

Zillionaire 1121

Chapter 1121:

Startled, Joanne quickly suppressed her anger and replaced it with her usual fawning smile. “Hester, is something the matter?” she asked sweetly. Dustin blinked, momentarily surprised at how quickly she could shift masks.

Despite everything, he still found her behavior perplexing. She clearly had feelings for Jeffery—so why would she agree to an arranged marriage and continue to play the role of obedient future daughter-in-law?

Hester, however, had no patience for her charade. Her lips curved into a bitter smile. “There’s no need for you to keep pretending,” she said coldly.

Joanne’s heart skipped a beat. It was all too clear—Hester had seen everything: her desperate sprint toward Jeffery, not Dustin.

Trying to remain composed, Joanne stepped forward hesitantly. “Hester... could you give me a chance to explain?”

Hester’s answer came cool and quick. “Fine. I’ll give you a chance.”

Then, without missing a beat, Hester turned to Linsey and Collin with a piercing gaze. “And I imagine you two had your hands in this little scheme as well, right? In that case, let’s all talk together.”

The group soon entered a lounge on the first floor, closing the door behind them. Once inside, Hester crossed her arms and glanced around before asking sharply, “Where’s Dolores?”

“She had a few drinks and was shaken by what happened,” Linsey replied smoothly. “I took her upstairs to rest.”

Hester’s lips curled into a sneer. “So she didn’t know about your plan tonight.”

“Of course not,” Linsey replied, her tone unwavering. “If Dolores had known the chandelier was rigged not to fall, she never would’ve played along. She doesn’t believe in faking her emotions, not with Dustin.”

When he heard that, something in Dustin’s expression softened. He drew in a breath, struggling to keep his emotions in check. “Mom, you saw it yourself. Dolores didn’t hesitate. She ran straight toward me when she thought I was in danger. Even though we’re no longer together... she still cares about me.”

“Enough!” Hester snapped, cutting him off. She cast a withering glance at Linsey, then turned her steely gaze back on Dustin. “Don’t be naive. Do you really think Dolores is that innocent? Linsey is her friend—of course she’ll defend her. For all you know, the two of them may have been fooling you from the start.”

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Dustin’s brows furrowed, his voice tense. “Mom, why is it so hard for you to believe me? Dolores wouldn’t fake something like that. If she had known about tonight’s plan in advance, she never would’ve agreed to attend at all.”

Then, after a pause, he added with conviction, “If you don’t believe me, investigate. Go through my phone. Ask my staff. I’ll cooperate fully. But don’t you dare accuse Dolores. She’s not who you think she is.”

A heavy silence fell over the room, thick with tension and unspoken truths.

Linsey blinked softly, taking in the silence that had settled over the room. Seeing that no one seemed eager to speak, she gently tugged Collin toward a nearby sofa nestled against the wall. The two of them sank into the cushions, seeking a brief moment of peace.

Tonight’s banquet had been a blur of calculated performances and subtle maneuvers—neither of them had even had the time to sip a single drop of water.

Noticing the dryness on Linsey's lips, Collin poured her a glass of water without hesitation and handed it to her with care. "Here. Drink slowly."

Chapter 1122:

She took a few slow sips, draining half the glass before lowering it thoughtfully. Something occurred to her, and she turned her gaze toward him. "Why were you late tonight?" she asked, her voice quiet but curious.

Collin answered with composure, "I was wrapping up the mess Dustin left behind."

Linsey shot him a look, her voice lowering to a playful whisper. "You do realize that's just the story we've been feeding everyone, right?"

The truth, of course, was that Dustin had never really left CR Corporation. His supposed fallout with Collin had been a carefully choreographed illusion, all designed to deceive Joanne and Hester.

Collin reached out and gently wiped the droplets clinging to the corner of her lips. "There were still a few issues at the company that needed attention. I was delayed. That's all," he said reassuringly.

Linsey accepted the explanation without protest. She trusted him.

They had promised to keep no secrets from one another. Over such a minor matter, she saw no reason to doubt him.

With a subtle change of subject, she leaned closer, whispering quietly about other things.

Collin, meanwhile, watched her closely. Her glowing smile, her relaxed posture—it all stirred a deep tenderness in him.

In truth, he had kept one secret from her. But it would be the last.

