to sever ties with the firm today."

As Sarah's audacity escalated, so did Jasper's wrath. "Fine," he seethed, his words echoing with malice, "You ungrateful wretch! If you are determined to leave, be prepared to be slapped with a lawsuit for breaking the contract

Yet Sarah was undeterred. With an unwavering resolution, she shot back, "Alright then, we'll face this head-on in court. I had the courage to show up today; I'm not scared of your threats!" Her hand hit the table with force as she pointed her finger accusatorily at Jasper. "You used to neglect your company duties, but now you have struck gold and become the CEO. But don't think too much of yourself! You are nothing but a playboy!"

Sarah's words pushed Jasper closer to the edge. But the HR head at his side stepped in, putting a temporary halt to his brewing counterattack.

With a strained smile, the HR head tried to pacify the situation. "Mr. Anderson, I implore you to cool down and Lend me your ear," he urged.

"What's Left to discuss? These folks all of a sudden believe they can fly without our help. How ungrateful!" Jasper retorted, his patience rapidly dwindling.

"It's not quite that simple," interjected the HR head, swallowing his exasperation. He soldiered on, his smile barely holding up. "Sarah, at this time, is a significant asset to our firm, she's the prime driving force for our traffic and revenue. You might want to consider finding a way to convince her to stay."

"Why would I want her around? Have I lost my mind?" The ridicule was apparent in Jasper's voice, his regard for Sarah had plummeted.

With an internal sigh, the HR head elaborated, "The company is already in choppy waters due to the sudden demise of the previous CEO, which led to a sharp drop in our market shares. Sarah is essentially our anchor in this storm. If she walks out, it will only amplify the chaos."

Yet, Jasper remained indifferent to the reasoning. His face reddened in his mounting anger, any association between Sarah and Ariana was distasteful to him. The possibilities of the tricks they might be pulling behind his back were endless. Moreover, Ariana had not only rejected him but had also physically kicked him, effectively burning their bridge. The mere thought of keeping anyone associated with Ariana in his Life was repulsive to him.

ALL these thoughts only added fuel to Jasper's raging fire. He wrenched himself free from the HR head's grasp. He made his announcement, his voice echoing around the room, "These useless folks were all propped up by Ariana. What's their worth? I can just find another artist to fill in their shoes."

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"You? ALL by yourself? Jasper, you're a laugh." Sarah discarded her diplomatic facade. She moved forward with a commanding stride, her towering heels amplifying her formidable presence. She responded in a sarcastic tone, "Don't hold yourself in such high regard. You're no match for Ariana. Evaluate your own shortcomings before pointing out others'. Your track record with Brielle is enough proof of your incompetence."

“Watch your mouth, Sarah. I can ensure you’re shunned in this industry.

Cross paths with the Anderson Group? Let’s see who’d dare to employ you!” Jasper’s retort was laced with a threatening promise. “Brace yourself for the penalty!”

On the periphery of the heated exchange, the HR head silently spectated. His internal sigh was almost audible as he rubbed his forehead in distress.

The company’s precarious state was more and more evident with each passing moment, yet Jasper seemed to relish his fleeting victory. He was truly inept, a pale shadow of his predecessor, Theodore.

Watching the volatile showdown, he shook his head in disillusionment.

The Anderson Group teetered on the brink of disaster, a collapse looming ominously. Any person with a modicum of wisdom would perceive this as a signal to find an alternative escape route.

As Ariana dashed to the office, she found that Sarah and Tyler had already accepted Jasper’s termination contract. Having agreed to the penalty clause, they were making preparations to leave.

Reaching the office, Ariana met them in the entranceway, locking eyes for a few moments before she asked, “Did you guys sign off?”

At Ariana’s question, Sarah, realizing she was informed, gave a straightforward nod. “Yes, we signed.”

Ariana hadn’t anticipated such a swift resolution, a resolution in which she had no say. Her frustration found voice as she blurted, “Couldn’t you have told me before making this significant decision? Even Betsy kept me in the dark!”

