

Zillionaire 951

Chapter 951:

Dolores said, "Dustin did all the heavy lifting today. He carried them when they got tired, made them laugh. I barely contributed anything."

A knowing smile tugged at the corners of Linsey's mouth.

"The way you notice his efforts tells me everything about how much you care. If his mother can't see your worth, that's her failing, not yours. What truly matters is how Dustin feels about you, how he chooses to be with you."

Dolores worried her lower lip between her teeth. "I can't stand the thought of him going against his mother because of me. She raised him, shaped who he is. If he defies her for my sake, it'll only bring him pain."

Deep sympathy filled Linsey's gaze as she watched her friend's internal struggle.

Before falling in love, Dolores had been fearless, unshakeable in her confidence.

Now Dustin had become her greatest vulnerability, the one thing that could bring her to her knees.

"But Dustin is crazy about you. Would his mother really force him into a marriage without love? Would she watch her own son live a life of quiet misery? That can't be what any mother wants for her child," Linsey spoke with quiet conviction.

Dolores remained quiet for a long moment, then her lips twisted into something that barely resembled a smile. "I can't guarantee Dustin will always feel this intensely about me. What if this is just infatuation passing itself off as love?"

Her gaze found Linsey's again as she searched for understanding.

“He’s nothing like Collin, you know. Collin came to you with a clean slate, no complicated history. But Dustin...” She trailed off, the weight of unspoken concerns hanging between them.

A hollow laugh escaped her as she continued, “I’m not naive enough to believe I’m somehow special enough to transform a man who’s loved and left so many others. What makes me think I could be the exception?”

Linsey absorbed every word without judgment, recognizing the familiar spiral of insecurity that had taken hold of her.

Uncertainty had poisoned Dolores’ confidence, making her question not just Dustin’s feelings, but her own worth in the relationship. Perhaps Dustin hadn’t proven himself thoroughly enough. Perhaps his reassurances had fallen short of what Dolores needed to feel secure. Otherwise, his mother’s disapproval wouldn’t have struck such a devastating blow to her sense of belonging.

Linsey suggested, “Dolores, why don’t you stay here for now? You’ll have company, and the children would be thrilled to spend more time with you.”

Sensing potential resistance, she hurried to add, “You wouldn’t need to lift a finger. We’d handle everything for you. And if work calls, I’ll have Collin arrange transportation. No stress, no complications.”

A genuine laugh bubbled up from Dolores despite her melancholy. “Are you afraid I might do something reckless?”

Linsey’s eyebrows lifted in mock surprise. “Of course not. I’ve just finished untangling a mess of problems and finally have breathing room. I’d love nothing more than to spend quality time with you.”

Mischief sparked in Dolores’ eyes as her mood lightened slightly. “I would have thought you’d want to make up for lost time with Collin, especially after sorting through all those misunderstandings.”

Linsey countered, “Right now, he needs to focus on rebuilding his relationship with the children. Otherwise, Zenia will keep branding him the bad man.”

Chapter 952:

Linsey's words sparked something genuine in Dolores' expression, chasing away the shadows that had settled there moments before.

Relief flooded through Linsey at the sight.

After a thoughtful pause, Dolores shifted upright against the headboard, her earlier melancholy seemingly forgotten. "Speaking of plans, when are you and Collin planning to get married?"

The question caught Linsey off guard. "Honestly? We haven't even discussed it," she admitted. "Between Haven's situation and whatever we'll need to handle with Gorman's parents, getting married feels like the least of our priorities right now."

Truth be told, without Dolores bringing it up, the thought might never have crossed Linsey's mind.

More telling still, Collin hadn't mentioned remarriage either.

Ever since their heart-to-heart at the bridal shop, they had simply fallen back into rhythm together, no grand declarations needed.

Years of history had a way of doing that. Even after four years apart, they moved around each other with the easy familiarity of people who had shared a lifetime.

Words felt superfluous when understanding ran this deep between them.

Linsey was convinced that Collin truly loved her. As long as their little family of four could find peace together, that felt like enough.

