

Zillionaire 1111

Chapter 1111:

Whispers rippled through the crowd.

“Wait, did I hear that right? They’re getting married in a month?”

“Can you believe it? Ms. Ellis is getting such a halfhearted celebration. First, a thrown-together engagement, now a rushed wedding. As a member of the Walton family, she deserves so much better than this.”

“Honestly, I almost feel bad for Joanne. Hester isn’t exactly treating her with much respect.”

At Linsey’s table, the low buzz of gossip drifted over. Dolores, slightly flushed from wine, seemed unaware, but the rest picked up every word.

Alicia’s eyes widened with genuine surprise. “Is it even possible to organize a proper wedding in just one month?”

Linsey offered a wry smile. “The Wade family probably doesn’t see any reason to waste their time or energy on something they consider trivial.”

With the eavesdropper hovering nearby, Linsey played her role, displeasure lacing her words as she stood up for her friend.

Everyone knew that when powerful families joined through marriage, months of meticulous planning were the norm. Such events weren’t just about two people—they reflected the prestige and status of both families throughout Grester.

So to have Hester announce a wedding date just a month away? That was a shock.

No matter how hard they tried, it would be impossible to avoid a last-minute scramble. Linsey had already found it odd that they had combined the engagement and birthday parties into one event.

Now it was clear that Hester never intended to put much effort into Joanne's side of things. She was simply a convenient pawn, making it easier for Dustin to secure his place at Wade Group.

For a fleeting moment, Linsey actually felt bad for Joanne. It suddenly made sense why Joanne had hesitated to marry into the Wade family at all.

Alicia chimed in quietly, "Honestly, the wedding itself isn't that important. As long as the couple is happy, it's enough. You don't really need a big event."

Linsey looked at her with genuine curiosity. "Is that why you and Jeffery never held a wedding? No wonder so few people even realize you're married."

Jeffery glanced at Alicia, a hint of guilt in his eyes. "I was still recovering at the time. Alicia didn't want to put me through anything stressful, so we just kept postponing. In the end, we signed the papers and skipped the ceremony."

"I already said I don't care." Alicia laughed, tilting her head. "But seriously, how did we end up talking about our own drama?"

She nudged Linsey with a teasing smile. "Wait! Didn't you and Collin skip your own wedding too?"

Linsey shrugged, resting her elbow on the table. "Collin and I? We already got married once. The second wedding was just a formality. No point dragging it out again..."

Before she could even finish the sentence, a familiar voice floated over, getting closer. "What's all this chatter? Did I hear someone drop my name?"

Linsey arched an eyebrow and turned just in time to be pulled into Collin's arms for a warm, familiar hug.

She looked up at him, her eyes softening as a small smile tugged at her lips. But before he could speak, Linsey gave him a quick, subtle look—just enough for him to catch on that someone nearby might be listening.

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Chapter 1112:

The years between them did the talking; Collin instantly understood what she meant without a word.

“You’re late,” Linsey murmured under her breath. “You missed Hester’s big announcement. Dustin and Joanne are tying the knot in a month.”

Collin barely blinked. “Noted.”

Without thinking, Linsey reached up to fix a strand of Collin’s hair that had gone rogue. “You’ve been swamped lately. Did Dustin dump a pile of mess on your desk before ditching CR Corporation?”

The mention of Dustin quitting CR Corporation hit like a jolt—Alicia’s and Jeffery’s eyes widened in shock.

“Wait, Dustin ditching CR Corporation? When the hell did that happen?” Jeffery asked, caught completely off guard.

Still salty about Collin, Jeffery added sarcastically, “So, is your firm about to crash and burn? Now it makes sense why you ran to the Lawson Group. Looks like this was your backup plan all along.”

Alicia rolled her eyes and gave him a light smack on the arm. “Would you quit running your mouth?”

She sighed quietly, a bit stunned by how Jeffery always took jabs at Collin, especially considering he was family through Linsey.

What none of them realized was that Jeffery's careless comment had just handed Collin the perfect opening for what he was about to do next.

"Oh, really?" Collin scoffed, a sharp grin forming. "You think CR Corporation falls apart without Dustin? Please. The guy's been riding my coattails for years. He's nothing but a pampered little party boy—what's he ever actually done?"

