

Zillionaire 1031

Chapter 1031:

Linsey absorbed this revelation, pieces of the puzzle clicking into place regarding their shared academic history abroad. The painful irony wasn't lost on her. While Joanne still carried the flame of her feelings for Jeffery, he had allowed her memory to fade into complete obscurity.

Linsey surmised that from the very beginning, Joanne's affection had been a quietly harbored secret, unrequited and unspoken. Otherwise, there would be no explaining how Jeffery could have erased her so thoroughly from his memory.

"I was the first one to meet Jeffery. It's disgusting how Alicia used cheap tricks to wedge herself in. One day, he's going to drop her—just wait," Joanne said, her voice laced with confidence as she tilted her chin.

Without missing a beat, Linsey flicked her gaze away, unfazed. "Then be patient. When Jeffery finally gets tired of Alicia, maybe you'll get your shot."

"Ugh, you—" Joanne sputtered before catching herself. Her tone softened, less combative now. "Linsey, let's not waste time on this back-and-forth, alright?"

Her eyes briefly shifted toward the apartment building, a subtle flicker of calculation crossing her face. "I'd stay and chat, but if my guess is right, your precious friend should be showing up any minute now." The mention hit its mark—Linsey's eyes darkened, just slightly. Joanne noticed the shift and slowly curled her lips into a sly smile, triumph flickering behind her eyes.

"You and Dolores go way back—what, twenty years? And yet you're just going to stand by while the man she loves marries someone else?" Joanne said slowly, as if drawing out the temptation. "You know I couldn't care less about Dustin. But you? If you help me get closer to Jeffery, I'll pull a few strings and get Hester on Dolores' side. Seems like a pretty sweet trade."

Linsey's breathing hitched ever so briefly. Her hands clenched at her sides, her body betraying the calm expression she tried to hold. Joanne had a knack for reading people, and Linsey's barely noticeable shifts in expression told her everything she needed to know. She could tell without a doubt—Linsey was beginning to crack.

Choosing to wrap things up, Joanne said, “I get that you don’t feel much warmth toward the Lawson family, but they hold you in high regard. Jeffery still carries the weight of what he did to you, and he’s not the only one. Whoever ends up marrying into that family won’t change your position, so why not think about forming a partnership that benefits us both?”

She ended with a quiet, knowing laugh and gave Linsey a smug little wave. “See you around, Linsey. Hopefully, by the next time we talk, you’ll have made the smart call.”

Linsey remained rooted to the spot, her gaze fixed on Joanne’s retreating silhouette until it faded into a distant blur. It wasn’t until a familiar voice, tinged with urgency, broke through the fog in her mind that Linsey jolted back to awareness. “Linsey!”

Dolores gripped Linsey’s shoulders, her hands warm and steady, as if trying to physically pull her out of her thoughts.

“Huh?” Linsey blinked, then forced a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Sorry, did you say something?”

A breath of relief escaped Dolores as she studied Linsey’s face. “I’ve been calling you forever. What were you even thinking about?”

One glance at Dolores, and Linsey made her decision—Joanne’s manipulation would stay a secret.

Chapter 1032:

Only days ago, Dolores had been crushed over Dustin, so much so that she even lost weight. There was no way Linsey would risk dragging her back into that spiral of heartache, especially not now.

Dolores had finally found a spark of joy again, throwing herself into the preparation of Dustin’s birthday surprise with genuine excitement. Linsey couldn’t bring herself to ruin that flicker of hope with Joanne’s schemes.

Besides, Joanne's obsessive chase after Jeffery had nothing to do with Dolores—it was her own mess to deal with.

A gentle smile touched Linsey's lips as a new idea formed in her mind, giving her the perfect excuse to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Did you ever get around to organizing those gifts you picked out?"

Dolores lit up instantly, her worry forgotten. "Yep, all done! And I made sure to hide them well. Dustin won't be dropping by my place anytime soon, so the surprise is safe."

"Let's talk in the car," Linsey said as she gently took Dolores' hand and led her into the vehicle.

"Alright." Dolores smiled brightly. "After such a long day out, I'm starving. I wonder what Glenda's making for dinner." They arrived home not long after.

All through dinner and later in the living room, Dolores stayed cheerful, chatting away with a relaxed grin.

Linsey sat beside her the whole time, smiling now and then—hiding her true emotions behind a calm, steady face.

Later that night, after freshening up, Linsey climbed into bed. She had barely settled when Collin, who had been waiting, pulled her into his arms.

"Hey! What are you doing?" she exclaimed, surprised.

