

Zillionaire 1131

Chapter 1131:

“Linsey, are you even aware of how deeply you stir up jealousy and bitterness in the people around you?” Joanne clenched her teeth, then dropped her gaze in defeat. Her voice came out rough and low as she whispered, “Now I see why Haven held so much anger toward you.”

Dolores grew restless at Joanne’s words and quickly interjected, “Linsey’s accomplishments are all her own. It’s normal to look up to someone who’s worked hard. But Haven wanted to hurt Linsey, and that’s not normal at all. You shouldn’t let yourself think that way either.”

A cold glance cut across the room as Joanne fixed her stare on Dolores, sneering with calculated malice. “Aren’t you envious of Linsey? Years of grinding work to establish Davidson Group, yet here you are, still trailing behind Linsey, who became a Lawson overnight. Now she’s CEO of Lawson Group, standing on equal ground with you.”

“Stop trying to sow discord!” Dolores’ voice sliced through Joanne’s words, irritation flashing in her eyes.

Hands planted firmly on her hips, Dolores fired back with deliberate precision. “My bond with Linsey runs deeper than your shallow mind can grasp. We survived the orphanage together, sharing every triumph and heartbreak life threw our way.”

Dolores paused, her finger pointing first at Linsey, then back at herself. “Everything we have, we share without question. I swore to build Davidson Group into an empire to support Linsey, while she promised to become a world-class designer, crafting exclusive pieces for me each year.”

Linsey’s rigid posture melted at Dolores’ heartfelt declaration. Warmth flooded her eyes as she gazed at her friend, touched beyond words by such unwavering loyalty.

Meanwhile, crushing loneliness swept over Joanne like a tidal wave of desolation. “Looks like my efforts crumbled to dust once again.”

Her lips barely moved as the words escaped, her voice hollow with resignation. “My parents scraped by on nothing. When I turned seventeen, they declared they couldn’t fund my education anymore. I

dropped to my knees, begging desperately, swearing I could work every spare hour to cover tuition and living costs. I shoved my report cards in their faces repeatedly, pleading with them not to rip away my dreams... but they slammed the door on my future without hesitation.”

Linsey’s gaze dropped to the floor. Having walked a similar path of desperation, she could feel the echo of Joanne’s struggle burning in her chest.

“Then Haven appeared in my life. She claimed she saw intelligence and potential in me, offering to sponsor my education with one simple condition: I would remain at her side, doing whatever she demanded without question,” Joanne continued, her voice growing distant.

Watching the unbreakable bond between Linsey and Dolores, Joanne realized her relationship with Haven was nothing more than a cruel joke.

“Those eight years chained me to Haven’s every whim, dancing to her tune whenever she snapped her fingers.” Joanne released a weary sigh that seemed to carry the weight of lost time. “Still, I owe her everything. Without her backing, studying abroad would have remained an impossible dream, and I never would have crossed paths with Jeffery.”

Linsey’s eyes sharpened for just a moment, her steady gaze settling on Joanne with quiet intensity.

Everyone else fell into respectful silence, creating an invisible circle around the confession. Even Hester, who had been fidgeting with barely contained impatience, found herself drawn into Joanne’s raw honesty.

“After falling head over heels for Jeffery, I threw myself into self-improvement with ruthless determination, sculpting myself into someone worthy of standing beside him.” Jeffery’s name transformed Joanne’s entire demeanor, softening the hard edges of her expression. “Every sleepless night, every sacrifice, every moment of doubt was for this dream.”

Chapter 1132:

Dark clouds gathered across Joanne's features once again as bitterness crept back into her voice. "Yet Haven dangled hope in front of me like a carrot, never giving me a real opportunity to meet Jeffery face to face."

Joanne's attention drifted slowly toward Collin, her gaze heavy with unspoken resentment. "News of Collin founding CR Corporation reached us overseas like wildfire. Haven completely lost her composure, pacing like a caged animal while lamenting her rash decision to flee that wedding altar. She kept muttering how different things could have been, how she should have been Collin's wife from the very beginning."

Collin didn't respond immediately. Instead, he reached over, intertwining his fingers with Linsey's and enclosing her hand gently in his warm palm.

