

Zillionaire 1021

Chapter 1021:

Lately, Collin had hardly contacted him at all. Yesterday, in fact, Collin had only reached out once—to ask for help at the hospital with Gorman. Even then, Collin made it clear he'd rather Linsey stay out of it. With that thought lingering in his mind, Dustin pressed his lips into a firm line, trying to quiet the strange unease building in his chest.

Steadying himself, he said, "After Gorman left Grester four years ago, the Green family's hold on local resources slowly began to fade. These days, most of the Green Group's operations are based overseas, so it's only natural that their influence in Grester falls short when compared to... Collin's."

Neither Linsey nor Dolores seemed to catch the hesitation in his voice, both of them preoccupied with their own thoughts.

After a pause, Dolores let out a knowing laugh. "So, in the end, it was Collin who really pushed Gorman out, right?"

A moment's uncertainty flickered in Linsey's eyes before she replied, "I'll talk to Collin later, see if he gives me a straight answer."

Dolores shook her head with a wistful smile. "I almost believed they'd put all their old grudges behind them. Wasn't it just yesterday that Collin was so patient, washing Gorman's hair in the hospital? Guess I gave them too much credit."

Laughter bubbled up from Linsey, and she couldn't help but join in.

She understood all too well that expecting Collin and Gorman to maintain any kind of peaceful relationship was simply out of the question.

Honestly, if the two of them could go a day without arguing or clashing, Linsey would have considered it worthy of applause.

Maybe, once Gorman was out of the picture, Collin could finally find some peace of mind.

Soon after, the three exited the hospital together.

For a while, Dustin hung back, clearly looking for the perfect chance to pull Dolores aside for a quiet word.

Before he could work up the nerve, Dolores brightened up and turned to Linsey. "If you aren't busy, how about coming with me to the mall? I could use some company while I shop."

"That sounds good to me," Linsey replied with a smile, not missing a beat.

A brief silence followed as Dustin searched for his response. "Count me in, too," he finally said.

Dolores shot him a look. "Don't you have work piling up?"

"I'm not in any rush," Dustin said right away, casting a quick glance at Linsey. "How about we take Linsey home first? She must be worn out after looking after Gorman these last few days. Let her get some rest, and I'll go with you to the mall."

At those words, Linsey arched a brow with a playful glint in her eye. She chose not to speak, opting instead to let the two of them sort it out on their own.

Dolores, firm in her stance, said, "There's no need for that. Linsey can come with me. You should get back to work."

"But..." Dustin interjected, clearly ready to argue.

Before he could say more, Dolores gave his shoulder a light pat. "Wouldn't your mother get suspicious if we were seen shopping alone together?"

Chapter 1022:

That made Dustin's face cloud over just a bit, and in a hushed tone, he said, "We already spent most of yesterday together, and this morning as well."

Dustin finally realized that Dolores simply wanted Linsey to accompany her. She had no interest in spending extra time with him.

"I get it," Dustin said, exhaling deeply, his gaze darkening as he stared into the distance. "I'll drive you both to the mall."

Dolores hooked her arm through Linsey's and declined with a firm shake of her head. "No, thanks. The mall's close enough. Linsey and I will just walk."

Without giving Dustin a chance to protest, she tugged Linsey along and hurried off.

"Dolores..." Dustin called after her instinctively, but the words caught in his throat.

He stood frozen, watching her figure fade into the distance, a heavy knot tightening in his chest.

Meanwhile, Linsey, pulled along by Dolores' brisk pace, felt a twinge of confusion.

Noticing Dolores' slightly rushed steps, she asked, "Did you and Dustin have a fight?"

"No, we sorted everything out. No more misunderstandings," Dolores replied smoothly.

Linsey blinked in confusion. "Then why didn't you let Dustin come with us to the mall? He looked pretty down when you brushed him off."

Dolores waved it off with a casual shrug. "That's just Dustin being Dustin. He gets all theatrical around me sometimes. It's no big deal."