In the blink of an eye, she was wrapped tightly in his embrace. His hold was so firm that she couldn't move an inch.

Her cheek rested against his chest. They both used the same shower gel, but somehow, she could still pick up that unique Collin scent. After a quiet moment, Linsey relaxed in his arms and smiled sweetly. "What's with the sudden hug?" she asked softly.

Collin rested his chin on her head. His chest moved as he spoke, the sound vibrating gently against her. "I'm trying to make you feel better," he said, his voice calm but filled with warmth.

Linsey froze for a moment. Her heart skipped a beat. She bit her lower lip lightly, then asked, "How did you know?"

From the moment she stepped into the house, she had put on a cheerful front. She thought she had hidden it well. But clearly, Collin had seen through her act.

He let out a soft chuckle and gently stroked her hair. "Baby, I'm your boyfriend. If I couldn't tell how you feel, I might as well go take a class on it."

Linsey burst into laughter. "A class? Do they even teach stuff like that?"

Collin pretended to think. "They should. Not everyone's born knowing how to love someone. I didn't get it right until I met you. If someone had taught me earlier, maybe I wouldn't have messed up so much."

The room was dim, lit only by two soft bedside lamps. The glow gently framed their faces, leaving a warm shadow in the background.

Chapter 1033:

Linsey looked up at him. The moment her eyes met his, her smile grew. She cupped his face lovingly, then leaned in to plant a soft kiss on his lips.

Collin's eyes sparkled with affection.

"Oh? Is that your answer?" he asked, his voice low and teasing. Though he was a tough businessman by day, around her, he was all warmth and tenderness.

Linsey giggled, her eyes shining. "Can't I reply that way?"

Collin answered with a grin, "Of course you can. I'm yours. You're free to do whatever you want to me."

Collin's tender words washed over Linsey like a balm, dissolving the tension that had coiled tight within her.

When he watched her shoulders ease and her expression soften, relief flooded through him.

His fingers found their way to her hair, stroking gently as the silence stretched between them. When he spoke again, his voice carried the hushed intimacy reserved for her alone. "Can you tell me what has happened?"

Something had clearly upset her today. Collin knew she had spent the afternoon with Dolores, which was supposed to leave her bubbling with laughter and stories.

Yet here she was, wrapped in melancholy like a heavy cloak. Memory struck him suddenly. The message his subordinate had delivered at noon!

His brow furrowed as pieces clicked into place. "Are you upset because Gorman is leaving?"

Linsey's eyes flew wide with shock. "Collin, what are you even saying?" The genuine bewilderment in her voice made him backtrack quickly. "I was just thinking out loud. I wasn't accusing you of anything."

A spark of mischief flickered in Linsey's gaze as she raised her hand to cup his chin, her thumb brushing across his jawline with playful firmness. Feigned indignation colored her tone. "Since you brought it up, now I can finally ask. Have you been secretly working to push him out these past few days?"

The tables had turned completely, and Collin silently cursed himself for walking straight into her trap.

Straightening, he adopted his most sincere expression. "Linsey, don't let that manipulative man fill your head with lies. The Green family's power in Grester has been crumbling for years. When business opportunities came up that conflicted with their interests, I simply took them. As the founder of CR Corporation, I have to put our company first. You understand that, don't you?"

Amusement sparkled in Linsey's eyes as she studied his face. "You could make robbery sound like charity work. Even when I want to be mad at you, you never give me a proper reason."

Collin's features melted into wounded innocence. "Baby, you wouldn't really side with another man against me, would you?"

She exhaled softly, shaking her head. "I'm not siding with anyone. I just don't see why all this scheming was necessary."

Her fingers traced lazy patterns across Collin's palm as she spoke, her voice taking on that patient tone she used when explaining complex matters. "Gorman came back claiming he wanted to expand the Green Group's reach in Grester. Yet everything he's done has only hurt his family's business instead of helping it. Until he sorts out whatever's clouding his judgment, he'll never be able to focus properly on work. I can see clearly that the Green family's foothold in Grester isn't nearly what it once was."

Chapter 1034:

Collin absorbed her words in thoughtful silence, offering no interruption.

His campaign to drive Gorman and the other Green family interests from the city had been motivated entirely by protecting Linsey, not from any fear that she harbored feelings for Gorman.

Through everything they had weathered together, his trust in Linsey had become absolute.

True, Gorman had risked everything to save her life, and Linsey had released her bitterness over the pain he had caused her in the past. Yet forgiveness didn't come so easily to Collin.