Feeling his touch, Linsey turned her head to meet his gaze—and found it filled with quiet tenderness. Moments later, she heard him murmur with solemn affection, "Darling, don't let her words get to you. You're my one and only."

She tried to hold back her reaction, but the faintest blush crept across her cheeks. She still wasn't used to his sweet, unexpected declarations—always catching her off guard, always making her heart race. Thankfully, no one else had heard his hushed vow, allowing Linsey to compose herself and act as though nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, Joanne continued her tale as though lost in the past. "Back then, I wasn't ready to face Jeffery again, but Haven insisted on returning. Reluctantly, I came back to Grester with her... but I was also hopeful. I truly thought I'd see Jeffery again."

Her voice grew wistful. "Haven was so eager to get close to Collin, I couldn't have her arrange for me to meet Jeffery. I hadn't even heard about Jeffery's marriage. I assumed he was still single, so I waited... and waited."

Linsey finally interjected, her voice calm but firm. "Jeffery actually married Alicia two years ago."

Joanne's face fell in an instant. Her eyes welled with unshed tears, and then—unable to hold back—she shouted, "Alicia?! How could she possibly be worthy of him? She's just an ordinary woman, with no

background, no status! All because she was a compatible bone marrow donor for Jeffery, she suddenly had the right to marry into the Lawson family?" Her voice cracked. "I can't accept it!"

Linsey's gaze darkened, her tone turning serious. "You know full well Jeffery didn't marry Alicia out of gratitude. Do you really believe he'd enter into marriage so carelessly?"

Then, with a faint smirk, she added, "If that's what you think of him, your taste in men is even worse than I imagined."

Joanne's temper flared. "Jeffery was manipulated—tricked by that woman! Alicia's nothing but a fraud. She seduced him, and he fell for it!"

But Linsey didn't waver. Her voice remained composed, her words like silk wrapped around steel. "Say whatever you want, Joanne—it won't change reality. Jeffery is married to Alicia, and more importantly, he loves her. Even if Alicia did use some so-called trick, Jeffery wouldn't abandon her over something so petty. Especially now... she's carrying his child."

"That's nonsense!" Joanne snapped, trying to retort—but Linsey didn't give her the chance.

"If you call Alicia manipulative," she said coolly, "what makes you think you're so innocent and pure?"

Joanne faltered. Her lips parted, but no sound came for several seconds. When she finally found her voice, it was quieter, defensive. "At least I wouldn't deceive Jeffery. My feelings for him are sincere."

Chapter 1133:

Linsey didn't hesitate. "But Jeffery doesn't want you. He wants Alicia, the very woman you keep dismissing."

Before Joanne could react, Linsey added with quiet conviction, "Deep down, you know the truth. You didn't lose because Alicia tricked him. You lost because Jeffery never loved you. If he had, something

would've blossomed between you long ago, when you were studying abroad. But even back then, he had no lasting impression of you."

She let the words linger before concluding, "You met him before Alicia ever did. But love isn't about who came first. You're just obsessed with a man who was never meant to be yours."

Joanne stood completely still, her mind blank as she tried to collect her thoughts.

A question weighed heavily on her—why had Jeffery never cared for her? Was she truly not as good as Alicia?

Linsey regarded her with a calm expression and spoke in a gentle voice. "Joanne, you're caught up in the wrong kind of thinking. There's no need to compare yourself to Alicia. You're two different people, and what Jeffery sees in her can't be matched by anyone else. Trying to measure up to her just isn't worth it."

She pressed her lips together before going on, her tone sincere and her gaze steady. "I've said it before—you have enough talent to create your own future. Making Jeffery the center of your world wastes all the effort you've put in so far."

Joanne fell silent, her face empty and distant, as if her mind were drifting somewhere far away.

Hester, sensing the conversation had gone on long enough, decided to step in. In a cool and distant tone, she said, "We've listened to what you had to say. You've clearly been through a lot, but that doesn't give you permission to make trouble for everyone else."

Dustin interjected, "You've told us a lot, and now things make sense. Kase forced you into an engagement with me, and it was never what you wanted. You don't even care for me, so why not just end this pointless relationship? Jeffery's already married, and there are other men out there. You'll definitely meet someone who's right for you."