Then, with a sly grin, she leaned in and whispered, "If he's actually sulking, it will make the gift I'm planning to get him that much more of a surprise."

Dolores didn't think Dustin was truly upset.

Since they had started dating, he often played up his dramatics or put on a pitiful act to grab her attention. She had grown accustomed to it.

So, naturally, she assumed this was just another one of his ploys to get her attention.

"A gift?" Linsey's eyes widened as realization dawned. "Oh, so you're shopping for something for Dustin. That explains the sudden mall trip."

Catching the warm, sweet smile on Dolores' face, Linsey couldn't help but mirror it. She asked, "What's the occasion for the surprise? Is it your anniversary or something?"

Dolores shook her head. "Nope, it's Dustin's birthday."

Linsey's face lit up at the news. "Dustin's birthday is coming up?" As they talked, they reached the mall's entrance.

"When I was still living in Grester, I never saw Dustin celebrate his birthday," Linsey noted.

Dolores nodded lightly, her voice softening as she explained, "I've talked to Dustin about it before. He said he's never been big on birthdays. Growing up, his parents were always fighting, so they rarely made a fuss over it. As he got older, he started going to lively parties and hanging out with friends, so his birthday just didn't mean much to him anymore."

As she spoke, a gentle smile crept across Dolores' face, her expression softening with affection as she thought of Dustin. "But now that we're together, as his girlfriend, I want to make his birthday special. It's a day to celebrate the fact that he exists, after all."

Chapter 1023:

Linsey listened quietly, touched by how deeply Dolores cared for Dustin, a warmth spreading through her chest. She had never seen Dolores so devoted to any man before.

Seeing the genuine connection between Dolores and Dustin, Linsey felt a quiet joy for her friend.

Dolores continued, "Besides, Dustin has been really stressed lately because of his mother. I know he's been working hard to get her to warm up to me, and it's weighing on him. So, I want to use his birthday as a chance to show him how much he means to me by putting together a memorable celebration."

Linsey gazed into Dolores' hopeful eyes and gave her hand a gentle, encouraging squeeze. "You're so considerate. I'm sure he'll see how much you care."

Dolores' cheeks flushed slightly, a hint of self-consciousness creeping in. "This is my first time picking out a gift for a guy, and I'm pretty new to this," she admitted, casting a shy glance at Linsey. "I figured, since you and Collin have been together for years, you'd know a thing or two about surprising a partner. That's why I insisted you come along."

"I'm more than happy to help!" Linsey replied eagerly. After a brief pause, her voice softened. "I once planned what I thought was an amazing surprise for Collin, but it didn't go as planned."

Dolores looked puzzled for a moment before realization dawned. "Are you talking about when you were pregnant four years ago?"

"Yeah. Sadly, that surprise turned into more of a shock," Linsey sighed before emphasizing, "I really hope your surprise goes perfectly this time."

Dolores laughed, her tension easing. "As long as I pick the right gift, I think it will be fine."

Just then, they spotted a sleek men's clothing store nearby.

Catching Dolores' fixed gaze, Linsey smiled and suggested, "How about we check it out?"

"Absolutely!" Dolores eagerly tugged Linsey into the store.

The array of men's fashion was almost overwhelming, with racks of stylish jackets, crisp shirts, and tailored accessories. Dolores' eyes widened. "I had no idea men's clothing had gotten this varied," she said, marveling.

Linsey, knowing Dolores wasn't usually into fashion, chimed in, "Well, I've noticed Dustin enjoys dressing sharply. Picking out an outfit for him could be a great choice."

Dolores' brow furrowed with worry as she grabbed Linsey's arm. "You've got to help me, Linsey! I'm hopeless when it comes to style. What if I choose something Dustin hates?"

"Don't worry," Linsey reassured her with a smile. "I'll give you some pointers. I'm sure Dustin will love anything you pick out."