The memory of Gorman's deception still burned within him. Faking his own death to manipulate Linsey into accepting IVF treatments crossed every line of decency.

At least Gorman possessed enough wisdom to retreat on his own, sparing Linsey further turmoil.

Had he chosen to linger and continue his pursuit, Collin would have ensured he faced far harsher consequences.

"It's a relief that you're not angry with me," he murmured, his voice soft with relief.

Linsey's expression grew serious. "Collin, you must promise me something. Never bring up Gorman's name again."

She paused, letting the weight of her words settle between them. "In return, I won't mention any of your admirers."

Collin's eyebrow arched upward in surprise. "I have admirers?"

"Of course, have you forgotten about Haven? And your childhood sweetheart, the famous actress Kylee, along with those other women I won't mention?" Linsey said, regarding Collin teasingly.

Their laughter gradually dissolved the tension that had coiled around Linsey's shoulders. As warmth returned to her voice, clarity began threading through her scattered thoughts.

"So, can you tell me what happened now?" Collin's voice dropped to a whisper as his fingers traced through the silken strands of hair framing her face, tucking them gently behind her ear.

Linsey dropped her gaze, the afternoon's events spilling from her lips in hesitant fragments.

The moment Joanne's arrogant threats entered the conversation, shadows gathered in Collin's expression like storm clouds.

As she caught the shift in his demeanor, Linsey's hand found his arm. "Don't worry. I won't let Joanne walk all over me."

A heavy sigh escaped Collin's chest. "But she did corner you, didn't she?"

Uncertainty rippled through Linsey's eyes.

"Joanne's words... I can dismiss them as the ravings of someone unhinged." Her fingers unconsciously sought the soft fabric of his pajama collar. "But Dolores genuinely cares for Dustin. That's what haunts me."

Meeting his gaze with sudden intensity, Linsey continued, "These past few days, Dolores has been wearing a mask of cheerfulness that doesn't reach her eyes. Before, her pain was raw and visible. Now, this forced brightness... she just doesn't want me to worry."

Chapter 1035:

Though Dolores rarely occupied Collin's thoughts, he considered this carefully. "If she's struggling emotionally, Dustin's likely at the center of it. I'll push him to step up, be present for her more consistently."

Linsey pressed on, worry creasing her brow. "What about Hester? Is there truly no way to soften Hester's judgment of Dolores?"

Without hesitation, Collin's response came steady and sure. "Dustin and Dolores should focus on their own relationship, regardless of Hester's interference. After all, what they share belongs to them alone. As long as Dustin shows true resolve, they can still find their way to happiness."

Tension still etched itself across Linsey's features, refusing to ease. "But Dustin isn't taking any real action. Lately, he and Dolores only manage stolen moments together, and even those happen under Joanne's protection to keep Hester from discovering them. If Joanne withdraws her help—or worse, leads Hester straight to them—Dolores will be completely defenseless."

Collin's silence stretched as he weighed her words. "Perhaps Dustin has already devised a strategy we're not seeing."

Discouragement shadowed Linsey's expression. "I hope you're right."

After a moment's hesitation, she fixed him with a puzzled stare. "Dustin runs CR Corporation as CEO, doesn't he? With that kind of power at his disposal, surely he could stand up to Hester? If he truly wanted to, couldn't he easily deploy security to keep her surveillance away?"

"Certainly." Collin's voice carried its own note of bewilderment. "Which makes his inaction all the more baffling. I can't understand why he hasn't moved against Hester's meddling."

His lips compressed into a thin line as he confessed, "Since he's keeping his cards close to his chest, I can't risk interfering. The last thing I want is to accidentally sabotage whatever strategy he's crafting."

The more Linsey absorbed his words, the deeper her unease grew. Urgency sharpened her voice. "He hasn't confided in you at all? Hasn't he come to you for counsel or asked for your perspective? Hester's relentless campaign against Dolores demands immediate action."

"We've barely exchanged words beyond pleasantries lately, so his thoughts remain a mystery to me," Collin admitted.

Linsey stayed quiet for a moment, then laid a gentle hand on Collin's shoulder. "You and Dustin practically grew up side by side, and he's the reason CR Corporation even exists. He sees you as family, Collin. Maybe you should reach out and talk to him more often."

She let out a soft sigh, a trace of confusion in her voice. "It's strange, isn't it? Dustin's got more experience in matters of the heart than you do, yet half the time he seems completely lost. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right call letting Dolores date him..."