Sarah quickly took Ariana aside, to spare her team any undeserved blame. “It was my idea. They had no part in it.” Her gentle voice laid out their rationale for the decision.

Ariana listened, and felt her anger melt a bit.

Sarah continued, sighing, "If you're seeking someone to blame, point the finger at Jasper. But for now, let's focus on resolving this.

Remember, you're pregnant. Anger won't do any good for you or the baby. I've managed to save a lot, and your guidance has been invaluable to me. I can handle the penalty."

Spotting Aziel standing a little distance away, Sarah leaned closer to Ariana. "Plus, Aziel's completely on board with my decision to terminate. His financial status is more robust than I imagined. We're okay."

Sarah's explanation soothed Ariana's anger, though she couldn't entirely shake off a twinge of guilt. Sarah was wise to leave the Anderson Group, but the hefty penalty was indeed a hit.

Sensing Ariana's lingering distress, Sarah added, "Moreover, the company's headed for a fall under Jasper's reign. SJ Entertainment is akin to a sinking ship. Our decision wasn't impulsive. It was in the best interest of everyone's future. Please don't blame yourself."

Fully understanding Sarah's perspective, Ariana composed herself. "I'm just sorry for you." That was all she could say.

Sarah was a star, steadily rising in popularity. With her standing, she could easily launch a new album and snatch several Grammys. But this roadblock was stalling her career yet again.

Understanding Ariana's worries, Sarah tried to reassure her. "A five-year hiatus is in my past, and this hurdle is nothing compared to that. I've been mulling over starting my own studio, and it's the right moment now to terminate. Tyler has a bright future, and staying in SJ Entertainment will only impede his growth. Let's not overthink this. We're hoping you bounce back soon and join us."

Listening to Sarah, Ariana felt a mixture of gratitude and helplessness, with a wave of guilt washing over her

It's one thing to say it, another to live it. Right now, she felt Like she was floundering, utterly adrift. Theodore's feigned demise had left her unprepared, and even though she had figured out his plan, she

couldn't share it with anyone. All she wished for at this moment was for Theodore to appear, just so she could deliver a punch to him, between bouts of laughter and tears.

"Don't worry. We're owning up to our decisions," said Betsy, stepping forward to offer Ariana a few comforting words.

Chapter: 765 Taking a deep breath, Ariana managed a nod, forcing herself to maintain a calm demeanor.

Breaking away from the Anderson Group was part of Theodore's strategy, and she played her part accordingly. Yet her friends had made a significant sacrifice, oblivious to the underlying truth.

Still, she couldn't spill the beans just yet.

She looked at her friends, making a silent pledge to herself. Once the dust had settled, she would let them in on the truth and do everything in her power to make it right for them.

Tyler, who had been quiet up until now, suddenly suggested, "Since we're all here, how about we grab a bite to eat together?" He made the offer to the group, but his eyes were glued to Ariana, a look of worry etched on his face.

Sarah was quick to support his idea. "I second that! Ariana, you can't keep cooped up at home all the time. Let's have a meal together. Think of it as a farewell feast and a toast to fresh starts."

Ariana, won over by their infectious excitement, decided to go along with the plan.

Just as they settled in for the meal, Ariana's phone buzzed. She pulled out her phone, saw an unknown number flash across the screen, and her heart pounded. The first thought that sprang to mind was that Theodore might be reaching out. She couldn't resist the possibility and answered the call eagerly.

"Ariana!" Jasper's voice rang out from the other end of the phone.

Ariana immediately recognized the voice. The expectation in her eyes disappeared in an instant, and her expression darkened. She didn't give Jasper time to say anything and just hung up the phone. She then blocked his number.

Just hearing Jasper's voice made her nauseous and she didn't even want to know what he wanted from her.

Ariana took a moment to calm herself down and swallow the negative emotions this call had just stirred up in her. Once she'd calmed down, she turned her full attention back to the dining table.