Dolores grinned, a playful glint in her eye. "I'm not banking on my gift-choosing skills, so I'm going for quantity over quality. I'll get him a ton of different things—Dustin won't have time to nitpick when he's too touched by it all."

As they sifted through clothes that matched Dustin's taste, a familiar voice called out from behind. "Linsey!"

Linsey turned, startled, and saw Jeffery and Alicia, whom she had met not long ago.

Chapter 1024:

Jeffery had already spotted her, and as she turned, his face lit up with the unmistakable joy of seeing her again.

Back at the hospital, he had been cautious, not wanting to interrupt her with what he assumed were pressing matters.

Now, as they crossed paths in the mall, his first impulse was to seize this opportunity to get closer to Linsey.

Alicia stood at Jeffery's side, effortlessly picking up on his intentions. She was more than happy to play along.

"Linsey, what a pleasant surprise to see you again," Alicia said, her warm smile radiating genuine friendliness as she looked at Linsey.

Linsey blinked, caught off guard, unsure if this encounter was pure chance or something more orchestrated. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that Jeffery, accompanying a pregnant Alicia on a shopping trip, wasn't just here to bump into her by accident.

"Out shopping for clothes?" Linsey asked, keeping her tone light and casual.

Alicia nodded, casting a fond glance at Jeffery. "Jeffery hasn't updated his wardrobe in ages. Since we were out for a prenatal appointment today, I figured it was a good chance to drag him here and pick out some fresh outfits, so he's not stuck wearing the same tired things."

Linsey's lips quirked into an amused smile, her eyebrow arching slightly. She vaguely recalled Jeffery's old air of arrogance, carrying himself with an almost untouchable pride. Now, he seemed far more grounded, almost ordinary in a refreshing way.

Dolores, meanwhile, instantly recognized Jeffery, and the pregnant woman beside him was unmistakably the wife Linsey had mentioned—the one Jeffery had quietly married six months prior.

Dolores found Alicia's appearance warm and approachable, a fitting complement to Jeffery's demeanor.

Jeffery turned to Dolores, offering a courteous nod. “Ms. Davidson.”

Dolores returned a bright smile and a wave. “Mr. Lawson, it’s been a while!”

She had only just remarked to Linsey that the Lawson family would likely seek her out again, and here, not even half an hour later, was Jeffery himself. Family ties, it seemed, had an uncanny way of pulling people together, especially in a city like Grester, where paths crossed easily.

“Alicia, allow me to introduce Ms. Dolores Davidson, chairwoman of the Davidson Group and Linsey’s closest friend,” Jeffery said smoothly, seizing the moment to bridge the connection. “Ms. Davidson, this is my wife, Alicia Lawson.”

Alicia’s tone was warm and earnest as she spoke. “Ms. Davidson, it’s remarkable to be chairwoman at such a young age. It’s clear Linsey surrounds herself with extraordinary people, which says a lot about why you two are so close.”

Dolores’ smile widened at the compliment. “Thank you, Mrs. Lawson. That’s kind of you to say.”

If someone else had offered similar praise, Dolores might have brushed it off as mere politeness. But Alicia’s words carried a sincerity that felt disarming, delivered with a tone that put her at ease.

She shared a subtle, knowing glance with Linsey, a quiet relief passing between them. It was clear Linsey also felt a positive connection with Alicia.

Chapter 1025:

Dolores couldn’t help but think Jeffery had struck gold—despite his insufferable attitude years ago, he had somehow found a genuinely lovely partner like Alicia.

As she sensed the calm, amicable vibe between Linsey and herself, Alicia’s smile grew as she stepped closer to them.

Linsey, noticing Alicia's careful movements with her pregnant belly, instinctively reached out to steady her. "Easy now, no need to hurry," she said gently.

Having gone through pregnancy herself, Linsey knew firsthand the challenges it brought. Though Alicia wasn't yet at the most taxing stage, the constant physical changes could still bring discomfort at any moment. Everyone's body handled pregnancy differently, after all.

