

Chapter 2

Watching Brendan still on the phone with Chloe Ellis, his voice soft and loving, Jayde Rosario swallowed the words she had come to say. She turned and quietly left the study.

To him, she was just a stepsister living in his house. He wouldn't care where she went to college. If that was the case, she didn't need to tell him.

In fifteen days, she would leave the Maynard home. She would leave Brendan.

Back in her room, Jayde looked at the warm glow of the Totoro nightlight on her bedside table. A flicker of sadness crossed her face. The chubby Totoro holding a green leaf umbrella over a little girl looked just like how Brendan used to shield her. But the past was the past.

She sighed softly and switched off the nightlight. The room went dark.

"Since I've decided to go, it's time to pack," she murmured to herself.

She pulled an old duffel bag from the top of her closet and opened the large, wall-to-wall display cabinet. Inside the glass-fronted shelves were all the memories. The good luck charms Brendan had brought her from the temple. The Coral Sea perfume he had specially blended for her on a trip to France.

One by one, she took them all out and placed them in the duffel bag. The bag slowly filled up, but her heart felt like it was emptying, a hollow space where a cold wind was blowing.

She pushed down the sadness and opened the bottom drawer of the cabinet. A yellowed diary lay inside. The pages were filled with childish pencil scribbles from her turbulent childhood.

[The new teacher is nice, but the kids say I'm a jinx. They say I have one dad and one mom, and nobody wants me.]

She remembered how Brendan had found her diary back then. He had read that page and gently stroked her head. "Silly girl, you're not a jinx," he'd said. "You're a star in my eyes. You sparkle brighter than anyone."

After that day, no one at school ever called her names again. She later found out that Brendan had gone to the school and quietly warned those children. He had protected her childhood in his own quiet way.

As she flipped through the diary, the pencil handwriting became neater. Every single page was about Brendan.

She turned page after page, her eyes blurring with tears. The last page held a note from him from when she was choosing her subjects in high school.

[Kid, whether you choose arts or sciences, remember to go to college here in the city. After you graduate, you can work at Maynard Group. I protected you when you were little. I'll keep looking out for you when you grow up.]

A tear fell silently onto the diary, blurring the ink.

Jayde pulled herself together, pushing down the complicated knot of feelings in her chest. Then, she started tearing the pages out of the diary. She tore up the letters, too. With each rip of the paper, a memory of her and Brendan seemed to fade.

She threw all the shredded pieces into the duffel bag and zipped it shut.

A while later, she heard a commotion downstairs. She walked out of her room and saw Chloe Ellis in the living room, hugging Brendan. A suitcase stood beside her.

Jayde's heart stuttered, and she froze on the landing.

Seeing her, Chloe smiled and waved. "Jayde! I'm moving in for a few days. I brought you a gift!"

Chloe opened an ornate box she was holding. "See if you like it."

Inside was a pink wristwatch with a metal strap. It was cute, with a bit of a British style.

Jayde frowned. She didn't reach for it. She had been allergic to metal since she was a child. When she was nine, a nanny had given her a metal spoon to eat with. She'd only gotten a small rash, but Brendan had fired the nanny on the spot. He had every metal item that might touch her skin replaced. He didn't allow any of her allergens near her.

As she was lost in thought, Brendan's voice cut through the air. "Hurry up and take it. Don't disappoint your sister-in-law."

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His words hit her hard. She stared at his matter-of-fact expression, a wave of sadness washing over her. He hadn't just taken back all his favoritism. He had forgotten her completely.

Jayde took a deep breath. She took the box and put the watch on her wrist.

"Thank you, sister-in-law. And... thank you, Brendan."

Thank you for making my decision to leave even easier.

Recommended for you

Chapter 3

That night, Chloe Ellis slept in Brendan Maynard's room.

Jayde knew they were a couple. She knew it was normal for them to stay together. But the quiet, ambiguous sounds that floated through the house in the dead of night kept her awake.

She lit another cigarette, watching the smoke curl around her slender fingers before taking a deep drag. It tasted bitter and acrid, just like her feelings.

The next morning, Jayde came downstairs with swollen eyes.

"Jayde!" Chloe called out, pulling her to sit on the sofa. A faint red mark was visible on Chloe's neck. "Your brother's birthday is coming up. I want to throw him a party. Do you know what style he likes?"

Chloe's question pulled Jayde back to the present. She couldn't help but remember a conversation she and Brendan had once had while walking on the beach.

She had told him she loved the sparkling ocean, the sound of the waves, and holding his hand as they walked on the sand while the sun rose. That day, Brendan had held her hand and walked with her for a long, long time.

"Kid, you like the beach," he'd said. "So from now on, our birthday parties will be by the sea. What you like is what I like."

Back then, his world revolved around her. Now, he avoided her. He had forgotten everything she liked.

A bitter feeling spread through her chest. It took her a moment to find her voice. "I..."

She was about to speak when Brendan walked over and interrupted her. "My affairs, you should ask me."

Chloe clung to his arm, whining. "I just thought, since you're a girl, you'd know him better. It seems like even his sister doesn't really know him."

Jayde forced a smile. "Yes, I really don't."

"You two talk. I have to go," she said, suppressing the bitterness. She turned to leave, but Brendan's eyes darkened.

"It's early in the morning. What could you possibly have to do?"

His cold voice made her heart stop for a second. Did he still care what she did?

Jayde answered truthfully. "I have an appointment to get my visa today."

As soon as she said it, Chloe looked surprised. "Going on a trip? With friends? Or a boyfriend?"

Brendan frowned at Jayde, his tone full of accusation. "Jayde Rosario, you just finished high school. Don't get involved with the wrong kind of people before you even start college."

The cold reprimand felt like a physical blow. It left her with no strength to explain.

In the silence, Chloe smoothed things over. "It's normal for a young girl to date. Brendan, don't be so harsh."

Then she turned to Jayde, her voice soft and comforting. "If you like someone, you should love boldly. You only get to be eighteen once. Don't listen to your brother."

Chloe then took Brendan's hand and they left together. Watching them walk away, Jayde slowly clenched her fists.

She only had one eighteen, and she had already given it to Brendan.

Fourteen days left. Then she would leave. She wouldn't let her youth get buried in this swamp where no one noticed her.

Jayde left the house. It was foggy outside, a light drizzle falling. Even though it was summer, the rain made her shiver.

In the past, on every rainy day, Brendan would drive her himself. "My little girl can't get wet," he would say. "My arms are your shelter."

But now, she had to get used to walking alone.

She lowered her gaze and walked out into the rain with her umbrella.

After getting her visa, she was about to call a cab when she saw a notification on her phone. A special notification, from Brendan's social media. Her finger moved on its own, clicking on it.

Brendan, who usually posted something once every six months, had a new status.

[Rainy days are perfect for going public.]

The photo was of him in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, embracing Chloe Ellis, who was in a mermaid-style wedding dress. He was smiling gently at the camera.

The simple sentence and the wedding photo shocked Jayde. Her eyes, already red, burned. The comment section was filled with congratulations. People were saying they were a perfect match, a pair made in heaven.

Jayde stared at the screen, feeling nothing. The usual ache in her chest wasn't there.

She calmly typed a comment.

[May you be together forever.]