Linsey blinked, then jumped in, her tongue sharp. "Hold on. Wasn't Dustin the one who picked that overhyped designer from CR Corporation for the last design competition? The guy had zero skills and was all flash. What was Dustin thinking?"

"Whatever. Glad he's out of the picture now—it saves me the headache," Collin muttered with a shrug, clearly unbothered.

Linsey let out a soft sigh. "If you hadn't been kind enough to take him under your wing, he'd probably still be partying his life away without a clue."

The back-and-forth between Linsey and Collin left Alicia and Jeffery a bit stunned. Neither of them had expected such blunt—and honestly, rather ruthless—words from the two.

Right then, a sharp voice sliced through the air from behind. "Mr. Riley," Hester said icily, "how bold of you to trash my son right here, at my own event."

Collin turned, along with the others, just in time to see Hester walking toward them with Dustin and Joanne in tow. A small crowd of curious guests followed close behind, already sensing tension and ready for a show.

Dolores, who had been dozing off from the drinks, suddenly perked up when she heard Hester's voice. Her brows knitted together as she straightened in her seat.

Hester stepped closer, standing right in front of them, and immediately spotted Dolores sitting next to Linsey.

With a knowing smirk, she said, “Well, isn’t this a surprise? I’m just thrilled to see all of you here tonight.”

Collin raised an eyebrow, replying coolly, “Mrs. Wade, you’ve got it wrong. I was only messing around earlier.”

He shot a quick glance at Dustin before adding, “Dustin and I have been friends for years. Yeah, he’s leaving the firm, and sure, I’m bummed, but I’m backing him all the way.”

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Chapter 1113:

Then, after a beat, Collin said more seriously, “At the end of the day, Dustin’s a Wade. He’s bound to play his part in the Wade Group.”

Dustin’s lips curled into a cold, sarcastic smile as he replied, “Is that so?”

That smile told Hester everything. It was years of resentment toward Collin, and she couldn’t hide how pleased she was to see it. She thought all her pushing and advice had finally sunk in—Dustin was waking up to reality at last.

Meanwhile, Joanne, who had been watching Collin and Dustin’s silent tension all night, found her gaze drifting to Jeffery without meaning to.

It had been tough catching Jeffery over the past few days, let alone getting a good look at him like this. She was thrilled he had shown up at tonight’s banquet.

But Alicia being there put a damper on things.

Joanne’s expression darkened. When her eyes landed on Alicia’s obvious pregnancy, irritation bubbled up inside her. She knew she had to make her move before the chance disappeared.

With the crowd around, Hester shifted the conversation toward Dolores.

“Ms. Davidson, looks like you’ve had quite a bit to drink,” Hester said, keeping her tone polite but edged with sharpness. “There are guest rooms upstairs if you want to rest. Just let the staff know. They can take you up.”

“No, thanks, Mrs. Wade. I’m fine.” Dolores lowered her gaze quickly, almost as if trying to disappear from Hester’s unreadable stare.

Whether it was the alcohol or just nerves, her heart suddenly began pounding hard in her chest.

Of course, Hester wasn’t truly concerned about Dolores. Her real game was testing Dustin, seeing how far he would tolerate this. She had known all along that Dustin wouldn’t simply walk away from Dolores without a fight.

So when she caught that quick flash of dark frustration in Dustin’s eyes, she couldn’t help but smirk slightly.

His anger and refusal to back down were completely irrelevant to her. She had just gone public with Dustin and Joanne’s engagement—along with their wedding date.

Hester was convinced that, despite all the love Dustin and Dolores shared, they didn’t have the guts or the power to push back. She was certain that in a few years, they would see she had been right and thank her for her foresight.

With that smug thought, she relaxed and said smoothly, “Good to hear.”

The second Hester’s eyes slid away, Dolores let out the smallest, almost invisible sigh of relief.

After everything lately, just hearing Hester’s name or seeing her face in the news or in photos made Dolores’ skin crawl like nothing else. Hearing that cold, sharp voice sent a shiver straight down her spine.