Linsey's natural empathy kicked in, and she couldn't help but extend kindness to Alicia, whose warm and approachable presence only made it easier.

Beyond that, Linsey refused to let her past friction with Jeffery taint her view of Alicia.

"Thank you," Alicia said softly, giving Linsey's hand a grateful squeeze in return.

If she had been merely curious about Jeffery's sister before, now, standing face-to-face with Linsey, she could feel the quiet charisma and warmth that radiated from her, drawing her in even more.

Linsey's smile was warm and genuine, free of any trace of pretense or pride. "It's obvious Jeffery cherishes you and holds you in high regard," she said, her tone sincere.

Linsey shot a pointed look at Jeffery, who was standing behind Alicia, and added bluntly, "When I first met him four years ago, he carried himself like he ruled the universe. Today, though, he's toned it down. He's finally a bit less insufferable."

Alicia burst into laughter at Linsey's candid remark.

Jeffery, caught off guard by her directness, blinked in surprise. Oddly, he felt no irritation—only a flicker of amusement.

"Linsey, you're just as sharp-tongued as you were four years ago," Jeffery said with a chuckle, a hint of wistfulness in his voice. "No wonder I've felt something was off these past few years. Turns out I was missing your jabs."

Linsey's eyes widened, and she let out a playful scoff. "You practically beg for it, don't you?"

Dolores jumped in, her tone teasing. "Mr. Lawson has changed so much. It's got to be because you've got him completely wrapped around your fingers, Mrs. Lawson."

The simple comment brought a flush of shyness to both Alicia's and Jeffery's faces.

Jeffery's ears reddened slightly, but he didn't protest. Instead, he nodded softly. "Alicia's incredible. She has always been so patient with me."

"It's mutual. Jeffery treats me wonderfully too," Alicia explained seriously, then added, "Calling me Mrs. Lawson feels so formal. Just Alicia is fine."

Dolores grinned brightly. "No problem, Alicia. And you can just call me Dolores."

The three women, hitting it off effortlessly, continued chatting as they wandered through the men's clothing store, browsing racks of stylish shirts and jackets.

Jeffery, the lone man in the group, was unsurprisingly left to his own devices. He didn't seem to mind, content to carry Alicia's bag and trail quietly behind, letting their conversation flow without interruption.

Chapter 1026:

"Are you two shopping for your partners?" Alicia asked, her curiosity piqued.

Linsey answered warmly, "Dolores' boyfriend has a birthday coming up, so I'm helping her pick out something special."

Dolores, eager to keep the focus off herself, quickly cut in. "Linsey's also here to get something for her boyfriend. They're such a tight-knit couple, practically glued at the hip. And they have lovely kids."

"You're exaggerating, Dolores," Linsey said, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"What? Linsey has children?" Alicia asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Yes. Actually, Linsey became a mother four years ago," Dolores replied.

"But Linsey looks like she could still be in her early twenties," Alicia said, her voice filled with genuine amazement.

Had Dolores not brought it up, Alicia would never have imagined Linsey was already a mother.

Jeffery, lingering quietly behind them, turned his attention to Linsey.

The news that she had had a child with Collin didn't shock him, but it stirred a wave of curiosity. He couldn't stop wondering whether her return to Grester meant she had fully mended things with Collin.

A flurry of questions raced through his mind in mere seconds, but he knew he had no right to probe into her personal affairs, so he kept his emotions tightly reined in.

Still intrigued, Alicia asked, "So, how many kids do you have?"

"Two. They're twins, a boy and a girl," Linsey answered, her face softening with a tender glow as she thought of Zander and Zenia.

Alicia's voice was warm and genuine as she said, "Your kids must be adorable."

Linsey's smile softened, her eyes drifting to Alicia's pregnant belly. "I'm sure your little one will be just as charming."

As they talked, Dolores' attention was caught by a stylish men's outfit on display. "What do you think of this set? I think it's quite nice," she asked, holding up the set with a hopeful look.