He paused, remembering something important, and added, "If you're scared that Kase might blame you, let me handle it. I'll speak to him and make sure you're not held responsible. Even as part of the Walton

family, Kase has no grounds to treat you badly. If he tries to punish you, come to me. I'll stand up for you."

Joanne's eyelashes fluttered, and a small, unreadable smile crossed her lips. In a quiet voice, she replied, "Dustin, you're really doing all you can to break this engagement. It's obvious your heart belongs to Dolores."

She lifted her head, her gaze cold and detached as she looked over everyone. "All of you seem so lucky in love. Don't you ever feel like the whole universe is working in your favor? Why does everything seem to turn out so well for you?"

Dustin's expression turned sour. He was clearly annoyed. He felt as though he had run out of patience after listening to Joanne for so long. He never imagined she would remain so stubborn, making all their attempts to comfort her feel pointless.

At this point, Dustin could see no way to talk sense into Joanne.

Just as he was about to ask Collin to step in and put an end to things, Joanne spoke again, her tone surprisingly steady and polite. "Fine, I'll agree to break off the engagement, but I want one last thing from you."

She offered a small, reassuring smile. "Don't worry. It's nothing that will cause trouble for anyone here."

Chapter 1134:

A quiet sense of relief spread through the room. Negotiating felt far better than arguing endlessly.

Linsey chimed in without hesitation, "What's your condition?"

A cunning light flashed in Joanne's eyes as she answered, "I want to be recognized as a Wade, the one and only daughter of the Wade family."

“No way!” Hester shot down the idea at once, her face set and serious. “News of your engagement to Dustin just broke tonight. If you suddenly became my daughter right now, it would cause a huge uproar. That’s completely out of the question.”

Hester’s concerns were genuine. She could no longer bring herself to trust Joanne. Until tonight, she had always thought of Joanne as polite and sensible—the perfect match for Dustin. But after everything that had happened, Hester realized Joanne was unpredictable, and a sense of unease settled over her. There was no chance she would accept Joanne as a Wade, much less as her own daughter, unless she lost all sense of reason.

Dustin felt the same. He looked at Joanne with a frown. “Joanne, I get that you want support, but there are other ways besides joining our family.”

Joanne let out a bitter laugh and turned a mocking stare on Dustin. “So, you really don’t care about Dolores, do you? You won’t even grant me this simple request. Maybe you’re not that eager to end this engagement after all.” She let the words hang in the air, then continued, sounding almost relaxed. “It makes sense now. Earlier you said that even if you couldn’t marry Dolores, you’d still keep her around forever. You just want her to stay your secret lover, hidden away for life.”

That was the last straw for Dustin. He could not take it anymore. “Joanne, do you have to keep saying things just to upset everyone? We’ve all tried to talk this out with you, calmly and respectfully.”

Joanne only gave a quiet chuckle, her eyes flat and empty. She looked around the room, her voice matter-of-fact. “I have to make you all feel miserable to feel even a little satisfied.”

“Joanne, you—” Dustin’s anger flared, and he nearly stepped forward to argue with her.

Dolores quickly reached out and held him back, letting out a sigh. “Don’t waste your energy on her. Haven’t you realized she’s been trying to stir up trouble between us this whole time? She just wants to see us rattled by her words. If you get angry, that’s exactly what she’s hoping for.”

Suddenly, Joanne’s expression softened, a sweet smile appearing on her lips as if the bitter, angry side of her had never existed.

"You know me so well, Dolores." She flashed her an innocent look. "If Hester and Dustin don't want me as part of the Wade family, maybe you'll take me in instead, Dolores."

Dolores shuddered at the thought. "No thanks. I'm not interested in surprise relatives. For me, Linsey is the only one I'll ever consider family, the only person I'd go to any length to protect."

Linsey looked over at Dolores with a hint of laughter in her eyes. Being around her had lifted the weight off her shoulders, enough that she teased, "And here I was thinking I was the one who always played the guardian."

Dolores raised an eyebrow in return. "Did you forget how I always stuck up for you when we were in the orphanage?"

She had made it her mission to shield Linsey during those tough years. Joanne watched them with a bitter sense of exclusion, unable to understand why she never seemed to matter to the people around her. No matter how hard she tried to get closer or win their approval, they always seemed to look past her.

.