"Don't worry too much," Collin said, trying to put her at ease. "Dustin's dependable. He wouldn't just act on a whim. I'll talk to him tomorrow and see where his head's at."

Even as Collin tried to reassure her, Linsey's thoughts kept swirling. Collin's trust in Dustin came from years of friendship, and Linsey respected that.

But when it came to Dolores' happiness, she didn't want to take any chances.

Chapter 1036:

Until Dustin stepped up and proved himself, Linsey found it hard to put her full trust in him.

Collin caught the anxiety flickering across Linsey's face and gave a small laugh.

He reached over, smoothing the worry lines from her forehead. "Hey, it's going to be alright. I've got faith in both Dustin and Dolores. They'll figure it out in their own time."

He lowered his voice, offering a soft reminder. "Remember all the storms we weathered before we finally found our way back to each other?"

That memory brought a genuine smile to Linsey's lips, her eyes shining as she met Collin's gaze. "You're right about that."

Collin smiled back. "And honestly, not every rough patch needs to be so dramatic. I just want you to stay hopeful. Don't let this get you down."

A soft laugh escaped Linsey. "If someone had told me that Mr. Riley would turn out to be so thoughtful and wise, I never would have believed them."

Collin took her teasing in stride, offering her a gentle smile as he rested a reassuring hand on her back. "You're not the type to agree to Joanne's scheme just so she can get closer to Jeffery. That's not who you are."

That earned another nod from Linsey. "Exactly. Ripping a family apart is wrong, especially now that Alicia's expecting. Even though Jeffery and I haven't always seen eye to eye, I could never help Joanne break up his family."

"We'll handle things our way," Collin replied with quiet determination.

“If Joanne wants to use Hester’s grudge against Dolores as leverage, then we’ll just have to help Hester see Dolores in a new light.”

Linsey’s agreement was quick and certain. “Absolutely!”

Her gaze lingered on Collin, warmth flooding her chest at the sight of his easy smile.

“Thank you so much, baby,” Linsey said softly, her gratitude sincere.

Those simple words brought a light to Collin’s face. He leaned in, cupping her cheeks with a tenderness that made his voice drop to a hush. “No, I should thank you too. I’m grateful you trust me enough to share what’s on your mind.”

The two of them shared a quiet, intimate smile in the gentle glow of the room.

Then, Collin leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Linsey’s forehead, his lips cool against her skin.

Linsey’s eyes drifted closed, letting the moment settle around her.

Collin’s voice was little more than a loving whisper. “Sweet dreams.”

When morning arrived, Linsey reached across the bed and found herself alone.

She washed up and made her way to the living room, where Dolores sat, tapping away at her laptop.

The noise of her footsteps caught Dolores’ attention, and she turned with a cheerful grin. “You’re up! Glenda’s whipped up breakfast—go grab some before it gets cold. Collin left with the kids at the crack of dawn. No idea what their plans are.”

A flicker of confusion crossed Linsey's face. Her thoughts drifted back to the late-night conversation she had shared with Collin. She had figured Collin was going to see Dustin, but bringing the children along made little sense.

Chapter 1037:

Forcing a light tone, Linsey said, "I'm sure Collin just wanted to treat them to a little adventure." She tried to keep any unease out of her voice. "Are you busy this early?"

Dolores let out a soft laugh. "I'm just hunting for ideas, trying to come up with creative ways to celebrate a boyfriend's birthday. I want to throw Dustin the best party ever."

The response caught Linsey off guard, leaving her with a strange mix of curiosity and worry.

A growing suspicion had taken root: after those tears Dolores shed days earlier, her attachment to Dustin had only intensified, bordering on obsession.

Back when Dustin's affections seemed to outshine Dolores', Linsey hadn't given the dynamic much thought. Yet, as Dolores seemed to throw herself more and more into the idea, Linsey couldn't shake a faint sense of apprehension.

Thinking back to Collin's gentle reassurance last night, she managed to calm her nerves. Reason told her she was probably making too much of things. Once Collin finished speaking with Dustin, the two of them could work together and surely convince Hester to welcome Dolores. That way, all of Dolores' effort for Dustin would finally count for something.

Comforted by that thought, Linsey nodded. "Alright, I'll eat first. When I'm finished, I'll help you brainstorm some party ideas."

Dolores waved her off. "No need! I've already narrowed it down to a handful of options. Later, I'll go check out some places in person—sometimes online reviews don't tell the whole story."

"Perfect. My schedule's clear, so I'll come with you." Linsey smiled, happy to tag along.

She made her way to the table and started on breakfast.