Linsey closely inspected the outfit Dolores had selected and gave a nod of agreement. "This would suit Dustin perfectly. If it appeals to you, I'm certain Dustin would be thrilled to wear it."

Soon after, Dolores and Alicia wrapped up their shopping trip.

Alicia, feeling the weight of her pregnancy, began to grow drowsy.

"You should head home to rest," Linsey said with understanding. Before they parted, Alicia swapped contact details with Linsey and Dolores.

The trio made plans to hang out when their schedules aligned, with Alicia suggesting that Linsey would bring her two kids for a playdate. They seemed oblivious to Jeffery's quiet presence, absorbed in their lively exchange.

It wasn't until Alicia and Jeffery exited the mall that he finally spoke up. "You really seem to connect with Linsey," he remarked.

Alicia nodded without hesitation. "It's not just because she's your sister. I genuinely admire her personality."

Chapter 1027:

After a brief pause, she added with a grin, "If it weren't for how much you two look alike, I would never have guessed she's your sister."

Jeffery arched an eyebrow. "Is that a compliment for Linsey or a jab at me?"

Alicia responded earnestly, "I'm not criticizing you. It's just that Linsey, despite being younger, carries herself with such maturity. Maybe it's because she grew up in an orphanage and learned independence early. Her friend Dolores shares that same confidence and decisiveness—qualities I really respect."

Jeffery's gaze dropped subtly. "Linsey endured a lot of challenges in her childhood, never showing a hint of entitled pride."

He paused, then added with a touch of regret, "Sometimes I wish she would act a little more carefree, so I could dote on her as her big brother."

Alicia countered gently, "If Linsey were like that, you wouldn't feel this need to protect her. It's exactly because she's so self-reliant that you feel this way."

Jeffery considered her words and nodded slowly. "You're right." As he spoke, he reached out to gently ruffle Alicia's hair. "I can tell you really like them. They must feel the same, or they wouldn't have spent so much time talking and planning to meet again."

Alicia laughed softly. "I didn't expect us to hit it off so well. It feels like fate brought us together."

She squeezed Jeffery's hand and continued, "I know you and your parents want Linsey to reconnect with the family. Let's work together to show her we mean it. Maybe one day she'll truly feel like part of the family."

As they talked, they sat close in the car, Jeffery taking extra care to ensure Alicia's comfort.

Their laughter filled the air, creating a warm, intimate moment.

Unbeknownst to them, someone watched from a distance. Even as their car pulled away, the observer's gaze lingered, their expression growing increasingly grim.

Meanwhile, Linsey and Dolores spent the afternoon browsing shops, carefully selecting the perfect presents for Dustin.

As they loaded their purchases into the car's trunk, Linsey surveyed the heap of bags and remarked, "You kept saying you were stumped about what to get Dustin, but look at this haul! If he doesn't appreciate this birthday surprise, I'd have a mind to call him out for being ungrateful."

Dolores grinned broadly, unable to contain her excitement. "I told you I would win him over with an avalanche of gifts. Each one felt perfect for him—I couldn't resist!"

With that, they climbed into the car, one after the other.

Linsey directed the driver to head to Dolores' residence first. Dolores had mentioned needing to stash the gifts at home discreetly, keeping even Collin unaware to maintain the surprise.

Linsey gave Dolores' hand a reassuring squeeze, saying slowly, "Dustin's going to adore these. You picked each one with such thoughtfulness—it's not just about how many there are."

Dolores' voice softened, unusually tender. "Thanks for spending the day with me, Linsey."

Chapter 1028:

Linsey's smile was warm and genuine. "No need for thanks between us." For Linsey, anything that mattered to Dolores was just as important to her, deserving her full commitment.

Dolores felt the same about Linsey's priorities.

Soon, the car pulled up outside Dolores' apartment building.

Linsey stepped out to help carry the bags upstairs, but Dolores quickly stopped her. "I've got this—stay here. It's too much hassle for you to trek up and back. Rest for a bit."