She bit her lip nervously, her hand reaching out without thinking to grab Linsey's sleeve, desperate for something steady to hold on to.

Dolores' actions didn't go unnoticed by Linsey. She didn't let her expression slip, but she gave Dolores' hand a reassuring squeeze, noticing the coldness in her palm. Leaning closer, Linsey asked softly, "Do you feel cold?"

The question snapped Dolores out of her thoughts, and she gave a small shake of her head. "I'm okay."

Linsey studied her for a moment, reading the storm swirling behind Dolores' calm exterior. Still, she kept up the pretense. All she could do now was hope tonight's plan would work, so Dolores would no longer have to endure all this pain.

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Chapter 1114:

At that moment, Hester turned her attention to Jeffery, forcing on a well-practiced smile. "Mr. Lawson, it's been a while. Nice to see you here representing Lawson Group."

Her gaze drifted to Alicia, who sat next to Jeffery. "Word is you two recently got married. I suppose the rumors are true. I haven't had a chance to congratulate you yet."

For years, Wade Group and Lawson Group had worked side by side, once matching each other in resources and standing. Lately, however, Lawson Group had been losing momentum, its growth slowing with each passing year.

That history was the only reason Hester bothered to treat Jeffery with respect.

Jeffery met her politeness with equal calm. "Thank you, Mrs. Wade. Just so you know, I stepped down as CEO of Lawson Group a few days ago."

A hint of pride flickered in his eyes as he nodded toward Linsey. "From here on, my sister Linsey will be running the company."

The announcement caught Hester off guard. A ripple of surprise broke through her composure as she stared at Linsey, who remained calm and collected. "Wait. Are you saying Mrs. Riley is your sister?"

Jeffery simply nodded. "That's right."

Ignoring the flicker of discomfort on Hester's face, Jeffery grinned playfully. "Don't you think Linsey and I look alike, Mrs. Wade?"

Alicia, sitting quietly beside Jeffery, had heard this line enough times to be unfazed.

Ever since Linsey had stepped up as Lawson Group's president and embraced her family ties with the Lawson family, Jeffery had taken to dropping hints about their sibling bond to nearly everyone he met.

Although the Lawson family hadn't made any formal statement about Linsey, word had already spread among Grester's inner circles.

Hester's carefully composed smile nearly wavered at his remark.

Her gaze darted between Jeffery and Linsey as she studied their faces in a new light. Until now, she had never paid much attention to any resemblance—perhaps simply because she had never actually seen Linsey and Jeffery side by side before.

But now, as they stood together, the family likeness was unmistakable. No one would doubt their connection after seeing them like this.

"So, Mrs. Riley is the real daughter of the Lawson family," Hester said, forcing a warm tone, though her eyes betrayed a brief flash of regret.

If she had realized Linsey was the Lawson family's real daughter, she would have pushed Dustin to get close to her from the very beginning.

Still, she couldn't help but be taken aback that Jeffery had truly stepped aside and handed the president title to Linsey. She found herself questioning whether Jeffery truly had no concerns about Linsey someday taking full control of the Lawson Group's fortune.

Besides, Linsey had only ever been known as a designer. Hester couldn't help but wonder whether she was truly equipped to run a company as complex as Lawson Group.

Linsey raised her brows at Jeffery's comment, casting him a composed, almost dismissive glance. "Yes," she said calmly, "Jeffery is indeed my brother."

As she spoke, her gaze shifted leisurely toward Hester. She didn't miss the flicker of surprise in the woman's eyes. It wasn't hard to guess what thoughts were racing through her mind.

Chapter 1115:

In that instant, Linsey understood something crucial—Jeffery's seemingly careless words had just advanced their plan far more than expected.

After all, in Hester's eyes, Dustin had already severed ties with CR Corporation, leaving a critical void. Without him, the company would inevitably falter.

And now, Linsey—Collin's wife—had been named president of Lawson Group. To anyone observing closely, it was clear: CR Corporation and Lawson Group had secretly joined forces.

CR Corporation, already the dominant force in Grester, now had the resources and reach of Lawson Group backing it.

Their union was not just strategic—it was explosive. In time, Lawson Group could even eclipse the influence of the Wade Group.