Chapter 1135:

That bitterness only grew. Joanne clenched her jaw and said, "So you're not going to agree to my condition. In that case, there's nothing left to discuss. Do whatever you want."

Joanne sent Collin a sharp glare. "Do you think being the founder of CR Corporation gives you the right to walk all over everyone?" she sneered. "One way or another, every last one of you will pay for this!"

Collin responded with a deep, chilling laugh. "You're welcome to try."

Without thinking, Linsey squeezed Collin's hand a little tighter, her face growing serious. Collin felt the tension in her grip and grew even more irritated with Joanne's behavior.

Without waiting another second, he called to the guards waiting outside the door. “Take her away and make sure she has no way to contact anyone.” He fixed Joanne with a cold stare as he continued, “You have three days to reconsider everything. Use that time wisely before you give me your answer.”

A faint, detached smile crossed his lips as he added, “Worried about Kase causing trouble for you? Now that you’re here with me, I doubt he can do much.”

Collin’s men moved in and quickly restrained Joanne.

For a brief moment, Joanne convinced herself Collin was just bluffing. “Collin, you can’t just lock someone up like this. That’s against the law!”

Collin’s voice was flat and uncaring. “People like you don’t get to hide behind the law.”

He signaled his men with a wave, and they began to lead Joanne away. Realization finally hit her, and panic filled her eyes as she yelled, “Are you all crazy? You’re really going to let Collin take me and lock me away? If you don’t stop him, you’re all just as guilty!”

Linsey usually felt uneasy about Collin using force, but this time, she chose to stay silent. They had already spent far too much of the evening dealing with Joanne. First, she insisted on being named the only daughter of the Wade family. Next, she turned to Dolores, asking to be recognized as her family.

It was obvious she would not give up until she had forced herself into their lives completely. Linsey watched Joanne, who was still yelling and hurling insults, and thought she resembled a snake lurking in the grass—difficult to shake off, with no telling when she might turn spiteful and lash out.

With the situation in mind, Linsey quietly asked Collin, “What should we say if Kase comes asking about this later?”

Just recently, they had managed to send Haven to prison. Now, they were about to detain Joanne as well. She doubted Kase would simply accept another blow to his pride, even with Collin’s power.

The Walton family carried a lot of weight in Grester. If that weren't true, Ivy would never have planned for Collin to marry Haven, and Hester would not have chosen Joanne as Dustin's bride, given her status as a Walton.

If Kase decided to make this a fight, it could become a real problem. That was why they had let Joanne drag things out for so long.

Collin gave her a gentle nod and reassured her, saying, "Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

Dolores, watching from the side, could not hide her worry. "You've already done so much for Dustin and me. Maybe we should deal with this ourselves. I'd hate to bring you any more trouble."

Dustin agreed, wanting to show he could also take responsibility for these problems.

Chapter 1136:

Dustin wanted to prove he could handle things on his own and not depend on Collin every time something went wrong. He kept his tone steady as he spoke. "Collin, I think it's best if you and Linsey don't get caught up in this mess."

It seemed clear to him that Joanne had been trying to hang on to him and Dolores, and it was their issue to sort out. Linsey and Collin didn't need to get involved or bring trouble on themselves.

Collin thought it over for a few seconds before agreeing. "Alright, she's yours to deal with. Talk things through and don't feel you have to be too gentle."

Dustin signaled for his own team to step in and take Joanne off Collin's hands. Joanne, who had put up a fight before, suddenly went quiet and let herself be led away without a word.

Hester gave Dustin a cold look and said sharply, "They have power and influence, and yet you refuse their help. You're making things so much harder than they need to be."

Collin had clearly offered to step in, but Dustin and Dolores insisted on managing things themselves. Hester honestly could not figure out why they would choose that path.

Dustin pressed his lips together and explained, “Mom, this is something we can manage on our own. There’s no need to get Collin involved over something so small. Besides, if Kase realizes he can’t reach Joanne, he’ll start asking questions. Sure, I could say I’m trying to build a relationship with her, and he probably wouldn’t care. But if he finds out she’s with Collin, he’ll be suspicious right away.”

Hester thought about it for a moment and realized he had a point. She gave Dustin a stern look and said, “Listen, if you ever try to pull some stunt to trick me again, don’t bother calling me Mom.”

Dustin lifted an eyebrow and responded playfully, “Of course, Mrs. Wade.”