Dolores' situation worried her far more than her own.

Linsey looked at Dolores' face, silently willing Dustin to fight harder for what they had had.

"Rest a little longer," Linsey murmured, smoothing the blanket around Dolores' shoulders. "I'll check on Collin's progress in the kitchen and call you when dinner's ready."

Dolores nodded, her body already surrendering to exhaustion. The amusement park had drained her more than she had realized, despite Dustin bearing the brunt of babysitting the children.

Linsey slipped from the room moments later, her footsteps barely disturbing the quiet.

Collin emerged from the kitchen. At the sight of her, he made his way toward her.

After a quick glance toward the bedroom, Linsey caught his wrist and gently pulled him toward the quiet balcony.

"What's going on?" Collin's eyebrow arched at her conspiratorial manner, amusement flickering across his features.

Linsey dropped her voice to barely above a whisper. "What do you know about Dustin's family situation? Do you know what his mother is like?"

The inquiry didn't catch Collin off guard.

The moment he had noticed Dustin's absence, he had sensed trouble brewing beneath the surface.

Years of friendship stretched between him and Dustin, roots running deep from childhood.

After they graduated, Dustin had thrown himself into helping establish CR Corporation with unwavering dedication.

Those shared experiences had given Collin insight into Dustin's character that few others possessed.

He recognized something different in Dustin's pursuit of Dolores, a determination that went beyond casual interest.

Otherwise, Collin wouldn't have allowed Dustin to get close to Dolores.

Dolores meant a lot to Linsey, after all.

Chapter 953:

Her heartbreak would inevitably become Linsey's burden to bear.

That was a scenario Collin refused to entertain.

From the start, something had felt off about today's events. Dustin's protective nature would never allow Dolores to shepherd the children home alone, not unless something significant had forced his hand. Business emergencies at CR Corporation would have crossed Collin's desk first.

That left only one conclusion—whatever had torn Dustin away had nothing to do with work.

The mere thought of Dustin's mother, Hester, brought an uncharacteristic shadow across Collin's usually composed features.

When he finally spoke, his words carried the weight of reluctant revelation. "What I'm about to tell you is something only a few know."

Unease prickled along Linsey's spine at his grave tone, her stomach already knotting with dread.

"Dustin's parents separated when he was just a child. For as long as he could remember, they had lived apart," Collin spoke quietly. "The Wade Group doesn't hold much influence in Grester these days, but they've managed to maintain some stability."

Linsey studied Collin's face, sensing something in his expression that made her lean forward with curiosity. She hesitated before asking, "Is Dustin's mother running the Wade Group now?"

Collin nodded. "She is. Dustin's father never found his direction, even as an adult. His grandfather spent years trying to guide him, but nothing seemed to stick. Eventually, Dustin's grandfather arranged his son's marriage to Hester, who was well-known in the city's social circles at the time. After the wedding, Hester threw herself into the Wade Group's affairs and rose to senior management within two years."

Linsey shook her head in appreciation. "That was remarkable."

"It was," Collin agreed. "But Hester thinks little of her husband. She's poured all her energy into rebuilding the Wade Group instead."

Collin's words slowed. "Fifteen years ago, the Wade Group stood on the brink of greatness. One deal that should have elevated them instead bled the company dry, leaving behind little more than debt and broken promises."

The revelation hit Linsey like cold water. Her eyes widened as the pieces fell into place. This explained the Wade Group's near disappearance from Grester's business landscape.

Collin continued, "When the collapse seemed inevitable, Hester became their salvation—pulling the company back from the abyss through sheer determination. But the stress from that disaster broke Dustin's grandfather's health. When he was dying, he made a choice that shocked everyone—he left most of the company shares to Hester instead of his own son."

He raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps it was spite, but a month after the funeral, Dustin's father disappeared with his son. Dustin was still in school when his father took him overseas. It took Hester three years to track them down and bring Dustin home."

Collin's composed mask slipped, revealing traces of sadness. "Dustin and I grew up together, but the boy who came back was a stranger. Those years abroad had twisted him into someone reckless—always with a cigarette or bottle in hand."

