

A Farewell 251

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Thomas was reluctant to bid goodbye to Donald and Sage after learning that were leaving Colville in the afternoon. After a short chat, Sage and Zachary left the room to offer some privacy to the two old friends.

Zachary said apologetically, "I was too busy to bring you and Donald around Colville over the past few days."

Sage replied with a smile, "It's alright. We'll visit again and have more fun when Thomas gets better."

Zachary nodded. "Of course." Despite that, both of them were acutely aware that Thomas would never recover.

"Life is unpredictable. I regret going abroad instead of spending two more years with Grandpa at home," he lamented.

In Sage's past life, she did not accompany Donald to Colville. Hence, she was in the dark about Thomas' health condition.

She comforted Zachary, "Don't be too hard on yourself. You couldn't foresee Thomas falling sick."

"Sage, you've grown up. You are more sensible and mature now. Look, you're even consoling me," he teased.

She deliberately poked fun at him, "Why? Was I really that childish back then?"

While they were chatting and joking around, Sage spotted the tall and slender Ian approaching them from the other end of the corridor with a fruit basket in hand.

Ian had changed into a light blue shirt, paired with a black tailored blazer. He seemed more energetic than before, although he was wearing his usual haughty expression.

Sage was surprised. Wasn't he resting at the hotel? What brought him to the hospital?

Zachary followed her gaze and noticed Ian. He asked, "That must be your husband then?"

Sage sounded surprised. "How did you know?"

Zachary explained, "I once heard his name from Grandpa. I also had the honor of reading a business interview featuring him."

As he was speaking, Ian had gone up to them. Sage turned to him and questioned, "Why are you here?"

"I called Grandpa. He said you were at the hospital, so I dropped by to visit his friend Thomas as well." Turning to Zachary, he asked, "And you are?"

Sage introduced, "He's Zachary Brent, Thomas' grandson."

Zachary extended a handshake. "Mr. Holcomb, I appreciate your kind gesture."

They exchanged a handshake, after which Zachary led them into Thomas' room. There, Donald introduced Ian to Thomas. "This is my grandson-in-law."

"What a fine young man!" Thomas complimented Ian. "Isn't Sage head over heels for him? She's fortunate to marry a man she loves."

Sage felt awkward. It appeared that everyone knew about her history of pursuing Ian.

Ian remained composed despite the suddenness of the statement. "I'm fortunate to have married her."

She shot him a bewildered look, thinking, "Wow. It seems like he really puts in the effort to uphold his image. How could he spew such nonsense?"

"Haha. Of course! Sage is pretty and thoughtful. Her husband is a lucky man," Thomas remarked with a smile.

After exchanging some pleasantries, Donald said his farewell to Thomas since it was getting late. Although Donald and Thomas were smiling, Sage noticed the tears in their eyes.

Zachary saw the visitors to their car. He reminded Sage, "Sage, come visit again with Donald when you're free."

"Will do." She waved at him. "Bye, Zack!"

Ian couldn't help but furrow his brows upon hearing the way Sage addressed Zachary, but he did not comment.

After having lunch at the hotel, they made their way back to Haldon City. Sage and Ian sent Donald and Dexter home before returning to Solaris Estate.

On the way back, Sage called Linda and promised to visit the Holcomb Manor the next day. Then, she proceeded to enjoy some shut-eye. Suddenly, Ian broke the silence. "Are you close with Zachary Brent?"

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Eyes shut, Sage murmured, "I guess so. We met once before this." Ian asked calmly, "And you're calling him 'Zack'?"

She opened her eyes and shot him a puzzled look. "What's wrong with that?"

Ian pursed his lips. "Why don't you call him Zachary?"

Sage replied, "Zack is his nickname. He usually goes by it."

Ian argued, "Well, 'Iany' is my nickname."

Sage knew what Ian was getting at. How ridiculous! Last time, Ian got drunk at the family gathering that they attended with Linda. There, he pestered her about why she had stopped using his nickname. Not only that, he even forced her to call him lany.

Presently, he seemed petty over how she addressed Zachary. People might mistakenly think that he cared about her.

She snorted. "Ian Holcomb, you're being silly." Then, she turned to stare out of the car window.