All these implications unfurled within Hester's mind in a matter of seconds, and a creeping unease began to take hold.

Just then, Dustin, who had remained silent until now, suddenly let out a cold laugh. "Well, isn't this fascinating," he drawled, his tone laced with biting sarcasm. "Mr. Lawson, you get married and promptly forget about your own company. Then, the moment your long-lost sister returns, you hand over the reins without blinking."

His tone sharpened. "Let me guess—you did it because Linsey is married to Collin, right? With Lawson Group now leeching off CR Corporation, you've secured a decade's worth of lucrative projects without lifting a finger."

Jeffery's expression darkened instantly. "Dustin, what the hell are you talking about?"

He was stunned. The Dustin he knew—lighthearted, unbothered—had vanished overnight. In his place stood someone bitter, guarded, and cold.

The sudden shift left not only Jeffery, but also Hester and Joanne visibly unsettled. None of them could quite grasp what had triggered Dustin's sharp turn.

While all eyes were fixed on the unexpected clash, Linsey quietly exchanged a knowing glance with Collin.

Then, she leaned toward Alicia and murmured in a calm, composed voice, "Alicia, Dolores seems a little unwell. Could you take her outside for some air?"

Alicia, unaware of the strategic undertones behind Linsey's request, immediately nodded and turned to Dolores. "Dolores, are you feeling okay?" she asked gently.

Blinking in confusion, Dolores found herself being gently ushered out, unable to process what was happening—but not questioning it either. Their quiet departure went mostly unnoticed.

Back at the table, Collin finally spoke, his voice clipped and emotionless. “The collaboration between CR Corporation and Lawson Group is nothing more than a standard business arrangement.”

“Standard?” Dustin sneered, shooting Linsey a withering glance. “Funny, that partnership just happened to fall into place the moment she took over as CEO.” His eyes narrowed at both Linsey and Jeffery, his voice cutting like a knife. “No wonder you’re siblings—you both play the same manipulative, underhanded game.”

Jeffery shot to his feet, fury flashing in his eyes. “Dustin, you’ve crossed a line!”

His shout echoed through the room as his hand slammed against the table with a sharp crack, startling everyone nearby and silencing the room.

A deafening crash tore through the room—followed by a second, even more jarring thud that echoed ominously above their heads.

Joanne was the first to react. She looked up in alarm, only to see the grand chandelier overhead swaying precariously, its ornate frame trembling, the bolts anchoring it visibly loosening.

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Chapter 1116:

Beneath it, Dustin had just taken a step toward Jeffery—unwittingly placing himself directly under the dangling weight.

Joanne’s pupils dilated in horror as the chandelier dipped lower, the angle unnatural, its golden arms tilting downward like claws ready to strike. Then came a metallic creak. The chandelier seemed on the verge of plummeting, poised to crush both Dustin and Jeffery.

Joanne and Hester cried out at once, their voices overlapping in panic. “Jeffery!” “Dustin!”

Both women surged forward, but in the chaos, Joanne’s elbow collided with Hester’s shoulder.

Hester stumbled backward and fell to the floor, her heels slipping helplessly against the polished tiles.

As the crowd erupted into disarray, gasps and shouts rising in waves, Hester remained on the floor, stunned. She watched as Joanne—without hesitation—ran straight toward Jeffery. Not Dustin. The realization hit like a slap.

Not far away, Alicia and Dolores were startled by the commotion behind them. Instinctively, Alicia turned to look—only to be stopped by Linsey’s outstretched arm.

“Don’t turn around,” Linsey said calmly, shielding her with both body and voice. “It’s nothing serious.”

Meanwhile, Dolores sobered up instantly. She sprinted toward Dustin, her heart pounding, instincts screaming.

She didn’t know the chandelier wouldn’t fall. She didn’t know it had been secured with a hidden safety chain, or that the danger was part of a carefully orchestrated performance.

She only knew that Dustin was standing under it—and she couldn’t let him face it alone.

When she registered her surroundings, she realized she was lying over Dustin, shielding him from danger, eyes squeezed shut as she braced for impact.

Gasps and murmurs rippled through the room.