After all, if he revealed his proposal plans and the wedding he had meticulously been preparing, it would ruin the surprise.

He felt he owed her more than words could express.

Nearly five years had passed since their first meeting in that church.

Their initial wedding had been swift and unadorned—born more of necessity than romance. To protect his identity, he had offered her no grand gesture, no fanfare. Then came the quarrels. After the divorce, she left the country, pregnant and alone.

Even their remarriage, later, had been handled discreetly—no wedding. From the moment they reunited, Collin had vowed to give her a ceremony worthy of her. But before that, he wanted to give her a proposal she would never forget.

Yes, they were already husband and wife by law, but he wanted to go through it all properly.

As they exchanged quiet banter on the sofa, the rest of the world faded. Neither of them noticed Dustin a short distance away, tense and restless, locked in a conversation that carried far more weight.

“Mom,” Dustin said, his voice steady but intense, “everything I’ve said is the truth.”

He drew a deep breath, meeting Hester’s gaze head-on. “Dolores and I love each other. She built Davidson Group from the ground up—on her own. Isn’t that just like what you did when you saved Wade Group on your own?” He spoke earnestly, every word weighed with meaning.

For months now, Hester had walked a careful line: criticizing Dolores while praising Linsey and Collin. Dustin had long since seen through it.

She didn’t necessarily hate Dolores—she just didn’t want him drifting further from Wade Group. She wanted him back, steering the family’s legacy. But he had no intention of turning away from CR Corporation.

So she elevated others. Compared him. Pressured him.

And now, hearing his sincerity, Hester sighed deeply. “You’re right,” she said at last. “Dolores is exceptional. Building Davidson Group without a powerful name behind her—it’s impressive. When I said she relied on you for investment, it was only to provoke you.”

Chapter 1123:

She pressed her lips together and added softly, “In business, seeking investment, forming partnerships—there’s no shame in it. It’s just how the world works.”

A spark of hope and happiness flashed across Dustin’s face. “Mom, you mean it? Are you really ready to welcome Dolores into the family?”

Joanne kept her emotions carefully hidden as she sat silently nearby.

Without addressing Dustin’s question, Hester shifted her attention to Joanne. “Kase reached out to me not long ago. He handed over your transcripts and shared your professional journey. I found your list of accomplishments remarkable, especially your time abroad and the depth of your internships. You have an impressive background. I always hoped you would help Dustin breathe new life into the Wade Group. In my view, you are the best match for him. Frankly, I doubt anyone else in Grester could suit him half as well.”

A brief pause allowed her words to settle, and then she spoke again, voice measured. “To be honest, Joanne, your credentials would open doors to any elite family in Grester, including the Lawsons.”

The impact of her remark left Joanne’s eyes shining with surprise. Linsey and Collin, too, exchanged startled looks, taken aback by Hester’s candor.

Still plagued by worry, Dustin could only dwell on his own troubles with Dolores. All he ever wanted was for his mother to accept Dolores—not to hear her list Joanne’s virtues in front of everyone.

Hester continued, “If you had followed in Dolores’ footsteps—becoming independent, starting your own business—I wouldn’t have picked you either.”

That comment caused Dustin’s anxious look to shift instantly.

Suddenly, everything clicked for him: Hester simply wanted a capable partner for her son, but not one with her own company.

Frustration tightened Dustin’s jaw as he searched for a way to stand up for Dolores. Deep down, he knew Dolores would never walk away from her dreams for the sake of a man. No matter how much he loved her, Dustin could not bear to see Dolores sacrifice her ambition just to marry him. If that was the price, he would rather lose her forever.

The truth was crystal clear to Dustin: asking Dolores to give up control of the Davidson Group meant demanding she turn her back on her own dreams. For Dolores, surrendering her ambitions would strip everything else of meaning.

A hesitant “Mom—” left Dustin’s lips.

Yet, before he could finish, Hester broke into a relaxed smile and said, “Still, women like Dolores are the ones I truly admire.”

Attention shifted as she looked over at Linsey perched on the sofa. “Linsey, you’re remarkable as well. When I found out you stepped into the CEO role at the Lawson Group, I was honestly amazed. My admiration is genuine. It makes perfect sense that you and Dolores are close—your drive and determination are so alike.”