He stared at her for a while but said nothing. The couple sat in the car in silence until they arrived at Solaris Estate.

As Sage didn't want to be near Ian, she ventured into the kitchen where she found Wanda preparing dinner. Ian made his way to the upstairs study.

Wanda looked around and said to Sage cautiously, "Mrs. Holcomb, Mr. Holcomb cares for you very much. When you were in Colville, he'd check the weather forecast in Colville every morning over breakfast." Sage replied absentmindedly, "Is that so? He must have had nothing better to do."

Wanda seemed very interested in chatting. "Is that true? He'd stare at your photos when he got home from work."

"Oh, Wanda, how did you even know that?" teased Sage. "Did Grandma make you say that to me?"

Wanda, sensing Sage's distrust, hurriedly clarified, "Mrs. Holcomb, I'm telling the truth. Mrs. Holcomb Senior has nothing to do with this.

"I found Mr. Holcomb staring seriously at your photo when I brought some milk to the study room for him. I had to call out to him a few times to get his attention. Only then would he turn off his phone screen." "Alright, I got it. Wanda, the soup smells heavenly. I'll have a bowl of it now because I'm starving!"

Sage dismissed Wanda's words, knowing that the latter intended to help repair their spousal relationship.

Ian did not have a photo of her, and she had hidden her Instagram stories from him. They did not even take a wedding photo together, not to mention couple wefies. What photo of her did he have?

Sage was already quite full by dinner time. She hurried toward the bedroom before Ian came down for dinner.

When she entered the bedroom, she noticed that the lamp she had discarded had been put back on her bedside table. It was glowing at that moment. Beside the lamp was some cute bunny decor.

She picked up the pair of exquisite bunnies. Their coats were lustrous, and they looked adorable with those long ears. It melted her heart slightly.

"A client gave these to me. I forgot to throw it out and decided to leave it on your table instead." Ian wandered over while Sage was admiring the decor. He nonchalantly explained the bunnies to her.

She shot him a disapproving glance. "How could you throw out these cute bunnies? You have really bad taste."

He scoffed. "I don't understand what's so cute about them."

Sage ignored him and placed the bunnies on the bedside table. Then, she went to the dressing room to get some clothes before heading into the shower.

He tagged along. Then, he said impassively, "Dad will join us for dinner. Would you like to meet him today, or would you prefer to say hi to him tomorrow?"

She froze in the middle of picking her outfit. Was Leo coming to Solaris Estate? If she had a choice, she did not want to meet Leo at all. What was the point of meeting her father-in-law when divorce was imminent? Still, Linda's birthday was in two days. Even if she avoided Leo for the next two days, she'd have to see him at Linda's birthday party.

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Besides, Sage thought it would be awkward if she refused to meet Leo when he showed up at her home. She sighed, not expecting to meet her father-in-law before the divorce.

"If you're tired, it's fine. I'll just let him know you're taking a nap," Ian offered calmly.

She secretly lamented and reluctantly said, "I'll change my clothes and join you shortly."

Ian did not object. He went downstairs alone to the living room, where Leo was waiting. Leo looked like he was in his fifties. Clad in casual wear, he seemed more muscular and bulky than his son. The serious look on his face underlined his authority and hinted at an unfriendly demeanor.

Upon spotting Sage, Ian approached her. "You're here."

Leo fixed his eyes on Sage as well. She flashed a polite smile and extended a hand to Leo. "Hi, Dad."

Leo merely grunted before taking a sip of his tea, leaving Sage feeling embarrassed. Getting along with Donald and Linda was a breeze, but the serious Leo was a tough nut to crack.

Ian took hold of her and led her to take a seat on the couch. He whispered, "Calm down. It's fine."

Sage couldn't possibly shove Ian away in front of Leo, so she settled on the couch with him.

Leo asked impassively, "Have you been traveling recently?"

She nodded. "I traveled with my grandpa to meet an old friend of his." "Did you not hear about my return to Haldon City?" Leo questioned sternly.

"Dad, your return isn't a huge event. It doesn't concern Sage," Ian voiced out before she had a chance to respond.