Dolores soon closed her laptop, joining Linsey with a curious look. "Isn't Gorman supposed to leave Grester today? Aren't you going to the airport?"

A gentle shake of the head was Linsey's answer. "No, we said our goodbyes yesterday. There's really nothing left to add."

After a brief pause, she added, "Collin is glad that Gorman's leaving. I'm sure he's already arranged for people to get him safely onto the plane."

Biting into her toast, Linsey spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. "Collin knows that if something happened to Gorman now, I'd feel responsible. So he'll make sure everything goes smoothly, and I don't need to see him off myself."

Dolores chuckled, giving Linsey a playful nudge. "That's exactly it! No wonder you read Collin like a book. You always know what he's thinking!"

Linsey made quick work of her breakfast, not lingering at the table.

Once both women had freshened up, they headed down to the lobby side by side. The moment they stepped outside, the sight of two gleaming luxury cars waiting at the curb caught their attention. Neither had time to question it—before they could even trade a glance, several familiar faces strolled over to greet them.

"Linsey!"

Startled, Linsey barely had time to react before Myla rushed over and wrapped her up in a fierce embrace.

"You're really here, Linsey!" Myla was overcome with emotion, her eyes shimmering with tears before she even made contact, her voice trembling. "Where have you been all this time?"

Chapter 1038:

Trailing just behind, Cruz arrived with worry etched on his face. Gently, he eased Myla back a step. “Easy, Myla. Don’t scare her.” With visible reluctance, Myla finally released her grip.

Meeting Myla’s gaze, Linsey noticed her wiping away tears with shaking hands and felt a brief moment of discomfort.

Her confusion cleared as she caught sight of Jeffery and Alicia lingering behind the older couple.

So Dolores had been right—Jeffery had already filled Myla and Cruz in on her homecoming.

It seemed the entire Lawson family had rushed over at dawn, as if afraid she might vanish again without a word.

Linsey caught Dolores’ playful, knowing look from the corner of her eye.

Myla tried to collect herself, but Linsey’s poised calm only made her more anxious.

Lost in the rush of reunion, Myla nearly forgot how things had ended four years ago. A hesitant apology slipped out. “Linsey, I’m sorry. Was I too much?”

Myla managed a nervous smile, obvious hope shining in her damp eyes as she sought forgiveness.

Linsey’s brows drew together ever so slightly. Looking into a face that mirrored her own, she found it impossible to be harsh.

Taking a breath, Linsey stepped back and addressed her with polite reserve. “Mrs. Lawson, is something wrong?”

Once upon a time, she had felt close enough to Myla to use her first name.

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But after the truth came out, Linsey had chosen a more distant form of address.

Even knowing that the couple in front of her were the parents she had once ached to find did nothing to change her decision.

Myla's lips trembled with emotion, her eyes filling as she fought not to cry in front of everyone.

"We were overjoyed to hear you'd come back, Linsey." Trying to recover, Myla offered a hopeful smile and invited, "If you're free today, would you join us for a meal? We've made a reservation. As a family, we thought—"

The word stuck in her throat. Worrying she had said too much, she hurried to correct herself. "I mean, we'd like to invite you to eat with us, just to talk and catch up."

Cruz quietly added his support. "There's no pressure, Linsey. We won't ask you to do anything you're uncomfortable with. We only hope to share a meal together."

He studied Linsey with gentle worry, his eyes red with emotion.

"You've changed a lot in four years. You seem thinner now."

Meanwhile, Jeffery and Alicia waited quietly behind the older couple. Their silence was its own kind of statement—they trusted Myla and Cruz to say what needed to be said.

Too many people speaking would only make Linsey feel cornered, and none of them wanted to overwhelm her.

Linsey kept her eyes lowered and declined with gentle formality. “Thank you, but I’ve already made other arrangements for today. I won’t be able to join you for lunch.”

Chapter 1039:

When she heard her answer, Myla’s heart tightened with disappointment, though she could hardly call it unexpected.

She spent a moment gathering herself, then suddenly shifted her focus to Dolores, who had quietly stood by through it all.

“You must be Dolores, aren’t you? I’ve heard you’ve been Linsey’s closest friend for years.” With warmth, Myla clasped Dolores’ hand. “Would you consider joining us? Maybe Linsey would feel more at ease if you were there.”

Cruz jumped in without missing a beat. “Dolores, you and Linsey have always been like sisters. I hope you know by now that Linsey is our biological daughter. We can’t thank you enough for looking after her all this time. If the restaurant doesn’t suit you, just tell us—we’ll gladly pick another spot, whatever you both prefer!”