After the food they ordered was served, they began to eat while discussing setting up a studio. There were still many troublesome matters to deal with at the moment.

Now that they had signed the termination agreements with Jasper, there were many follow-up tasks that needed to be completed.

The most important thing was to create a studio. But even for that, there were many tedious procedures to manage. Also, they would need to rework on the album that Sarah had shelved.

"Fortunately, we own all copyrights," Sarah exclaimed gleefully as she took a sip of wine.

During the negotiation with Jasper, she demanded to keep all the copyrights of her works. This was one of her conditions for agreeing to pay an exorbitant penalty for breach of contract.

"That's right! Owning the copyrights makes a big difference. If we didn't own them, all these years of work would have been for nothing,"

Betsy chimed in. She had drank too much and seemed a little tipsy. But even so, she still wouldn't put down the bottle of whiskey.

Ariana nodded too.

Since they owned the copyrights to Sarah's songs, it would be easier for Sarah to make a comeback after she Left the Anderson Group.

Everyone had a good time. When dinner was over, Ariana said goodbye to her friends and returned to her apartment alone.

Back home, Ariana slumped down on the couch and turned on the TV. By chance, she came across a news broadcast on the Anderson Group.

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Ariana slowly sat up, her eyebrows furrowed. The news reported that the Anderson Group had successfully won the hotel project in the Olympic Village. The long-established company might be making a comeback. SJ Entertainment swept away the haze and the company's stock price soared.

Onscreen, a confident Darian was giving a press conference, his face beaming with happiness. Next to him stood Jasper who wore a fancy suit as usual.

Ariana couldn't bear to see these two men together, and she couldn't help but roll her eyes. She finally understood why Jasper didn't hesitate to let Sarah go at this moment. It turned out that he had something to rely on.

However, knowing the type of petty person that Jasper was, Ariana guessed that he would not let this matter go so easily. It was very likely that he would take advantage of the breach of Sarah's contract to create controversy and tarnish her image.

Thinking of that, Ariana logged into her social media account.

As she expected, news of Sarah's contract termination was already circulating online. However, it was overshadowed by news of the Anderson Group's soaring share prices. The comment section was flooded with hate comments with people accusing Sarah of being ungrateful and disloyal to the Anderson Group.

Some people even went so far as to say that Sarah turned her back on SJ Entertainment because the company was going through a bad patch. Very quickly, Sarah was Labeled as a cunning person.

Several trolls joined in smearing Sarah's image, claiming that she was a jinx and that anyone unlucky enough to work with her would suffer one way or another. They even pointed out that when Sarah was at SJ Entertainment, the company's CEO passed away. But now that she had Left SJ Entertainment, things were taking a turn for the better for the company.

ALL these comments infuriated Ariana who felt she couldn't let it go. She decided to screenshot and report each one of them. Just as she was done reporting the comments, she received a phone call from an unknown number.

She quickly assumed it was Jasper calling. At this moment, she was in a very bad mood, so she decided to vent her anger on Jasper.

Ariana took the call and immediately started swearing without letting the other person speak. "Jasper, you have absolutely no shame! You're like chewing gum on a shoe. Who do you think you are? If you have so much free time, spend it tending to your weak kidneys and don't bother me."

Ariana kept spouting insults and didn't stop until she was tired and out of breath. When she was done, Jasper said quietly, "Theodore's funeral is scheduled for Sunday."

Ariana froze, the words 'Theodore's funeral' echoing in her ears Like a ghastly wind. A sharp stab of pain throbbed in her chest; her breath hitched.

Theodore's demise was but an act and she knew that. Still, hearing his name associated with 'funeral' twisted a knife in her heart, it felt so terribly wrong.

A tumult of emotions churned within her, a blend of sorrow and anger.

Her chest felt constricted, and she found herself unconsciously soothing her belly with a gentle stroke. The baby within seemed to respond to her distress, a faint twinge resonating in her abdomen.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she managed to rasp out, "Where is it?"