With that, Dolores scooped up several bags and darted into the building.

Linsey, left waiting below, gave a small, amused smile.

She glanced over and noticed the bodyguard standing nearby.

Recalling that he worked for Collin, and knowing Dolores wanted the gifts to remain a secret, Linsey spoke firmly. "Don't mention our shopping trip to Collin. It's a surprise for Dustin, got it?"

The bodyguard nodded promptly. "Of course, Ms. Brooks. My lips are sealed."

Just then, the sharp, steady click of heels on the pavement caught Linsey's attention, the sound oddly unsettling.

She turned to see Joanne approaching, her face inscrutable, eyes locked on Linsey.

"What are you doing here?" Linsey asked, her brow furrowing as realization hit. "Have you been tailing us?"

The bodyguard immediately moved to stand between them, ready to intervene if Joanne made any sudden moves.

Seeing that, Joanne halted and let out a light laugh. "What are you afraid of? I'm not foolish enough to cause a scene in public. I'm here alone. I'm not a threat."

Linsey's eyes narrowed, unease creeping over her as she studied Joanne's overly friendly smile. She was certain this wasn't a chance encounter.

Suddenly, Linsey remembered Gorman's recent caution, urging her to stay wary of Joanne.

Joanne, maintaining her usual warm smile, said, "Linsey, I truly respect you and would be thrilled to work together. I'm happy to ignore your earlier dismissals today. I hope you'll rethink my proposals."

Nothing could have prepared Linsey for Joanne's relentless persistence, which bordered on the absurd.

A cold resolve settled over Linsey as she replied, "I'm telling you, I refuse to get involved with something so ridiculous."

A low, dismissive laugh escaped Joanne as her attention shifted to Dolores' apartment building.

Without warning, she said, "You and Dolores must be closer than most sisters. It's rare to see that kind of bond."

Hearing Dolores' name thrown into the conversation sent a wave of suspicion through Linsey's mind.

There was no doubt Joanne had her sights set on Jeffery, so it made no sense for her to suddenly focus on Dolores—until Linsey pieced it together.

Chapter 1029:

Offering no room for doubt, Joanne continued, "If you want Dolores to marry Dustin without a hitch, I'm your answer. I haven't known Hester long, but I already understand her inside and out. If I step in, Dolores will earn Hester's blessing in no time. That means Hester won't be breathing down Dustin's neck anymore, either."

Realization struck Linsey hard. Joanne wasn't just negotiating—she was issuing a threat.

Jaw clenched, Linsey murmured, "And if I refuse?"

Amusement danced in Joanne's eyes as she laughed. "Then I'll stick to Hester like glue and make sure I'm always by Dustin's side."

Feigning innocence, she let out a theatrical gasp and teased, "Don't tell me you're as naive as Dolores. If I hadn't been covering for them, do you really think Hester wouldn't have caught on to their secret meetings by now?"

Silent and breathless, Linsey struggled for words, finding herself trapped by Joanne's cunning.

A subtle shift in Linsey's face didn't escape Joanne, who got straight to the point. "Relax, I'm not going to ask you to do anything unforgivable. All I need is for you to help me bump into Jeffery a little more often."

Tension radiated from Linsey's clenched fists as she tried once again to talk Joanne out of her scheme. "Let me say it one more time, Joanne—Jeffery is already someone else's husband!"

"You mean Alicia?!" Joanne blurted out, the name snapping something inside her as anger twisted her features.

Shock rippled through Linsey at the sudden outburst.

Fixing Linsey with a fierce, unblinking stare, Joanne continued, "Do you have any idea what Alicia did to get here? Jeffery deserves better than her."

Emotions boiling over, Joanne paused only to steady her breath before launching into her story. "I dug into everything this afternoon. Three years ago, when Jeffery's blood disorder nearly killed him and the Lawson family had lost hope, Alicia appeared out of nowhere and offered to help—but only if they paid her \$50 million upfront. She wouldn't even sign the bone marrow agreement until the money landed in her account."