Hester’s irritation flared, and she looked like she might reach out and swat Dustin on the head. “You little rascal, you’re really testing my patience tonight!”

With the biggest problem finally behind him, Dustin felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders and even found himself teasing the usually serious Hester. “Come on, Mom, don’t get so worked up. I think you’ve picked up a few new worry lines. You know, it’s—”

“Probably because you’ve been stressing too much over nothing,” Dustin joked with a playful grin.

Hester gazed at Dustin, the son she had raised on her own, and a wave of sadness passed through her. She realized in that moment that sometimes letting go was the smarter move, since holding on too tightly might only pull her further away from him.

Up until tonight, Hester had always believed she could see things more clearly than Dustin ever could. Now, after everything that had happened with Joanne, she had no choice but to respect Dustin’s choices.

She turned to Dolores, this time letting go of the old resentment and coldness she used to feel.

Dolores, caught off guard, greeted her quietly, “Mrs. Wade.”

For once, Hester's features softened, and her voice turned gentle. "Since you're Dustin's girlfriend, you can just call me Hester."

Dolores stared in shock, hardly able to process what she had just heard. She looked at Hester, who was actually smiling at her, and wondered if she was imagining things. It was hard for her to believe that Hester's attitude could change so quickly—and become so warm.

Chapter 1137:

It wasn't until Dustin beamed and gently took her hand that Dolores jolted back to reality. A bit flustered, she murmured, "Hester."

A few seconds later, she seemed to realize she had overreacted. Composing herself, she added calmly, "Hester, thank you for accepting me."

Hester looked into Dolores' sincere eyes and smiled again. Then, with surprising solemnity, she said, "I owe you a heartfelt apology. I was far too stubborn before. I misjudged you and let my own prejudices cloud my view."

Dustin's eyes widened in disbelief. He knew all too well how proud and resolute his mother could be. For Hester to offer such a formal apology—especially to someone younger—was almost unheard of. It was a rare and powerful sign of genuine respect.

Dolores, equally stunned, felt her eyes grow hot with emotion. For a moment, words escaped her.

Still smiling, Hester stepped forward and gently took Dolores' hand. "Everything I said just now came from the heart. I truly admire you. You remind me of myself back when I rebuilt Wade Group from the ground up."

She cast a meaningful glance toward Linsey, who stood quietly to the side, then added with disarming honesty, "If I had possessed Linsey's brilliance in my youth, I might have taken Wade Group even further. Perhaps CR Corporation wouldn't be the top company in town today."

Dolores instantly understood what Hester was getting at. She was honoring both of them: Linsey for her exceptional aptitude, and Dolores for her strength and spirit. Just like the younger Hester, Dolores had carved out her own path with courage and determination.

And who's to say? One day, perhaps she too would become one of the most respected businesswomen in Grester.

Dustin blinked and sighed theatrically. "Mom, do you have to keep praising Linsey even now? Dolores is my girl, you know."

Hester instinctively wanted to scold him for being petty—always needing the last word in the smallest of things.

But after a moment's thought, she realized he had a point. Linsey wasn't the one marrying Dustin, after all.

She nodded, a smile touching her lips, and reached out to affectionately smooth Dolores' hair. "You're right. To me, no one is better than Dolores. No matter how extraordinary others may be, they're not the one I've chosen to welcome into our family."

Dolores smiled softly at that, and Linsey couldn't help but chuckle.

Only Collin, ever the protective husband, frowned slightly and cut in, "Linsey's obviously the best. Is there even a question?"

Linsey quickly raised her hand to cover his mouth before he could say more, laughing in spite of herself. He always had a talent for making her blush with unexpected praise, while remaining completely unfazed.

Hester let out a soft chuckle. "Collin, perhaps instead of arguing with me, you should take Linsey to visit Ivy. I imagine she'd be overjoyed to see the wonderful woman you've married."

Linsey blinked, then turned to Collin. Hester's words stirred something in her. Since returning to Grester, she had been so caught up in work and family affairs that she had nearly forgotten to visit Ivy at the nursing home.

With Dolores' troubles finally resolved, Linsey thought it was time she visited Ivy. Collin remembered, too, that since Linsey had left for overseas four years ago, Ivy hadn't seen her once. He also realized that Ivy probably had no idea Linsey had given her two lovely grandchildren.