Jasper was quick to sense the melancholy shadowing Ariana's voice. A smug satisfaction found him; after all, Theodore was out of the picture now. "East Cemetery, ten in the morning," he informed her, a smirk playing on his lips.

Lost in her brooding thoughts, Ariana was barely present in the conversation.

Seizing the opportunity, Jasper attempted to sway her. "No need to mourn so deeply," he coaxed, his words as slippery as a well-oiled eel.

"You're young; you should look ahead. There's a vast sea out there, filled with other fish. And you know, the Anderson Group..."

He didn't get the chance to finish his thought. Ariana, roused from her musings, abruptly ended the call, her face a mask of ice-cold determination.

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After disconnecting the call, Ariana wrapped her arms around herself in a somber hug. Once her emotions had settled, she retrieved her phone and scrolled through her contacts, her fingers eventually pausing on Theodore's number.

She lingered there, caught in a moment of uncertainty, then finally hit dial.

An undercurrent of quiet anticipation buzzed through her as Ariana waited, hoping against all odds to hear a familiar voice on the other end.

But what greeted her was the impersonal chill of a mechanized voice. "The number you have dialed is currently switched off. Please press 1 to leave a message." The automated message bore into Ariana's heart like a drill, its relentless repetition echoing in her ears.

Her phone slipped from her grasp, its screen continuing to glow ominously as it lay discarded. Ariana curled up, her head buried in her knees, her body wracked with sobs.

She had braced herself for this outcome, yet the reality still stung, sparking an uncomfortable frisson of fear.

Why wasn't Theodore resurfacing? Was he truly enacting his death? Was she merely caught in the throes of a delusion, a fantasy of her own making?

Soon enough, Sunday rolled around, escorted by a dreary drizzle that matched Ariana's mood. An ostentatious funeral was underway at the East Cemetery.

Both Darian and Jasper had always harbored a bitter envy towards Theodore. Their resentment was so potent that they had resorted to various underhanded schemes to undermine him, even dabbling in assassination attempts.

In the wake of his demise, however, they left no stone unturned in orchestrating a grand farewell for Theodore. Not only did they extend invitations to prominent business associates, but they also beckoned every single employee of the Anderson Group to partake in the event.

Decked out in a black gown, a matching hat, and cradling a black umbrella, Ariana loomed at the cemetery's entrance. Her lips twisted into a sardonic smile as she observed the assembled crowd. Their garb might be befitting a funeral, but she couldn't help but wonder how many of them were genuinely grieving for Theodore.

Darian and Jasper, in particular, tried their best to don a sorrowful facade as they greeted the guests. But Ariana saw past their pretense; their eyes were alight with joy, their posture radiating an unmistakable pride.

Even the visitors milling about, who appeared to be connected with the Anderson Group, showed a surprising level of intimacy with Darian, to the point of nearly clasping his hand and congratulating him outright.

The gathering didn't resemble a funeral; it was more akin to a raucous carnival.

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Ariana's gaze turned icy as she surveyed the scene, a sneer curling her lips. Imagining the kind of spectacle that would ensue if Theodore were truly dead filled her heart with a suffocating sorrow, almost as though the air had been sucked out of her Lungs.

Gathering her composure, Ariana brushed away her tears and ventured into the heart of the funeral.

As Ariana walked into the cemetery, many people turned to look at her.

"Who is she?"

"I've never seen her before, but | have to say she's quite beautiful. | guess she must be from a wealthy family."

The people present whispered while staring at Ariana.

Ariana was relatively unknown in the business world, so it was understandable that these people didn't know who she was.

After all, the Anderson family had only used her as an insemination tool at that time. She and Theodore hadn't even had a decent marriage, and their relationship was never made public.

Those present were trying to figure out who brought Ariana here and what relationship she had with Anderson's family. There were all kinds of guesses, and some even thought she was the Anderson family's illegitimate daughter.