Dustin sat there in disbelief. He had never thought Hester would voice her respect for Dolores this soon. Shock made it impossible for him to get a word out. Joy tangled his thoughts, leaving him speechless for a moment.

Unfazed by Dustin’s stunned silence, Hester went on, her tone steady. “Still, Linsey has the edge over Dolores, simply because she’s a Lawson by birth.”

The mood tightened as she spoke directly to Dustin, making the room feel uncomfortably tense. “If you were the man marrying Linsey, I’d never have to worry about you stepping up as chairman of the Wade Group.”

Her comment sent ripples through the room.

Without missing a beat, Collin rose from his seat, his face hardening. He gripped Linsey’s hand and responded with a cold edge, “Mrs. Wade, I suggest you choose your words more carefully. Linsey is my wife, and that’s never going to change.”

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Chapter 1124:

A flash of embarrassment colored Linsey’s cheeks as she tugged Collin firmly back into his seat. “Collin, just stay put.”

It astonished her that Hester’s offhand remark had rattled Collin so deeply. Anyone watching might have thought Dustin harbored feelings for her.

Linsey’s quiet command took the edge off Collin’s temper. Nevertheless, his hand remained locked around Linsey’s, and the guarded look he shot Hester held nothing back—a far cry from the calm professionalism he usually displayed as CR Corporation’s leader.

“You know, Collin, it’s rather unexpected for someone as reserved as you to end up with Linsey. Luck seems to have favored you,” Hester remarked.

A sharp huff escaped Collin, and though frustration flickered in his eyes, Linsey’s silent warning kept him from launching another retort. Collin’s silence brought Linsey some relief.

Directing her attention back to Hester, Linsey addressed her evenly. “Mrs. Wade, I doubt we’re here just so you could compliment me.”

Her lips curved in a polite, knowing smile as she added, "I imagine what's really weighing on you is Dustin's situation."

Hester's brows rose slightly, her gaze never leaving Linsey. "Only a moment ago did I catch on that you and Dustin had been staging everything. You didn't just fool me—Joanne was swept up in it as well."

A pointed glance went to Joanne, who had yet to utter a word, and Hester inquired, "Isn't that so?"

Tension swept back into the room, settling heavily over everyone present.

A chill lingered in Joanne's stare as she gradually raised her head, locking eyes with Hester. "Are you saying, Hester, that you want to break off our engagement?"

A quiet laugh slipped from Hester, her reply almost airy. "I've already stated my position. In my eyes, you are the most fitting choice for Dustin's wife..."

Before she could complete her thought, Dustin's nerves snapped and his voice burst out. "Mom, after everything that's happened, you're still pushing for me to marry Joanne? She has no feelings for me. She loves Jeffery! You saw it with your own eyes. When the chandelier was swinging, the only thing she cared about was getting Jeffery to safety. She didn't even notice I was right there!"

Each word from Dustin came faster, his complaints becoming more outlandish. "This night was supposed to be our engagement celebration, and she barely acknowledged me, her supposed fiancé. If we end up married, there's a real chance she'll disappear with our family's wealth just to chase after Jeffery!"

The accusations became so wild that Linsey's patience snapped.

"Enough, Dustin," Linsey interjected. "You're a grown man. Why do you expect a woman to protect you? And honestly, running off with your fortune is not nearly as simple as you make it sound."

Watching Dustin fret over the family's assets, Linsey couldn't help but think that if he let Joanne walk away with the Wade fortune, he truly would be beyond help.

Her interjection wasn't an attempt to defend Joanne—just a blunt response from one woman to another.

The candor in Linsey's words drew a look of surprise from Joanne.

Finally, after being confronted so directly, Dustin realized he had gone too far. He shrank back a bit, muttering with embarrassment, "I just wish Mom would really think this through."

"Would you let me finish before jumping to conclusions?" Hester's sharp look cut straight to Dustin. He always lost his cool whenever Dolores was involved.

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Chapter 1125:

An uneasy silence fell over Dustin as he closed his mouth, unwilling to test his mother's patience any further. Still, he couldn't ignore the faint praise Hester had offered Dolores—proof that her disapproval wasn't set in stone.

Hope flickered inside him; maybe there was still a future for him and Dolores. Forcing down his nerves, Dustin waited, doing his best to steady himself while Hester weighed her next words.