Chapter 1138:

Soon enough, everyone went their separate ways in the banquet hall.

Once Linsey settled into the car, she let out a big sigh of relief and said, "Now Dolores and Dustin can be together without any more obstacles. All our hard work really paid off."

Collin reached for her hand and brushed a gentle kiss across her fingers. "You were wonderful tonight, sweetheart. The whole evening belonged to you."

Linsey flashed him a playful smile. "Who knew I had such a talent for acting? If designing ever stops working out for me, maybe I should go into movies." She lifted her chin with an air of mock importance. "Either way, you'll always be well cared for as long as I'm around."

Collin shot her a teasing look. "So that was your plan all along—to support me?" His laughter rumbled low and warm in the back seat.

"Honestly, that sounds perfect. If you're serious, I'll give up work. I'll stay home, watch the kids, take care of the house, and make sure you always have a hot meal."

Their conversation wandered into light, silly topics, filling the car with a sense of comfort and happiness. Even the driver up front couldn't help smiling, thinking how close Linsey and Collin had grown.

Linsey turned to Collin, half-amused and half-accusing. "Seriously? The founder of CR Corporation complaining about work. If your staff ever found out, they'd never stop calling you lazy behind your back."

Collin shook his head at once. "All I want right now is to spend more time with you and the kids. That's honestly my biggest wish."

Linsey gave him a gentle smile and sighed with a hint of seriousness. "Unfortunately, I'm now the CEO of Lawson Group. Every day, I have to show up at the office and deal with stacks of paperwork."

The thought of it made her laugh. "And Zenia and Zander are almost ready for kindergarten. Once that starts, we'll all be running around busy. You might find yourself with too much free time."

Collin put on a mock look of heartbreak. "Now I feel completely left out."

Linsey couldn't help but laugh at his dramatic face. "It's funny, you know. Five years ago, when we'd just gotten married, you were glued to your work. I was always reminding you to take care of yourself. Now you're turning lazy and trying to avoid work."

She grinned, her voice teasing. "I have to admit, I'm drawn to men with ambition. I don't go for the lazy types."

Hearing that, Collin immediately straightened up, slapped the back of the front seat, and called out to his assistant. "Bring me the work files. I need to start working hard again."

The assistant looked surprised for a second, then quickly handed Collin a tall stack of documents.

Linsey glanced at the pile in disbelief. "Are you sure you want to get through all those today? That's quite a lot."

Collin's whole mood shifted as he focused on the paperwork, flipping through the pages with determination and speed that surprised Linsey. She thought to herself that he really threw himself into work mode fast.

With Collin now buried in his documents and completely silent, Linsey found herself getting bored. Curiosity got the best of her, and she leaned over, trying to sneak a look at what he was reviewing.

Chapter 1139:

Just as she moved closer, Collin snapped the file shut.

“Holding the title of Lawson Group’s CEO means you ought to respect the lines drawn between competitors. Looking at confidential files from another company is out of bounds,” Collin said, his voice firm and professional.

Linsey’s eyes widened as if she couldn’t believe what she had just heard. “You’re not actually being serious, are you, Collin?”

Collin didn’t bother to glance up from his work. “I’m being serious. I trust you understand what professionalism looks like.”

Annoyance crept across her face as Linsey shifted in her seat, inching closer to the car door. “What, do you think you’re the only one who gets to go over important files? I’ve got files to go through, too.”

Finishing her retort, she felt Collin’s hand reach over, gripping her arm with determination, as if he meant to draw her closer.

But Linsey, echoing his previous remarks in her mind, pulled away immediately. With another annoyed little sound, she glared at him. “Hands off. You should keep your attention on your precious documents. Wouldn’t want you accusing me of snooping again.”

A grin broke through Collin’s sternness as he put the paperwork aside, sliding over to Linsey and pulling her into a snug embrace. “Come on. I was just messing with you.”

His gaze shimmered with affection as he watched the way she pouted in response. Linsey turned away, annoyance still written across her face.

Confronted by Linsey's feisty attitude, Collin found himself pausing, lost in his own thoughts. Suddenly, it felt like those years when Linsey had vanished came rushing back. In that lonely stretch of time, he would find himself daydreaming about her, carried away by hope he could hardly contain.