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Seeing Ariana walking straight towards the place reserved for the deceased's parents, the crowd was further confused as to her true identity.

The employees of SJ Entertainment were standing not far away. In fact, Darian had forced all the employees of SJ Entertainment to attend the funeral and several of them looked bad.

It was understandable that they were in a bad mood. They were here against their will, moreover on a Sunday. It was downright abuse.

Those of the employees who had never gotten along with Ariana still wanted to attack her at this moment. But seeing that she was out of reach, they turned their attention to Marge.

"Marge, are you regretting your resignation now?"

"No sooner did you leave than SJ Entertainment turned things around and the stock price skyrocketed. I pity you, really. You left the company and now, you can't find such high-paying jobs."

Marge completely ignored these disgusting people and their petty mockeries. She didn't even waste her time answering them. She moved away from the group and moved a little closer to the front row. Then, she saw Ariana not far away.

Marge's eyes lit up and she happily walked over to greet Ariana. It wasn't until she got to Ariana's side that she suddenly realized it was Ariana's late husband's funeral.

Marge's outstretched hand froze in midair and the smile on her face grew stiff. She suddenly felt lost, not knowing how to comfort Ariana.

After a moment of silence, she only managed to utter a single phrase, "My condolences".

Ariana turned to look at Marge with a faint smile and patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

Marge looked at Ariana carefully for a moment. It wasn't until she saw that Ariana was doing just fine that she was reassured. With a sigh, Ariana looked at the family area in front.

Darian and Jasper had been chatting with the guests for a long time.

Sharon and even Brielle were here as well.

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Sharon held Brielle's hand while chatting with the guests. It was obvious that she was trying to show everyone that she and Brielle had a good relationship.

To think that just a few days ago, Jasper had humiliated Brielle in front of Ariana. Now he was pretending to love her in front of everyone.

Ariana thought they were hypocrites.

She couldn't stand the sight of these people. As far as she was concerned, they didn't even have to attend the funeral.

Ariana patted Marge on the shoulder and said goodbye. Then, bearing her disgust, she walked towards the family area.

That was where she belonged.

Sharon was the first person to see her.

When Sharon saw Ariana, she quickly Let go of Brielle's hand and walked over to Ariana, moaning loudly. "My poor daughter-in- law!"

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Sharon was overdoing it. Her exaggerated expression and Loud voice filled Ariana with disgust.

She guessed Sharon was doing that on purpose.

Seeing Sharon coming to her side, holding out her hand, Ariana frowned and took a step back to avoid her.

Sharon felt embarrassed for a moment. Then, she turned around in tears and addressed the guests present. "You haven't met her yet, have you?

She's my poor daughter-in-law. The wife of our deceased son, Theodore... What a cruel trick of nature." Sharon wiped away her tears as she spoke, occasionally glancing at Ariana with a trace of triumph. Suddenly, all eyes were on poor Ariana.

The gazes that fell upon Ariana held a blend of piercing examination idle curiosity, and poorly-masked compassion. To their prying eyes, Ariana felt like she was an item on the auction block; a sense of ridiculousness surged within her

She heard their sympathetic platitudes, the well-worn phrases like "my deepest sympathies," but she said nothing in return.

Their eyes, their voices-they reeked of scorn. Theodore was gone; the reins of the Anderson Group now rested in the clutches of the Darian father-son duo. As a widow, Ariana was nothing more than chaff in the wind to these people.

At that moment, Brielle approached Ariana, an artificial veil of sympathy draped around her, her arm entwined with Jasper's.

"Don't Let your grief consume you, Ariana," Brielle said, her voice dripping with faux concern, her eyes sparkling with concealed scorn.

She tried to close the gap between them, forcing a facsimile of tears, attempting to portray a depth of sisterly love she clearly did not possess. “Your sorrow is mine too, Ariana. Take care of yourself, or else you’ll leave me worrying.”

Jasper spared Ariana a swift glance, but before he could utter a word, a wave of nausea washed over her. She wanted nothing to do with them.