For a fleeting moment, Linsey's composure cracked, surprise registering before she carefully schooled her features.

No part of her expected that Jeffery's life had been saved under such circumstances.

"So what happened after that?" Linsey asked, curiosity finally winning out as she kept her tone steady and reserved.

Hatred narrowed Joanne's eyes as she responded, her words bitter and fast. "Alicia's a master manipulator—she'd do anything for wealth and power. She waited until the Lawsons had their backs against the wall before making her demands."

Each sentence only fueled her anger, eyes growing colder. "Even after pocketing all that money, she still wanted more. She refused to leave Jeffery's side after the surgery, and played her part so well that he doesn't see through her at all!"

A bitter sigh escaped Joanne's lips, venom dripping from every word as she hissed, "The child Alicia's carrying is probably the result of some despicable scheme!"

Chapter 1030:

Linsey observed Joanne's eruption with cool detachment, watching as resentment consumed what remained of the woman's composure.

When Joanne's tirade finally subsided, Linsey replied with measured calm, "You claim Alicia agreed to donate her bone marrow to Jeffery in exchange for financial compensation. Since the money has already been transferred to Alicia, it demonstrates that the Lawson family is well aware of this arrangement, including Jeffery himself. It's entirely possible that Jeffery personally approved giving Alicia the money."

The words struck Joanne like a physical blow, shock and bewilderment washing over her features as color drained from her face, then flooded back in mortified patches. Her voice quavered as she whispered, "What do you mean?"

Linsey pressed forward with unhurried precision, "What I mean is this—regardless of whether Alicia is the scheming woman you paint her to be, Jeffery ultimately chose to marry her of his own free will. As for the child Alicia is carrying, you can be absolutely certain it is the fruit of genuine love between Alicia and Jeffery."

Before Joanne could mount a defense, Linsey struck with surgical accuracy, "Do you honestly believe that someone of Jeffery's character and standing would allow a woman he doesn't love to carry his child? Moreover, they got married. Doesn't that make your accusations sound rather ridiculous?"

“That’s nonsense!” Joanne snarled through clenched teeth. But she quickly wrestled her fury back under control, her lips curving into a mocking sneer. “If Alicia hadn’t been a successful match for Jeffery’s bone marrow, she wouldn’t have even crossed paths with him, much less married into the Lawson family. Her background, appearance, and education all pale in comparison to mine. What could she possibly possess that makes her worthy of Jeffery?”

Her words dissolved into defeat, Joanne’s gaze dropping to the ground, her voice emerging as a hoarse whisper laden with grief. “If Jeffery had married another distinguished young lady, I wouldn’t have uttered a single protest. But he chose to marry someone as unremarkable as Alicia. How can I possibly accept that?”

Linsey sighed silently.

Throughout Joanne’s impassioned outpouring, it became painfully clear that simply mentioning Jeffery’s marriage to Alicia would never be enough to release this woman from her torment.

The realization prompted Linsey to shift toward more delicate territory. “Earlier today, you witnessed firsthand how Jeffery seemed not to recognize you at all. Though your feelings for him run deep and true, love cannot be willed into existence by one heart alone.” Linsey’s lips pressed into a thin line as she prepared to deliver the merciless truth. “To speak plainly, Jeffery doesn’t envision you as part of his world. If he felt any attraction toward you, you would have captured his attention when we encountered him this afternoon.”

Joanne’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, and with a single, fragile blink, they spilled over, cascading down her cheeks in silent rivulets.

Brushing the tears from her cheeks with defiant fingers, she lifted her chin and declared with stubborn resolve, “During our time studying abroad, Jeffery and I were acquainted. We’d gather with classmates and friends regularly, and I’d engage him in discussions about our coursework. Seven years have passed since then. It’s perfectly understandable that I’ve slipped from his memory. After all, we lost contact completely over the years. I can hardly fault him for not recognizing me.”