

## Chapter 4

After posting the comment, Jayde Rosario unfollowed Brendan Maynard's social media. The days until she left were counting down. She would use this time to dig him out of her heart, piece by piece.

She returned to the hillside mansion. The house was empty, and a chill hung in the air. She went into the kitchen and cooked herself a simple bowl of egg noodles.

While she was eating, her phone buzzed. It was a message from Chloe Ellis.

[Jayde, Brendan and I won't be home tonight. Take care of yourself.]

A moment later, Chloe sent several more photos. A candlelit dinner. A mirror selfie in a fancy hotel suite.

Jayde's fingertips trembled slightly as she looked at the pictures. She calmly replied with one word.

"Okay."

She closed the chat, and a notification popped up from her high school group chat. Someone had tagged her. She clicked on it and saw her classmates were planning a graduation party for the weekend.

She thought about it. Once she moved to California, she probably wouldn't come back to the country very often. She agreed to go.

Her reply instantly brought the group chat to life.

[Will your doting brother Brendan Maynard come to the party?]

[Remember that time we were camping and there was a landslide? Your brother flew back overnight and brought a search party into the mountains to find you. He said he'd always be with you when you went out. He should come this time too, right?]

The messages from her classmates filled her mind with memories of a time when she felt safe and warm. But now, those warm feelings were like shards of ice, piercing her heart with every breath.

Jayde put her phone down and replied with three words.

[He's not coming.]

Her classmates' idea of Brendan was stuck in the past, in the years when he spoiled her completely. They didn't know about the confession he had rejected when she was seventeen. And they didn't know that the man who had promised to protect her had found someone else to protect.

That night, Jayde slept restlessly. In her dream, she was eight years old again, standing awkwardly by the fountain on her first day at the Maynard home. She didn't know what to do.

In the dream, young Brendan, in his plaid school uniform, glanced at her indifferently. Then he turned and walked away with his backpack, without saying a single word.

She woke with a start, her face wet with tears that had stained her pillow.

If Brendan had been that cold to her from the very beginning, maybe she would have understood the distance between them sooner.

But there were no "if onlys." The hardest thing in the world wasn't never having something. It was having all the favoritism, and then losing it all overnight.

When she got up, she looked at the duffel bag in the corner of her room, full of memories. Thirteen days left. Thirteen days until she truly left this place.

Whether she wanted to or not, she had to throw these memories away. Only by getting rid of them completely could she clear the space in her heart.

Jayde took a deep breath, picked up the heavy duffel bag, and walked out of her room.

As she was about to go downstairs, she saw Brendan and Chloe Ellis had just returned.

Brendan frowned when he saw the bag in her hand. "School hasn't started yet. Where are you going with that luggage?"

Jayde tightened her grip on the strap. "I'll be living on campus later, so I packed some useless things to throw away."

She struggled to carry the heavy bag down the stairs.

Brendan didn't say anything. He just strode forward, took the bag from her, and walked outside. He threw it directly into the large trash receptacle by the curb.

The clattering sound it made as it landed made Jayde's heart sink. If he cared even a little, he would have heard the sound of the wind chimes made from seashells from the Aegean Sea inside the bag.

What he threw away were the gifts he had flown halfway around the world to bring her over the years. They were also the memories they had once promised they would never forget.

But Brendan didn't even glance at the trash. His gaze was fixed straight ahead.

"You're going to college in the city. There's no need to live on campus. Stay at home after school starts. I'll talk to your teacher."

His tone was unquestionable. It filled Jayde with a mix of emotions. If he had just asked her high school teacher, he would have known she hadn't even applied to any colleges in the city. She had applied directly to the University of California, Berkeley, thousands of miles away.

But his mind was on Chloe Ellis now. He didn't care about her future at all.

It didn't matter. Only thirteen days left. Once she was in California, she wouldn't need his attention.

Thinking this, she turned and went back upstairs without a word.

Behind her, she heard Chloe asking quietly, "Is Jayde mad because we didn't come home last night?"

Brendan's voice was cold. "She's eighteen now. She should learn to be independent. No one can stay with her forever."

Jayde paused on the stairs, then continued to her room.

Yes, she was eighteen. She wouldn't miss the past. And she wouldn't hope for the future. From now on, she could walk her own path, all by herself.