Her expression unreadable, Hester's gaze landed on Joanne. Though she wore a gentle façade, something cold glinted in Joanne's eyes.

"Tonight's announcement of your engagement to Dustin doesn't make it permanent," Hester stated, her voice even. "I can end it at any moment."

Odd as Dustin's reasoning might have sounded, it wasn't entirely outlandish. In that tense moment, Joanne had dashed straight for Jeffery, pushing Hester aside without hesitation. If Jeffery ever found himself in trouble, Hester suspected Joanne would use the Wade family's power to help the Lawsons

without a second thought. Risking her own safety, Joanne had shown just how far she would go for Jeffery's sake.

At Hester's words, Joanne's gaze dropped, a bitter smile flickering across her lips. "So, Hester, what reason will you give for breaking things off?" she asked quietly.

Her lashes trembled as she paused. After gathering herself, Joanne spoke again, her voice rough with regret. "I understand all of this is because of me. I didn't put Dustin first—but..."

An uneasy jolt ran through Dustin. What was Joanne trying to pull now?

Raising her gaze, Joanne fixed Dustin with tearful eyes, looking heartbreakingly fragile.

"Dustin, maybe I haven't moved past Jeffery, but are you really innocent in all this? Haven't you and Dolores done things that cut even deeper?"

A trembling smile broke across Joanne's lips as glistening tears traced down her cheeks. "Jeffery keeps his distance, and whatever I feel is one-sided. But you and Dolores? You never hid your flirting, not even when I was watching."

Instant tension washed over Hester's face as she interjected, "Joanne, what are you getting at?"

A low, brittle laugh slipped from Joanne, tears streaming as she laughed, yet a cold chill lingered in her eyes, unsettling everyone in the room.

With a sudden lift of her chin, Joanne's face became unreadable. "Call off the engagement if you want," she retorted, crisp and clear, "but don't think you can pin the blame on me."

Her unyielding stare locked onto Dustin. "I've covered for you and Dolores more times than I can count. Loyalty deserves better than betrayal."

“Nobody forced you, Joanne! You were the one who offered to help!” Dustin exclaimed, his nerves fraying.

That one reckless admission was all it took for Hester to realize he had been meeting Dolores behind her back.

A flash of fury crossed Hester’s features. “You’ve been lying to me for who knows how long, Dustin!”

The urge to slap Dustin was almost overwhelming, but Hester’s attention shifted—right now, Joanne was the greater problem.

She had never pictured Joanne as capable of turning the tables so quickly, leaving her carefully crafted plans in shambles.

Chapter 1126:

Reining in her anger, Hester closed her eyes, a sudden thought creeping into her mind.

“Are you afraid that Kase will hold it against you later?” Hester asked, her voice calm but perceptive.

Joanne didn’t even try to deny it. “Of course I am.”

She turned away, her movements slow and deliberate, walking toward the window. Her voice dropped to a soft murmur. “Kase acknowledges me as a Walton. That status grants me access to Grester’s elite circles. But in truth, he doesn’t care about me. I’m just a pawn to him—a tool to bring greater benefits to the Walton family.”

As the words fell, Joanne paused by the window, her silhouette outlined by the fading light. She stared blankly into the distance. “Even for tonight’s engagement party, he declined to attend, citing poor health as an excuse.”

The room fell into an almost reverent silence. The only sound was the faint rhythm of their breathing.

Linsey remained seated on the sofa, directly facing Joanne's figure by the window. Just two hours earlier, she had mockingly downplayed the importance of the engagement party to defend Dolores, using its simplicity to strike at Joanne. But now, she realized the truth cut deeper than she had imagined.

Joanne hadn't merely been slighted by the Wade family—she had long grown used to being undervalued. Instead of fighting for her own identity, she had reduced herself to the image of an ideal partner, desperately chasing validation through love, not self-worth.

Linsey exhaled quietly, unable to find the right words to respond.

Hester, however, had far less tolerance for sentiment. The longer she listened, the more her suspicions grew.

A new concern began to gnaw at her. If Joanne had fallen for some other wealthy bachelor, she might have been able to convince her to stay with Dustin, to stand beside him as a supportive partner.

But never had she expected Joanne to be harboring feelings for Jeffery. Jeffery was not only married, but about to become a father, and his relationship with Alicia was widely known to be stable and loving.