“What happened with the chandelier?”

“Oh my God, that was terrifying!”

“Wait—look! It didn’t fall... There’s still a central chain holding it up!”

“Seems like it just came loose... Thank goodness.”

As the panic subsided, Dolores slowly opened her eyes, dazed and shaken, only to find Dustin gazing at her—his eyes glistening with tears.

“You really came,” he murmured, his voice raw with emotion.

In that moment, Linsey’s earlier words replayed in his mind like a prophecy: Dolores will come. She’ll run to save you.

And she had. Without hesitation, without knowing it was all a staged illusion, she had lunged at him—just as he had secretly hoped.

“Dustin, are you okay?” Dolores asked, her voice trembling. Her face was pale, her eyes darting over him, checking for injuries. “Did anything hit you? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Dustin whispered, his arms slipping around her waist. He pulled her in tightly, inhaling deeply as though grounding himself in her presence.

Of all the variables he had planned for tonight, Dolores had been the one element he couldn’t predict.

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Chapter 1117:

“Dolores...” he murmured, his voice a mix of reproach and awe. “Have you lost your mind? That chandelier could’ve killed you. You didn’t even think—you just ran to me. Why would you do that?”

Dolores raised her head, her gaze narrowing at the chandelier’s unsteady sway overhead. Despite the uneasy flicker, the fixture remained in place.

Nearby, Jeffery looked up at Joanne as they lay on the floor, confusion flickering across his face. “Ms. Ellis, what brings you running over here?” Taking a moment, he gently inquired, “Do you think you can get up?”

Breathing heavily, Joanne noticed how Jeffery kept his hands on either side of her, never intruding. A hint of irony shadowed her eyes as she regarded him.

Jeffery’s concern deepened. “Ms. Ellis?” he called again, perplexed by her silence. A furrow formed between his brows as he tried to read her expression. “Did you hurt yourself?”

Only then did Joanne lift her eyes, her voice low and wry. “Right now, I almost wish I had.”

Jeffery registered her answer, but the intention behind it escaped him. That puzzled look on his face left Joanne unwilling to continue the conversation.

All her initial planning—using her partnership with Dustin to edge closer to Jeffery—now seemed pointless. With Jeffery right in front of her, Joanne found herself at a complete loss, unable to muster a single word or action.

“I’m fine. There’s no injury,” Joanne murmured, her gaze dropping to the floor.

Pushing herself upright with both hands, she tried to mask her unease. Without warning, her ankle wobbled inside the narrow heel, sending her off balance. A small gasp escaped her lips before she could stop it.

Out of nowhere, a firm grip caught her wrist, anchoring her.

Startled, Joanne glanced up, her heart racing as she realized Jeffery was the one steadying her. Her focus drifted from his composed face to the reassuring hand wrapped around her wrist.

“Watch your step,” Jeffery said, his voice calm and courteous as he helped her regain her footing.

Assured that Joanne was no longer at risk of falling, he promptly let go.

He scanned the area, quickly locating Alicia and Linsey a short distance away, feeling relieved that Alicia hadn't witnessed the near accident.

Even though the chandelier hadn't come crashing down, its erratic movement had shaken everyone.

Lingering close, Joanne found herself watching him, a quiet yearning flickering in her eyes.

A wave of memory swept over her, pulling her back to afternoons on campus when she would quietly study the curve of Jeffery's jaw from a distance.

A small hope stirred inside her—maybe Jeffery hadn't truly forgotten. Perhaps those memories simply lay dormant.

The thought crossed her mind: if only she could spark his memory, surely those moments from long ago would come rushing back.

Gathering her resolve, she softly called out, "Jeffery..."

Her words had barely left her lips before another voice cut through the moment. "Jeffery!" Alicia called, moving carefully, her hands resting protectively on her expectant belly.

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Chapter 1118:

At once, Jeffery moved to her side. "Slow down, Alicia. There's no need to hurry," he said, concern evident in his tone.

Joanne felt her features go rigid, remaining rooted where she stood, uncertain what to do.

Her gaze followed Jeffery as he walked away, her thoughts tumbling in confusion.