Without a word, she sidestepped, distancing herself as she silently awaited the beginning of the funeral rites. Her lack of response sent a cloud over Jasper’s face.

Sharon quickly picked up on the tension, donned an apologetic smile, and turned to the guests. “Our Ariana is distraught, lost in her grief, and manners have slipped her mind. | trust you all understand.”

Her poise was unmistakable, the very picture of a gracious hostess; as if she’d forgotten her own past as a home wrecker. With Theodore’s passing, all her inhibitions evaporated. She seamlessly stepped into the role of the Anderson family matriarch.

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“Silence, please. The funeral is commencing,” she announced.

Just then, a priest emerged, and a hush swept over the gathering.

Ariana stood to one side, quietly observing, her hands clenching unconsciously. The funeral was under way, and as for Theodore... would he finally make his presence felt?

The priest Lifted his hand, and eight pallbearers brought a heavy, black coffin into view.

By the book, the priest would lead in prayer, then the family and kin would pay their respects, culminating in a collective farewell. The coffin would then be taken for its final journey — to the crematorium.

Ariana's gaze was glued to the ominous black coffin; she could feel her heart racing. As the eight pallbearers made their way to the elevated platform, set down the coffin, and then began to open it, Ariana's brow furrowed slightly.

Despite their muscular builds, lifting the coffin seemed an ordeal. The weight of the coffin seemed unnatural.

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Ariana couldn't glimpse its contents from where she stood; all she could do was watch the ominous black box settle on the platform from afar.

Her breath hitched, her hands started to tremble of their own accord. She had to keep reminding herself that it couldn't be real, that Theodore couldn't possibly be in that box.

Yet the gnawing uncertainty tugged at her. It had been too long since she'd last seen Theodore. Anxiety pooled within her like an unwelcome guest. Why hadn't he surfaced yet? When would he spring into action?

Could she bear to see the funeral rites concluded, to witness Theodore's existence being erased from the world? Heavy-hearted, a crimson hue tinged Ariana's eyes. Her fists clenched; she repeated a mantra to herself—wait, just a little longer. If she could endure, maybe he would appear.

As these thoughts danced in her mind, the priest switched on the microphone, a religious text cradled in his hand, and addressed the gathering with the opening line of his eulogy.

"Welcome to Aimee Wallace's funeral."

The utterance sparked an immediate furor among the gathering.

"Aimee Wallace? Isn't this Theodore Anderson's memorial?"

“Who is Aimee Wallace? Why have I not heard of her?”

“Is something amiss? Did the priest mispronounce the name?”

Abruptly, murmurs filled the air.

Ariana, too, was dumbfounded, momentarily frozen in place, thoughts eluding her. After a few moments, she recognized the name Aimee Wallace as Theodore’s mother.

Simultaneously, Darian, after a moment of stunned silence, erupted in an indignant and agitated outburst, “What is this nonsense?! I didn’t pay you a king’s ransom to engage in this absurdity!”

His tone was harsh, his glare threatening, but underneath, there was an undeniable undercurrent of panic he couldn’t conceal at the sound of that name.

Sharon too, was caught off guard. Her usually rosy complexion turned ashen. Oblivious to Darian’s rage, the priest calmly addressed the attendees, “There is no error. This is the funeral of Darian’s former spouse, the erstwhile matriarch of the Anderson family, Aimee Wallace, which was fifteen years overdue.”

His declaration immediately sent shockwaves through the crowd, particularly amongst the business associates who had become acquainted with the Anderson Group only after Darian’s ascension. They were completely taken aback by the revelation of Darian’s ex-spouse.

“What? He was married before? This is the first I’ve heard of her...” “And if it’s his ex-wife’s funeral, then where is Theodore?” Whispers in the crowd increased in volume and frequency, with conjectures painting Darian in an increasingly negative light.

“Something’s amiss! Halt the proceeding: shaky, face pale, and forehead dotted with beads of perspiration.