Recognition dawned in Linsey's eyes. "That explains it. A few years ago, everyone in Grester was talking about Dustin's love life."

Collin nodded grimly. "He was spiraling completely. Hester tried everything to straighten him out, and I spent countless hours trying to reach him too."

"What finally turned him around?" Linsey leaned forward, genuinely curious.

Chapter 954:

Collin replied with a calm demeanor, "My car accident changed everything. The crash left me with leg injuries, and I realized I couldn't stay trapped under the Riley family's thumb forever. I started building my own business in secret."

He paused for a moment before continuing, "That's when Dustin stepped in. He offered to help me build CR Corporation from the ground up and break free from the Riley family's control. During those crucial early years, he became my shield—keeping the vultures at bay while I focused on strategy."

Listening to their story, Linsey felt her heart tighten with unexpected sympathy for what both men had endured.

The pieces were finally falling into place.

"So Hester still sees Dustin as unreliable? Is that why she meddles in his personal life and tries to control who he marries? Does she want to repeat what his grandfather did—find him a wife from a powerful family who can strengthen the Wade Group, because she thinks her son can't manage it himself?"

"It's possible," Collin said, his voice noncommittal. He still couldn't figure out what Hester was really thinking.

Linsey rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. "Dolores is amazing too! She built the Davidson Group from the ground up. How many young women can pull that off? Why does Hester look down on her?"

Collin paused, thinking for a moment. "She probably heard about what happened to Dolores' company four years ago. Dustin found out first and stepped in to help. That's what pulled the Davidson Group through."

Linsey's expression darkened. "Dolores only needed one final investment. Even without Dustin, she would've pulled through. I'm sure of it."

She paused, then added sincerely, "Of course, I'm not denying that Dustin helped. I'm grateful for what he did."

Collin let out a soft laugh and patted her head gently. "I get it. But if Hester really is biased against Dolores, we may not be able to change her mind."

Linsey frowned when she heard that.

She had hoped Collin could offer a way to help Dolores win Hester over. But now, things felt even more difficult.

Thinking of how downcast Dolores had looked earlier made Linsey's heart sink.

"Alright, don't worry. We'll do what we can to help them," Collin said gently.

Linsey gave a small nod. She was on the same page.

A few quiet seconds passed before she looked up at Collin and said in a low voice, "Find time to talk to Dustin. Try to understand where he really stands."

Her gaze was firm. "If he still cares for Dolores and won't back down because of Hester, then we'll support them. But if he gives in that easily, then it's over."

She gave Collin a sharp look. "And if it comes to that, I won't let him come near Dolores again."

Collin's brow twitched slightly. He replied in a serious tone, "I don't think Dustin will walk away. He's truly serious about her."

Looking at Collin's sincere expression, Linsey felt a flicker of hope. She trusted Collin deeply. If he believed in Dustin, then maybe there was still a chance.

And even if Dustin failed her, she wouldn't blame Collin for it. After all, no matter how close they were, Collin and Dustin were still separate individuals.

"Let's talk about this later. Dinner should be ready," Collin said, gently taking her hand and leading her inside.

Elsewhere, Dustin followed Hester into one of her homes. They walked into the study, one after the other.

Chapter 955:

The moment the door closed behind them, Dustin spoke up. "Mom, you misunderstood. Dolores—"

But Hester cut him off sharply. "Enough, Dustin."

Dustin stared at Hester, confusion written all over his face. "Mom, why did you cut me off? You—"

Hester spun around, her eyes sharp and cold. There was no warmth in her gaze—only frustration and deep disappointment. "Dustin! You've always been playful, chasing after one woman after another. Did I ever interfere?"

She took a steady breath and continued. "Let's not even talk about whether Dolores is right for you. Just look at yourself. You're almost thirty, still tagging along behind Collin every day. He has kids. And you? Still fooling around. Tell me, how am I supposed to trust your judgment?"

Dustin still didn't fully understand. He thought she was just eager to see him settle down and start a family. "I'm willing to marry. But Dolores has to agree first. You scared her off with the way you acted today," he said quickly.