In just a few strides, Jeffery reached Alicia, clasped her hand gently, and, with practiced tenderness, brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face.

“Why do you look so freaked out?” Jeffery asked, his eyebrows raised in concern.

Alicia’s eyes scanned him quickly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I heard two loud bangs just now. Linsey said the chandelier upstairs almost fell. I got scared... Thought you might’ve been under it.”

Jeffery let out a quiet laugh, trying to ease her worry. “I’m good, seriously. Not even a scratch.”

They weren’t standing particularly close, but something about the air between them felt personal, as if it wrapped them in a space no one else could enter. Joanne noticed the shift in energy between them, and her face slowly fell into a quiet, heavy frown.

Linsey saw Jeffery drift closer to Alicia. Without rushing, she turned and made her way over to where Dolores and Dustin were.

Dolores and Dustin were still locked in each other’s arms, lost in their own world, completely oblivious to Hester walking straight toward them, her face blank and unreadable.

Just then, Collin quietly stepped up next to Linsey. He leaned in and muttered, “Let’s just watch for now. No need to jump in.”

Linsey gave a subtle nod, deciding to hang back without saying a word.

“Get up. Everyone’s staring,” Hester murmured, her voice low but tight, fighting to stay composed.

Dolores, still in Dustin’s arms, seemed to snap out of a trance. She scrambled to her feet, avoiding Hester’s gaze like it burned.

"I... I'm sorry," Dolores mumbled, flustered.

Dustin pulled himself together fast. Standing tall, he looked Hester straight in the eye. "I'm fine, Mom."

Hester's lips twitched in a bitter half-smile. Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Oh, I'm sure you are."

Her eyes flicked upward to the chandelier, which was still wobbling faintly, like a warning.

The banquet hall manager came sprinting over, clearly panicked. "Mrs. Wade, we're so sorry. We failed to double-check the fixtures. Turns out the screws holding the chandelier were loose."

Hester shot him a cold, sharp look. Her voice was raspy, edged with fury. "You should count yourself lucky no one ended up in the hospital tonight."

"We're truly sorry, Mrs. Wade. We'll give you a full explanation—and make it right," he promised, almost breathless.

The manager's eyes darted nervously to the big shots standing nearby, anxiety written all over his face. "If anyone's hurt, we'll get you to a hospital right away. All the bills, any damages—everything's on us."

His gaze swept over the crowd: Collin, the big shot behind CR Corporation; Dustin, next in line for the Wade fortune; and Jeffery, son of the Lawsons. Not a single one of them was the type to mess with.

Chapter 1119:

And yet, he couldn't for the life of him understand how the screws on that chandelier had suddenly come loose. Thank goodness the main chain had held up. If that thing had actually fallen and hurt someone, even selling the whole hotel wouldn't cover the fallout. Just thinking about it made him break out in a cold sweat. He wiped his forehead, equal parts relieved and mortified.

Hester didn't say a word. She just stood there, unreadable.

Dustin—who, of course, had planned the whole thing—put on a cheery act to smooth things over. “It’s all good, no need to panic. Nobody’s hurt. Stuff breaks, it happens,” he said with an easy shrug.

After all, this so-called accident was his doing. Obviously, he couldn’t go blaming the hotel staff for something he had staged.

Dustin glanced at Hester, careful not to push too hard. “Mom, no one got hurt. Maybe we should just keep things moving and make sure the rest of the guests are okay?”

Hester locked eyes with him, silent for a long, loaded moment.

Dustin kept his grin intact, as if he hadn’t just set off a bomb in the middle of the banquet. Up until now, Hester had always seen Dustin as a bit soft, not exactly sharp or cunning.

But right then, she realized—he was learning to play the game. And worse, he was starting to play her.

Dustin stood his ground, calm as ever. He knew Hester had figured it out. Of course she had. With instincts like hers, there was no way she hadn’t sensed he was the one behind the whole thing.

But he wasn’t trying to hide it. This was all part of the plan—to open her eyes to what Joanne was really up to.

Luckily, Joanne had reacted exactly as he had hoped. No surprises there.

The Wade family’s grand banquet came to an unexpected and awkward end. One by one, the guests began to trickle out, their murmurs echoing beneath the chandelier that had narrowly avoided becoming headlines.