Each time those dreams surfaced, happiness would wash over him, only to disappear almost instantly, as fragile as bubbles. What stayed behind was nothing but an ache—a lingering emptiness that refused to fade.

After what felt like an eternity, Linsey finally glanced his way and caught the quiet sorrow in Collin's eyes.

That look from him struck something deep inside her, a quiet ache blooming in her chest.

"Is something bothering you, Collin?" Linsey asked, her brows knitting together as regret tugged at her for snapping earlier.

Her hands moved up to cradle his face, and her voice grew soft, careful not to press too hard. "I was only teasing. Why do you seem on the verge of tears?"

Collin blinked slowly, his eyes searching Linsey's gentle expression. An instant later, a sharp breath escaped him as he pulled her close, holding on as if he might lose her again.

Linsey hadn't expected it and ended up pressed against Collin's chest, her thoughts circling around the way his eyes had shimmered moments before. "Are you crying, Collin?"

She tried to ease out of his grasp to see his face, but his grip on her shoulders held her firm.

Resting his chin atop her head, Collin drew in a shaky breath, and when he spoke, his voice quivered. "I'm not crying."

The words only deepened her concern, doubt flickering in her eyes as a wave of worry settled over her. She quickly tried to comfort him. "Don't cry, Collin. I swear, I was only joking. I never meant to hurt you."

Chapter 1140:

Meanwhile, the sudden shift in mood didn't escape the notice of those up front. Both the driver and Collin's assistant exchanged glances, curious about what was happening in the back seat.

Their eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, and they caught sight of Collin's eyes, now rimmed with red. For a split second, shock registered on their faces as they realized he really was crying.

It was almost impossible for them to accept. After all, they had stood by Collin for years, through wounds and hardships, and never once had they seen him break down.

Given how smoothly Collin and Linsey had been chatting just moments ago, his tears left everyone confused.

Collin swiftly activated the divider between the front and rear seats, completely obscuring the view ahead.

The sound of the partition descending heightened Linsey's unease. "Collin, what's going on with you? If something's happened, you need to tell me right away. We swore no more secrets."

As she spoke, a chilling possibility gripped her. Her eyes widened, her voice quivering as she stammered, "Did you just find out you're seriously ill, like Jeffery once did?"

Collin paused for a moment before softly asking, "If I were facing a life-threatening illness, what would you do?"

His words hit Linsey like a shockwave, her heart pounding furiously. Tears welled in her eyes, and the world around her seemed to fade to a lifeless gray.

“What... did you just say?” she whispered, disbelief clouding her mind.

In a flash, she replayed Collin’s recent actions in her head, recalling how he had arrived inexplicably late to the gala tonight. Had he fallen ill during that time?

The thought made her throat tighten, her breaths coming in short, panicked gasps, startling Collin into letting go of her immediately.

“Are you okay, Linsey?” he asked, his voice urgent, filled with deep regret. He cursed himself for causing her such distress with his thoughtless question.

Linsey doubled over, her body trembling, her hands and feet growing icy. Seeing her distress, Collin pulled her close again, his face etched with fear. Forgetting everything else, he rushed to clarify, “No, I’m not sick. It was just a hypothetical. Please, breathe—I’m not dying.”

The deafening buzz in Linsey’s ears began to fade. She lifted her head stiffly, her pale face slick with cold sweat, and looked at him.

As he saw her in such a state, Collin’s heart ached with guilt, his voice heavy with remorse. “Linsey, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said something so reckless.” He drew her into his embrace, feeling the chill of her skin. “I’m completely fine. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Linsey’s ragged breathing gradually steadied, her lips trembling as she croaked.

“Absolutely,” Collin replied, his eyes closing in anguish as he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. “Linsey, don’t worry. I’ll take care of myself and never leave you alone in this world.”

Linsey’s sobs broke free as she clung weakly to Collin’s steady wrist. “You terrified me, Collin...”

“I’m so sorry,” Collin said earnestly, his voice thick with regret. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have made such a cruel joke or even hinted at something like that.”

Before he could finish, Linsey quickly pressed her hand over his mouth. Sitting up, her eyes tearful and resolute, she stared at him. "Don't ever say things like that again."