The sudden focus caught Dolores off guard. She hadn’t expected the Lawsons to appeal to her so directly. It struck her as genuine proof of how much Linsey mattered to them.

Those four years had been a black hole—Collin had searched endlessly, but even he had failed, thanks to Gorman’s determination to keep Linsey hidden. The Lawsons, especially with their waning influence, had never stood a chance.

Still, Dolores had surmised that, given their desperation years ago, the Lawsons would move mountains to see Linsey if they got even a whisper of her return to Grester.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lawson, I’m so grateful for your kindness, but unfortunately, I have prior commitments today,” Dolores replied with soft regret, turning down Cruz’s generous offer.

Disappointment flitted across both Myla's and Cruz's faces at her answer.

The sight left Dolores oddly unsettled.

A sidelong glance at Linsey told her plenty—her friend's brow was pinched, and the spark in her eyes had dulled.

Lowering her gaze, Dolores noticed Linsey's hands were balled into fists at her sides, small crescent marks blooming where her nails pressed into her skin.

There was no doubt left—Linsey no longer looked to the Lawsons for anything. What remained in her heart was only reluctance, even a touch of resistance.

Even so, witnessing the disappointment on their faces, Linsey felt a flicker of tenderness—some threads of family were nearly impossible to sever, no matter how much she tried.

Dolores, for her part, silently wished Linsey could mend things with the Lawsons. Maybe then, if life turned upside down again, Linsey wouldn't have to stand alone as she had four years ago.

Once, Dolores had truly believed she could be Linsey's anchor.

But when trouble blindsided her own company, Dolores found herself barely able to keep afloat. There had been no way to reach out to Linsey when she needed it most.

Now, even her relationship with Dustin remained unresolved, hanging over her with uncertainty.

A quiet hope lingered in her mind—if she ever had to leave Grester behind, at least Linsey might not be left all on her own if the Lawson family could fill the gap.

Chapter 1040:

She was almost startled by how quickly these thoughts tumbled through her head.

By the time Dolores returned to the moment, Myla was already speaking again, her voice soft with understanding. "It's alright, truly. Any time you're free—"

But before Myla could say more, Dolores flashed Linsey a gentle smile and said, "I'll handle things on my own later. Linsey, why don't you have lunch with Mr. and Mrs. Lawson? After so many years apart, you must have a lot to catch up on."

Linsey's eyes went wide in protest. "But—I..."

Out of the corner of her eye, Dolores spotted Myla's and Cruz's faces brightening with hope, and a weight seemed to lift from her shoulders.

Dolores could see without a doubt that the Lawsons' feelings for Linsey were sincere.

If only they could show her genuine warmth and make up for the time they had lost, Dolores believed Linsey's forgiving heart would eventually let them back in.

She understood better than anyone—Linsey still carried a deep yearning for family.

"No more second thoughts," Dolores said, squeezing Linsey's hand with a steady grip and sending her a look full of gentle encouragement. "Go on. We'll catch up tonight."

With that, she offered a polite smile to the Lawsons and slipped away down the street.

Linsey stayed rooted to the spot, her gaze following Dolores until she was out of sight, her emotions tangled in knots.

Those few words from Dolores said everything she needed to hear. She knew exactly what Dolores hoped for—a real conversation between her and the Lawsons, one that might finally bring closure.

Even if she decided not to return to them, she owed everyone an honest answer.

Otherwise, the Lawsons would never stop searching for her.

Resolved, Linsey turned to Myla, who stood there, eyes shining with unshed tears, and said in a calm, clear voice, "Let's go."

Myla looked stunned for a moment, but Cruz gently nudged her back to herself.

"Yes! Yes, of course!" Myla's tears spilled over, trickling down her cheeks and leaving a little mark on her blouse.

Watching Myla break down like that, Linsey felt a sharp pang deep inside, her breath faltering for just a moment.

Still, her face gave nothing away, leaving her emotions well hidden. It wasn't just Myla and Cruz who were overjoyed—Jeffery and Alicia shared quick, hopeful looks as well.

"Come along, Linsey," Myla said softly, reaching out in an attempt to take Linsey's hand.

Linsey instinctively stepped back, gently sidestepping Myla's gesture. Myla's fingers dropped to her side, and a flicker of sadness crossed her features.

A hush settled over the group, making the air heavy with awkwardness.

Linsey's expression stiffened, her lips parting as if she meant to say something, but no words came.