Hester's face darkened. Just hearing Dolores' name again sparked a fire within her. "A woman who can't even keep her company afloat without relying on men—how could she be good enough to marry into our family?"

Her voice grew colder. "I want you to marry someone from a powerful family. A smart, capable woman who can strengthen the Wade Group—not someone like Dolores."

Dustin's eyes widened in disbelief. "Mom, what are you saying? Dolores is brilliant. She built the Davidson Group from scratch! Who told you she depends on men?"

Hester scoffed and walked over to sit on the sofa. Her tone was icy. "Four years ago, the Davidson Group nearly went bankrupt. You bailed her out using CR Corporation's money. If that's not relying on a man, then what is?"

She paused, then added flatly, "In my eyes, without your money, her company would've gone under long ago."

Dustin felt his chest tighten. His jaw clenched. He said through gritted teeth, "Mom! Dolores is nothing like what you're saying. Yes, I helped her back then—but after that, she did everything on her own. She built that company up with her own hands. Just recently, she landed the best promotion deal in all of Grester. Neither I nor CR Corporation had anything to do with it!"

But his words didn't soften Hester's scorn. Instead, she let out a mocking laugh. "You mean the design competition in Grester, right?" She gave him a sideways glance, her voice cutting. "Don't think I'm clueless. Dolores has a talented friend—Linsey Brooks, who goes by the name Aurora Bright in the design world. It was her—"

"Design that won first place. I was at the competition myself. Linsey's skills are impressive. I also heard she's Collin's girl."

Hester looked Dustin over, her sarcasm sharp and deliberate. “I just don’t get it. You’ve worked with Collin for so many years, yet you haven’t learned a thing from him. He built CR Corporation from scratch. You? You’re just wearing the CEO title and working under him.”

Hester ignored the storm brewing in Dustin’s eyes and pressed on, her voice as cold as ice. “It’s bad enough that you can’t measure up to Collin, but even the woman you’ve set your sights on pales in comparison to his girl. Isn’t that pathetic?”

She scoffed. “I’m not saying you have to find someone as accomplished as Linsey, but at the very least, choose someone with some real capability. Tell me, aside from running a small, unimpressive company, what exactly does Dolores have that makes her worth your time?”

“Mom!” Dustin suddenly shouted, his voice raw.

Chapter 956:

He locked eyes with her, breathing heavily, his face pale with disbelief. His eyes glistened, the edges reddened with emotion.

People around them thought he and Dolores were a match made in heaven. They were close in age, had natural chemistry, and even their careers complemented each other.

But never in his life had he imagined that the first person to stand against him dating Dolores would be his own mother. And not just oppose it—but tear it down completely.

His heart ached. He had gotten used to his mother’s scoldings over the years. She rarely offered praise. But this—this cruel dismissal of Dolores—was something he couldn’t stomach.

Hester looked stunned by his sudden outburst. Her eyes widened, filled with disbelief.

“Dustin, are you raising your voice at me now? Do you think you’re so capable that you no longer need me meddling in your life?”

She sprang to her feet, her tone sharp and scathing. “Don’t forget—when the Wade Group was crumbling, it was me who stepped up and saved this family’s legacy!”

Dustin stood frozen, watching her with pained eyes. His chest felt tight, his heart thudding so hard it hurt.

“I had no one to rely on. Your father was useless—he only made things worse!” She jabbed a finger toward his face, trembling with anger. “If it hadn’t been for me, your...”

Grandfather wouldn’t have died in peace. He handed more than half of the Wade Group’s shares to me so I could keep this company safe—from your father, and from you! And now you dare defy me? You ungrateful child!”

Seeing her so worked up, Dustin felt a wave of guilt crash over him. But behind that guilt, pain still simmered. He clutched his forehead, trying to suppress the pounding in his head. His voice came out hoarse. “Mom, that’s not what I meant. I just want you to see Dolores for who she really is...”

But Hester cut him off again, her tone sharp. “If I say she’s not good enough, then she’s not worth considering!”