What alarmed her even more was that Joanne, fully aware of all this, still harbored deep feelings for him.

She could vividly recall Joanne's lingering gaze on Jeffery earlier that night. It sent a ripple of dread through her.

This wasn't just a passing infatuation—this was dangerous. Joanne would not let go easily. And when things spiraled out of control, Dustin would be dragged right into the chaos, humiliated as the jilted fiancé in front of all of Grester's elite.

As Dustin's mother, Hester couldn't allow that. He was her only son.

And so, she made her decision. The engagement had to end—tonight.

“I’m willing to spare you public embarrassment,” Hester said coolly. “I won’t expose your feelings for Jeffery. Let’s just part ways quietly—it benefits both families.”

Joanne turned from the window, her brow furrowing. “Kase will demand a reason. If I can’t give him a convincing explanation, he won’t let it go.”

Hester’s expression hardened. “You keep refusing. Do you really think I’m easy to negotiate with?”

Her voice turned sharp. “You paraded your affection for Jeffery tonight, plain for all to see. That alone is reason enough to dissolve the engagement. What leverage do you think you have left?”

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Chapter 1127:

But Joanne didn’t flinch. Her tone was ice-cold. “Fine. Then let that be the reason. But don’t think I’ll go quietly. I’ll take it public and reveal everything: how Dustin kept seeing Dolores behind my back, how he stayed emotionally entangled with his ex, how he met her in secret, got intimate, and then threatened me to keep—”

“Joanne!” Dustin snapped, stunned. “What nonsense are you talking about?”

A flash of anger nearly pushed Dustin to the brink; he was seconds away from confronting Joanne directly.

Right then, Collin stepped in, reaching out to restrain him. “Keep it together.”

Labored breaths rattled out of Dustin as he instinctively tried to wriggle free from Collin’s grasp. Before he could break loose, Linsey strode over, her voice steady. “Is this really all it takes for her words to get under your skin? Should we be admiring her sharp wit or questioning how easily you snap?”

Dustin shot her a glare, grinding out his answer. “You both find it easy to stay levelheaded, but it’s not your name being dragged through the mud. I don’t mind if Joanne slanders me online, but if she goes after Dolores, that’s where I draw the line!”

He spoke so hastily, Linsey barely had a chance to silence him.

A look of disbelief overtook Linsey's features, her eyebrows shooting up as she stared at Dustin as if he had lost his senses. "Have you completely lost it, Dustin?"

Throwing out his Achilles' heel like that—he had practically handed Joanne the leverage she needed.

Predictably, a victorious grin spread across Joanne's face. "So that's it. You're terrified I'll ruin Dolores' reputation online."

She let out an exaggerated sigh and spoke with deliberate slowness. "Why not think about your options, Dustin? Are you willing to sacrifice Dolores' good name, or are you ready to force this engagement to end?"

"You!" Panic seized Dustin as the realization hit, his complexion shifting from ghostly pale to bright red with frustration. Words stuck in his throat, leaving him speechless.

Joanne's provocations had chipped away at his composure until he blurted out things he shouldn't have.

A mocking laugh tumbled from Hester's lips. "Suppose I go ahead and call off the engagement—Dolores' reputation is none of my concern."

The sound seemed to echo in Dustin's head as he whirled to face Hester, desperate. "Mom, please don't! Dolores hasn't done anything wrong. Meeting up was my idea, not hers."

"Not another word out of you!" Hester shouted, thrusting a finger in Dustin's direction. "Say anything else and Dolores can forget ever joining this family!"

A quick flash of panic darted through Dustin's eyes before he steadied his voice. "Even if marriage isn't possible, Dolores and I could still choose each other. But destroying her reputation just to end this engagement isn't a price I'm willing to pay. I won't drag down the Davidson Group she's poured her life into. That's something I'll never do."

A bitter edge crept into Hester's voice. "So this is what I get after everything I've done for you?"

Years of planning and sacrifice suddenly felt wasted, slipping right through her fingers. She couldn't help thinking that perhaps it would be better to let someone else—anyone but Dustin—take the reins of the Wade Group. Adopting a child from a distant orphanage even crossed her mind.