Alicia, who had become accustomed to early nights ever since her pregnancy began, yawned discreetly. Jeffery, always attentive, took her gently by the arm and led her toward the exit.

But just before they left, Jeffery paused and pulled Linsey aside. His gaze was sharp, laced with quiet suspicion. "Tell me the truth," he said in a hushed voice. "Is there something going on tonight that I should know about? You guys are acting... odd."

Linsey's lips curled into a subtle smile. "Seems you're more perceptive than you let on."

At her words, Alicia's curiosity was piqued. She leaned in and lowered her voice. "Linsey, what's really happening tonight? Jeffery mentioned earlier that something felt off, but I thought he was overthinking things."

Glancing around to ensure no one was within earshot, Linsey gave a reassuring smile and murmured, "Let's just say we were carrying out a small operation. And thanks to you—though you didn't know it—we pulled it off."

Alicia blinked in surprise, while Jeffery raised an eyebrow. Linsey added warmly, "I'll explain everything once the dust has settled. Promise."

Alicia and Jeffery exchanged a quick look. Though curious, they decided not to push further.

"Very well," Alicia replied, smiling knowingly. "We'll wait for your full confession later."

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Chapter 1120:

Jeffery nodded. "Take care of yourself. We'll be heading home now."

As the couple walked away, Linsey exhaled quietly, the weight of the evening momentarily lifting off her shoulders.

One piece of the night's puzzle had safely exited the board. Now, it was Dustin's turn to play his role.

Inside the dimming banquet hall, Hester was still performing her hostess duties, elegantly guiding the remaining guests toward the exit.

“Mrs. Wade, congratulations! Mr. Wade and Ms. Ellis make a lovely pair,” one guest complimented.

Hester’s smile faltered for a brief second before returning with practiced grace. “Thank you. I’m glad you could join us.”

Joanne, who usually played along with Hester’s performances, stood unusually withdrawn. She kept her distance, remaining behind with Dustin.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dustin noticed her distracted demeanor. Leaning slightly toward her, he murmured, “I went to great lengths to give you a chance to impress Jeffery. Why didn’t you take it?”

Joanne turned to him, her expression a mixture of disbelief and anger. “So it was you behind that stunt.”

“Of course,” Dustin replied with infuriating calm. “Didn’t I make it clear? I can’t stand Collin and Linsey. When I saw them tonight, I couldn’t help but provoke them a bit. And since Jeffery was around, I figured I’d hand you a perfect opportunity to shine by saving him.”

“You’re insane!” Joanne hissed, her fury barely contained. “We’re supposed to be allies. Shouldn’t you at least tell me before pulling something like that?” She took a breath, then added through gritted teeth, “And for your information, I really thought that chandelier was going to crash down. I threw myself at Jeffery—right in front of Hester! Can you even imagine what she’s thinking of me right now?”

Dustin gave a shrug, blinking innocently. “But you never cared about me, did you? So why keep up the act?”

In that moment, the pieces finally clicked. Joanne’s breath caught as realization dawned.

A bitter smile played across her lips. Her voice, when it came, was low and cold. “Dustin... are you playing tricks with me?”

And there it was—the truth she had been too distracted to see until now. Dustin had never truly trusted her. He had let her drop her guard, pushed her into revealing herself before Hester, and used her to further his own strategy. She wasn't sure if there had ever been a real falling-out between him and Collin at all.

He had spun an elaborate illusion. And she had played right into his hands.

Dustin watched Joanne's face twist in disbelief, raising an eyebrow with an air of calm detachment. "Joanne, I must admit, I genuinely admire your courage. In that moment, you didn't hesitate—you ran straight to Jeffery's side. Honestly, before the banquet even began, I was nervous, wondering what I'd do if you didn't care about his safety at all."

"Utterly shameless," Joanne hissed, her voice trembling with fury.

She couldn't believe it—what she thought was an opportunity to draw closer to Jeffery had turned out to be a trap set by Dustin himself.

At that moment, Hester turned toward them with a face carved from stone. Her voice rang cold and sharp. "Joanne."