

Chapter 6

When she got home, Jayde Rosario was soaked from the rain. She felt drowsy and heavy. After a hot shower, she collapsed into bed and fell asleep immediately.

For the past few days, she had been alone in the mansion. She was already getting used to it. She no longer tried to ask about Brendan Maynard's whereabouts.

"Ding."

Her phone chimed with a message. She picked it up and saw it was from her father, Farrell Conner.

[My dear daughter, your flight is scheduled to depart at 10 PM on August 25th. Remember to bring all your documents and materials for school. Dad will be waiting for you at the airport.]

Jayde clicked on her phone's calendar. She murmured to herself, "Only seven days until I leave this home."

Her calendar for seven days from now had an entry: [Brendan Maynard's Birthday].

Maybe her departure was the best birthday gift she could give him.

Over the next two days, Jayde went through her luggage again, making sure she had everything. Then she packed up all the old things she couldn't take with her and arranged for a donation pick-up service.

As the courier was making a list of the items and preparing to pack them into boxes, Brendan returned home.

"What's going on?" he asked, his eyes on the piles of clothes and books.

Jayde filled out the donation form and motioned for the courier to take the bags first. "I arranged for old clothes to be picked up. I'm clearing out things I don't use."

Her voice was calm and empty of emotion. It made Brendan frown. He had felt that Jayde was different lately, but he couldn't quite figure out what had changed. A strange feeling was growing inside him, a sense of

emptiness he couldn't explain.

"Chloe and I have been staying at the Blue Sea Apartments downtown," he said, changing the subject. "It's quieter there and more convenient for work."

Jayde just nodded slightly. The Blue Sea Apartments, without her there, would indeed be quieter.

She watched as Brendan started gathering some of his and Chloe's things, preparing to leave again. On impulse, she asked, "Brendan, your birthday is next Friday. Can I attend?"

Jayde had meticulously prepared a gift for Brendan's birthday every single year. This year would have been the tenth year. Ten. A perfect number. She wanted to see it through one last time.

Brendan had shielded her for ten years. She wanted to say a proper goodbye.

"We'll see," Brendan said, unwilling to commit. He pushed his suitcase toward the door and left.

The heavy sound of the door closing made Jayde's heart tremble slightly. Her eyes reddened.

Back in her room, she instinctively reached for the drawer in her bedside table, wanting to look at the love letters she had written to him. But when she opened it, the drawer was empty. She had already thrown away those brief but heartfelt letters. Only a faded sketchpad lay at the bottom of the drawer.

Jayde carefully took out the old sketchpad and gently opened it. The yellowed pages each showed Brendan in a different moment.

Brendan in his plaid school uniform, holding her hand, saying, "Kid, I'm taking you home."

Brendan on the highest podium, holding a trophy, hanging the gold medal around her neck. He had said, "Kid, you're my badge of honor."

Brendan at a formal banquet, holding a wine glass, in complete control, sending a thornless rose over to her table. He had said, "Kid, roses need time to bloom. I'll wait for you to grow up."

Every drawing was a memory etched deep in her mind.

But it didn't matter anymore. She would scrape those memories clean

from her heart, bit by bit.

She turned to the last page of the sketchpad. It was blank. Jayde remembered that every year on Brendan's birthday, she would secretly draw a picture of the two of them together. She thought she would draw one this year, too.

But this year, the people in the drawing would be Brendan and Chloe Ellis.

This time, she genuinely wished them well.

She drew meticulously, stroke by stroke, with great care. She didn't stop until the sun began to set.

Then, she heard the sound of a key in the front door.

Jayde went out to the living room and saw Brendan stumble in. He smelled strongly of alcohol.

"Brendan, why did you drink so much?" Seeing his unsteady steps, she quickly went to help him.

Brendan leaned heavily on her, his large hand wrapping naturally around her waist. The strong scent of alcohol mixed with his familiar woody cologne filled her senses.

Jayde froze. She wanted to step back, to create some distance, but the next moment, Brendan pulled her into his embrace.

His restless hand slipped under her clothes, and his burning, alcohol-fueled kiss landed forcefully on her lips.