Her voice echoed through the room. “Dustin, I’m warning you—if you insist on going against me, I have plenty of ways to make things hard for her. I won’t just sit back and let her drag you down.”

“Why do you have to be like this?” Dustin whispered, clutching his head, his eyes burning with frustration.

Hester exhaled sharply and sank back onto the couch. Her tone had lost its edge, but not its weight. “Because you’re part of this family. And as the only heir, your duty is to protect the company’s future. If you can’t even make the right choices in your personal life, how can I ever trust you to take over what I’ve put my heart and soul into?”

Dustin clenched his jaw, his fists trembling slightly. He turned away, refusing to meet her gaze.

“I don’t want to take over the Wade Group,” Dustin said quietly, yet with unmistakable resolve. “I’ve been at CR Corporation for years. That’s where I see my future.”

Hester, who had just begun to calm down, was instantly riled again. She slammed her hand on the desk with a thunderous crack that echoed across the room. The sheer force of it made her palm sting, but she didn’t flinch.

Her eyes locked onto Dustin’s, icy with rage. “CR Corporation belongs to Collin! Do you really want to live your whole life beneath him? Like a servant?”

Despite the sting in his chest, Dustin stood his ground. “Collin and I have been friends since we were kids. He’s never treated me like a subordinate. I’m at CR Corporation because I chose to be.”

Hester’s fingers twitched as if she wanted to slap the stubbornness out of him. To her, staying at CR Corporation meant Dustin would always be second best. But if he took charge of the Wade Group—their legacy—he might just have a shot at surpassing Collin. She could almost picture it: Dustin rising up, turning the tide, and becoming the richest man in Grester. But instead, he was throwing away that future, just like his useless father.

Chapter 957:

The more she thought about it, the angrier she got. But deep down, she knew she couldn’t push too hard right now. Dustin was decent at heart—patient, reliable—but if cornered, he could be reckless. And she couldn’t risk losing him entirely.

She took a slow breath, her chest rising and falling as she tried to rein in her fury. Quietly, she pulled her hand back and pressed her palm gently, hiding the redness.

“Dustin,” she said softly, managing a rare smile, “you’re my son. I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

Her voice was calm now, almost warm. “Alright. You can stay at CR Corporation. It’s good to learn from Collin. But when it comes to your marriage, I need you to trust me—and follow my lead.”

For a brief moment, light flickered in Dustin's eyes—joy. But it faded just as quickly.

He gave a faint, bitter smile. "Mom, if I'm as incapable as you say, who in Grester would even want me? Especially when your standards are so high."

Hester took his change in tone as a sign of compliance. Her lips curved into a satisfied smile. "Don't trouble yourself with that. I'll handle everything. Once the time and place are set, I'll let you know," she said, her voice softer now.

Dustin said nothing more. His shoulders slumped as he turned away, walking out of the study slowly but deliberately.

Though the house had a room prepared just for him, he didn't even glance in that direction. Before any servant could stop him, he had already stepped outside. Moments later, he climbed into his car, slammed the door shut, and started the engine. He typed in Collin's address on the GPS.

Back at the amusement park, he and Dolores had parted in a rush. After everything Hester had said—those cruel, dismissive words—he could only imagine how hurt Dolores must be feeling.

He had to see her face-to-face.

He pulled out of the driveway and drove off quickly. But after a while, something didn't feel right.

His instincts kicked in. Glancing at the rear-view mirror, he saw what he had suspected—a familiar car tailing him closely. It was Hester's.

The moment Dustin realized he was being followed, a surge of fury exploded inside him. All the anger he had buried deep within him came rushing back.

His jaw clenched, and without a second thought, he yanked the steering wheel, speeding across the nearby open lot.

When he confirmed the car behind him was still tailing, he jerked the wheel sharply, cutting across the path and bringing his vehicle to a halt—blocking the other car head-on.

The two cars collided with a jarring crunch, shattering the silence of the empty lot.

Amid the chaos, Dustin could hear panicked voices rushing toward him. “Mr. Wade! Are you alright?”