Chapter 1128:

"If you're so intent on protecting Dolores, then don't end things with Joanne. That way, Dolores keeps her good name," Hester sneered, sarcasm dripping from every word. "Didn't you just say you could stay with Dolores forever, even without a wedding? Go ahead, give that a try—let's see how Dolores feels about it."

Stunned into silence, Dustin finally let out a weary sigh. "That's not how I meant it, Mom."

All the while, Joanne watched their quarrel unfold, lips curved in a triumphant smile. She donned an air of concern and spoke up, her tone unhurried. "There's really no need to rush things. Maybe there's another way to solve this."

That possibility lit up both Hester's and Dustin's faces, a spark of hope flickering between them.

Curiosity piqued, Linsey turned her attention to Joanne, eager to hear what solution she might propose.

At that moment, Linsey caught the unmistakable shimmer of victory hiding behind Joanne's gentle smile. A sudden jolt ran through her chest, the look reminding her of past manipulations she had seen before.

The realization made Linsey's eyes go wide, suspicion growing—surely Joanne was gearing up for another clever plot.

"Out with it." Hester's voice trembled with impatience.

She couldn't convince Dustin, so she turned her hopes to Joanne.

Dustin looked at Joanne, eyes full of hope. He silently wished she would say something—anything—that would make things easier. He had made a promise to himself: if Joanne agreed to end their engagement peacefully, he would owe her. Whatever she needed in the future, he would help—no questions asked.

But Dustin had misjudged her.

Joanne looked at him slowly and said, "Dustin, why don't we continue the cooperation we agreed on not long ago?"

Dustin blinked, confused. Then it hit him. His voice rose in disbelief. "What? Joanne, are you out of your mind?"

"Cooperation? What cooperation?" Hester asked, her brows furrowed.

Linsey, who had been listening, let out a helpless, bitter smile. After all the chaos, here they were—back at square one.

Once again, Joanne was playing games—using Dustin's relationship with Dolores as a weapon. She was trying to stir trouble between Jeffery and Alicia.

She turned to Hester with calm eyes. "They won't agree, but maybe you will. You're the chairperson of Wade Group. If you help me, you can turn Jeffery against Alicia. Once they divorce, I'll have a chance to get close to him."

Hester took a step back, stunned. Her voice shook. "Joanne, are you crazy? How could I help you get close to Jeffery? He's married—and his wife is pregnant!"

Joanne answered coldly, eyes unblinking. "She can have a miscarriage, can't she? So what if she's pregnant? Even if Alicia gives birth, I can get rid of the child."

The room fell silent. Faces changed. Every child was a gift—every life, sacred. But Joanne tossed those words like they were nothing.

Linsey's face turned hard. "Do you hear yourself? That's a crime, Joanne. Crimes land people in prison."

She drew a sharp breath and added, "Do you know the damage a miscarriage causes a woman? You're a woman too. How can you speak like that—with no heart, no shame?"

Chapter 1129:

Joanne shrugged and let out a mocking laugh. "Is Alicia the only woman who can give birth?"

Her voice was light, but her words were heavy. "If I marry Jeffery, I'll give him children too. If he wants a son, I'll have one. If he wants a daughter, I'll have a girl."

Linsey couldn't take it anymore. Her voice was cold as steel. "If that's how you think, I pity your future children. To you, they're not lives—they're tools. You don't want to be a mother. You want to be a machine. And that's not just sad for them—it's sad for you."

Joanne's expression darkened instantly at Linsey's words. Her gaze turned sharp, her tone laced with accusation. "Linsey, you've gone on and on just to stop Hester from agreeing to my proposal. If you don't want to collaborate with me, fine. But do you really have to sabotage others from working with me too?"

She gave a bitter, mocking laugh. "I see it now. You don't really care about that so-called best friend of yours, Dolores. I came to you first with a genuine offer, and you turned me down for someone you barely know—Alicia. How utterly disappointing."

Linsey gave a slow, composed smile. "There's really no point reasoning with someone as lunatic as you."

Joanne froze. "What did you just call me?!" It was the first time anyone had dared call her that. Her polished, elegant façade cracked for a split second as fury twisted her features. "You think you're better

than everyone just because you're married to Collin Riley? Don't fool yourself, Linsey. You're just clawing your way up by playing nice with Alicia. You want to secure your place as CEO of Lawson Group, and you're using her to do it. How disgraceful. Dolores must be ashamed to call someone like you a friend!"

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out from behind. "And what gives you the right to speak on my behalf while throwing mud on others?"

Everyone turned. Linsey's eyes instantly lit up. "Dolores? Why did you come down?"

With a cool, poised expression, Dolores walked toward Linsey, linking arms with her in a gesture both tender and resolute. "I just woke up and felt much better. When I didn't see any of you, a waiter told me where you were. I came looking—though I wasn't expecting such a full house."

From the moment she appeared, Dustin's gaze never left her.

As she stood beside Linsey, he finally spoke. "Dolores, you should be resting after that incident."

She cut him off with a roll of her eyes. "Wasn't that incident part of your brilliant act? I thought you didn't care who got hurt, as long as your performance went according to plan."

Dustin faltered, momentarily lost for words. After a pause, he tried to drag others down with him. "Then what about Linsey and Collin? They were in on it too. Why single me out?"

Linsey shot him a glare, but before she could respond, Dolores answered coolly, "They helped you because you begged them to. Now you're blaming them? That's—"

"Pathetic. With that kind of attitude, good luck finding anyone to work with in the future."

Linsey raised her hand in mock innocence. "Just to clarify, I didn't do it for Dustin."

Dolores laughed warmly. "I know. You did it for me. You're the best person I've ever had in my life."

“Dolores, that’s totally unfair,” Dustin grumbled. “You always take Linsey’s side.”

Chapter 1130:

As they carried on bantering, almost oblivious to everyone else, Joanne stood there, practically shaking with frustration. “How long are you two planning to go on joking around like this?”

Her tone sharpened as she pulled out her phone. “Fine. If you’ve decided to risk Dolores’ reputation, don’t blame me. With one word, I can have my team release a flood of dirt on her. By tomorrow morning, Davidson Group’s stock will be in free fall.”

But before she could tap her screen, Collin, who had been silent until now, finally spoke in a voice as calm as it was threatening. “Go ahead. I’d love to see if your little online smear campaign can move faster than my team. But fair warning—if they’re even a few seconds late, tomorrow’s headlines will be all about you.”

Joanne froze for a moment, her eyes growing wide as if she could not believe what she had just heard. “Can you repeat that?”

It seemed impossible to her that Collin, the founder of CR Corporation, would openly use his influence to threaten a woman. She wondered how he was not worried about becoming the subject of ridicule if this ever got out.

Collin’s face showed no emotion as he replied, “If you’re going to use these ridiculous threats against us, I have no choice but to respond in kind.” As the person who built CR Corporation from the ground up, he truly believed that nothing could touch him. His silence earlier had only been to see how far Joanne was willing to push her luck.

Anger twisted Joanne’s features, and she yelled, “All of you come from powerful families, and now you expect me to shoulder all the blame?” Her breathing became uneven, and a wild look flickered in her eyes as she stared at the people in front of her.

Hester narrowed her eyes and retorted, "I already told you, we can end this engagement without drama. You're the one making things difficult."

A bitter laugh escaped Joanne as she wiped at her eyes. "You have no idea what I'll have to deal with after you force this engagement to end."

Linsey watched Joanne's pain from afar, her own heart tightening at the sight. Dolores, too, felt a wave of sympathy seeing Joanne break down like this.

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"If you have any problems, you can come to us directly. We're not unreasonable. As long as what you ask is within reason, we'll do our best to help," Dolores said, glancing at Linsey for confirmation.

Linsey gave a small nod, silently letting Dolores know she agreed.

Now that Hester was no longer pushing for Dustin to marry Joanne, everything would be resolved if Joanne agreed to end the engagement.

Joanne let out a cold, mocking laugh as she turned to Dolores. "You think you can help me?"

Her sharp gaze swept over the group, leaving a chill in the air.

"There's the most famous fashion designer in Grester here, the founder of CR Corporation, the chairwoman of Davidson Group, and the chairman of Wade Group," Joanne said, her voice steady and low. Finally, she fixed her eyes on Linsey. "But you, Linsey, you're the one I envy most. You're beautiful, you're talented, and you have so many admirers. I always thought you fell short because you were an orphan. I never expected you to turn out to be the biological daughter of the Lawson family, and now you're even running the Lawson Group as CEO!"

Linsey's brow furrowed as she noticed the growing hostility in Joanne's stare.