His head throbbed, the dizziness hitting him hard, but he shoved the car door open and stepped out, his face expressionless. As his vision cleared, he found himself surrounded by familiar faces—Hester’s men, her personal staff.

“Mr. Wade, your head’s bleeding. Please, let us take you to a hospital,” one of them said urgently.

Dustin’s voice came out low and cold. “Were you following me?”

The group hesitated before, almost in unison, they lowered their eyes. “Your mother instructed us to stay close. Just for your safety,” the lead man admitted.

So that was it.

Chapter 958:

Not protection. Surveillance.

Hester wasn’t just interfering—she was trying to control every step he took, just in case he might meet Dolores in secret.

Dustin stood silently, his lips tightening. Then, a hollow laugh slipped from his throat—dry and bitter.

He turned away, blinking slowly, fighting back the heat behind his eyes.

So, this was her answer. She was determined to keep him from Dolores.

“Mr. Wade...” One of the men started cautiously.

Dustin didn’t look at them. He drew a long, shaky breath. “I get it.” There was no point in blaming them. They were just doing their jobs—carrying out her orders. Even if he fought them off, it wouldn’t change a thing.

And if he pushed too hard, Hester would do exactly what she threatened. She would come for Dolores and the Davidson Group.

Four years. He had watched Dolores pour her heart into saving that company, working day and night to lift it from the brink.

He knew what it had cost her. If everything she had built was torn apart because of him, he wasn’t sure he could live with himself.

A tightness rose in his chest, constricting his throat. He turned away, trying to swallow the lump that formed.

Then his phone vibrated.

Dustin tensed. He pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the screen.

It was Collin calling.

He steadied his breath, clenched his fist, and answered.

“Hey, Collin. What’s up?”

His voice was calm. Too calm.

But after a brief pause, another voice answered. “It’s me.”

The sound of her voice cracked something inside him. His entire expression shifted. His eyes shimmered, and he turned abruptly, opening the car door and sliding back into the driver’s seat. “Alright. I’m listening.”

Without looking at the group outside, he slipped in his Bluetooth earpiece and started the engine again.

But this time, he didn’t head toward Collin’s place.

In the side mirror, he saw the staff scrambling back into their car, following him yet again.

Dustin didn’t react. His knuckles tightened on the wheel. Then her voice came through—soft, steady, like a balm to the storm raging inside him.

“Are you okay right now?” Dolores asked.

The moment Dustin heard those words, his face shifted with mixed emotions.

He had expected Dolores to complain or ask something sharp—but she did neither.

Instead, she simply asked how he was, as if nothing had happened. That hurt more than anything.

“I’m... I’m okay,” Dustin said, struggling to keep his emotions in check. Still, his voice shook slightly.

Worried she might catch on, he quickly asked, “And you? Still at Collin’s place?”

Dolores gave a light chuckle. Her voice was calm, as if the past few days hadn't happened. "Yes. Linsey wants me to stay a few more days."

Chapter 959:

Dustin could already guess why.

Knowing Dolores was with someone she trusted gave him some comfort. He didn't want her caught up in this mess. He felt it was his burden to carry alone.

Dustin took a deep breath. There was so much he wanted to say, but he kept it short. "Dolores, take care of yourself."

On the other end, Dolores sat quietly, tears rolling down the back of her hand.

She understood him loud and clear.

He wouldn't be able to see her for a long time.

By now, she was sure—his mother didn't like her one bit.

And now, she understood why Linsey had insisted she use Collin's phone.

It was the only safe way. Dustin's mother couldn't trace it.

Her throat tightened. She swallowed and said softly, "I will."

Just two words, but they felt heavy on her tongue.

After a moment, she added, her voice shaking, "You too."

Then silence settled between them. Only the sound of their breathing remained.

A car horn suddenly blared, snapping Dustin back to the moment. The red light had turned green, and the car behind him was honking.

He started the car again, his hands trembling on the wheel.

Having given up on going to Collin's, Dustin didn't know where else to turn. No matter which direction he took, his mother was watching. She would know every move, every breath.

Would she try to control every part of his life next?

The thought chilled him, and his body stiffened.

"It's getting dark, Dustin. You should head home," Dolores said gently. She sat alone on the balcony, staring at the fading sky, her expression unreadable.

Dustin's grip tightened on the wheel when he heard her voice. "Dolores, will you wait for me?" he asked, almost like a whisper. Then, more firmly, he added, "Wait for me. I'll find a way."

Dolores lowered her eyes, hiding the sadness in them. "Okay, I'll wait." A true smile finally touched Dustin's lips.

"We have to stay strong, Dolores. Think about it—Collin and Linsey went through so much, but they made it in the end. We can too. Let's not give up on each other, alright?" His voice lit up, filled with a hope he couldn't hide.

Dolores couldn't see Dustin's face, but she could imagine the joy it held.

She smiled faintly, though her eyes were clouded with tears.

To her, their situation wasn't the same as Linsey and Collin's.

The problems between Linsey and Collin were theirs to face.

But what stood between her and Dustin was his mother—and her disapproval wasn't something that could be talked away.

Dolores had never been one to beg for acceptance, especially from someone who had disliked her from the start.

Linsey had kindly given her a chance to reach out to Dustin, but Dolores knew it was only to say goodbye.

She was thankful her feelings hadn't grown too deep.

Chapter 960:

With Dustin's kind heart and charm, she was sure he would meet someone better, someone who would win his mother's favor. One day, he would forget about her. She would be nothing more than a passing memory.

That thought helped her hold back the tears. She wiped her face quickly, forcing herself to stay composed.

Then, in a steady voice, she said, "Alright, Linsey's calling for dinner. You should go home now."

Hearing her words, Dustin felt the weight on his chest lighten. He let out a quiet laugh. "Okay. Make sure you eat something. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Alright," Dolores replied quickly, and the very next moment, she hung up.

As soon as the call ended, the strength drained from her body. Her breathing became uneven.

Her phone slipped from her fingers and hit the floor. Her head spun, and her cheeks burned with heat.

Everything felt heavy. Somewhere in the distance, she heard Linsey's voice calling her name.

She looked up slowly and saw Linsey's anxious face.

"Linsey..." Dolores didn't realize how pale she looked, or that cold sweat had soaked her skin.

She barely whispered Linsey's name before everything went dark.

When Dolores opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was Linsey. She sat at the bedside, her head resting in her hand, eyes closed, breathing quietly.

For a moment, Dolores just stared. A warmth spread through her chest, easing the panic she had felt earlier.

She shifted slightly, then noticed something strange about her hand.

Turning her head, she saw the IV needle still in place.

The small movement was enough to wake Linsey.

"Hmm? Dolores, you're awake?" Linsey sat up quickly, checking the drip and letting out a sigh of relief. "Good, it's not finished yet."

She stretched her arms and gave Dolores a gentle smile. "How do you feel?"

Dolores tried to speak, but her throat was dry and scratchy. “What happened to me?”

Linsey noticed her struggle and poured a glass of warm water, handing it to her. “The doctor said you fainted from over-breathing and low blood sugar. A glucose drip and some rest should do the trick.”

She didn’t mention the tears Dolores had shed before passing out. Instead, she started talking about light, everyday things—trying to lift the weight from Dolores’ heart.

“You were out for nearly five hours. We’ve already had dinner without you. Are you hungry? Collin prepared something delicious earlier—it’s still warm and waiting. Should I bring you a plate?” Lena asked.

At her words, Dolores, who had just set down her water glass, couldn’t suppress a warm laugh. “I must be truly blessed to have both of you fussing over me like this.”

Linsey’s expression shifted to mock indignation. “What kind of talk is that? We’re friends. You’re unwell, so naturally, I’m here to care for you.” She began to rise from her seat.

But Dolores caught her sleeve, fingers gently coaxing her back down. “I’m not quite ready to eat yet. Linsey, stay with me a little longer. I could use the company.”

Linsey hesitated for a moment, then settled back down with a bright smile. “Of course.”