Leo glared at his son. "Was I addressing you? Where are your manners?" Ian did not look ruffled after Leo chided him, but he did not retort either.

Sage was perplexed by the situation. While this was her first encounter with Leo, he had previously shown little interest in their marriage. Why had he suddenly showcased his disapproval?

Nevertheless, it was true that the Joyners were not on par with the Holcombs. Given Ian's standing, he could easily find someone better. Sage did not dwell on the matter, thinking that it was normal for Leo to dislike her.

Wanda announced that dinner was ready. Ian, with his hand around Sage's waist, headed toward the dining hall. Since she didn't want to offend Leo, she said to him, "After you, Dad."

Leo shuffled toward the dining hall without a word. Dinner proceeded in silence. Fortunately, Sage had eaten some snacks before dinnertime, so she relaxed in her chair and picked at her food.

Seeing that, Leo snapped, "Did nobody teach you table manners?" When she realized that Leo was addressing her, Sage froze. While she was well-versed in dining etiquette, she didn't see the need to practice it in the comfort of her home.

"Dad, please stop disciplining us. This is a family dinner. There's no need for any strict etiquette" Ian defended Sage.

"This is ridiculous!" Leo slammed his utensils onto the table. "Ian, do you think you can cross the line now that you're living independently?" Sage had heard from Linda about Leo's hard-handed parenting methods. Judging from the exchange today, Leo seemed to be a man of rules.

Ian remained unbothered. "Are you here to have dinner with your son and daughter-in-law, or are you here to enforce rules? If it's the latter, I'm sorry, but we don't need all these rules at our home."

"I'm sorry," Sage apologized. She straightened her back to avoid causing a fight between father and son.

"Dad, we're done with dinner. Please take your time." With that, Ian grabbed her hand and led her upstairs.

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"Where are you off to? Are you seriously leaving your father alone at the dinner table?" Leo growled.

Ian replied, "We will excuse ourselves for now because I'm worried our lack of manners will spoil your appetite."

"Ian, you're really something." Scoffing, Leo got up and left. Sage felt uneasy about how the dinner had ended.

"Ignore him," Ian said to her. "Would you like something else to eat?" She shook her head. "I'm full."

She struggled to comprehend how Ian had endured Leo's parenting when he was a child. Despite being born into wealth, Ian's life didn't seem all that rosy.

Fortunately, she wouldn't be Mrs. Holcomb anymore, freeing herself from worrying about meeting Leo's high standards.

The next day, Sage and Ian visited Linda. Sage had a headache when she recalled Leo's attitude from last night.

If it weren't for Linda's sake, she might have refused to go and confessed to Ian that there was no need to change her, as she wouldn't be married to him any longer.

"It's okay. Grandma's here, and she'll support you. Besides, Dad won't be home until later," Ian comforted Sage, seemingly having read her thoughts.

She nodded. "Don't you have work to attend to? Go ahead."

Linda came out to greet them. "Sage, you're here! Come over."

Sage happily skipped her way to Linda. "Grandma."

"Gosh, you're finally back," Linda teased. "I was worried you might stand me up again."

Sage obediently replied, "It was my fault the last time. I will never do that again."

"Glad you know it. As punishment, you'll spend the day and stay the night at my place!"

Sage had no reason not to agree since Linda invited her to stay. Linda had made up the excuse of needing Sage's help to decorate the venue, but the housekeeper had already seen to it. All Sage needed to do was to keep Linda company and go on a stroll together.

After lunch, Sage accompanied Linda to the chapel, where light music and a nice, woody scent filled the air. Linda loved performing religious rituals.

On Sage's previous visit to the chapel, Linda had asked her about the decision to divorce and persuaded her to delay deciding.

40 days had since passed. Tomorrow would be Linda's birthday. She took a bunch of sandalwood incense sticks, which Sage helped her to light.

Placing the incense on the altar, Linda asked, "Sage, have you changed your mind?"

Sage had lost count of how many times Linda had asked her this question. Her response remained unchanged.

Linda sighed softly without saying anything. Feeling bitter, Sage held Linda's hand and said, "Grandma, it's okay. If you don't mind, just think of me as your granddaughter. I'll visit you often."

Linda patted Sage's hand but remained silent.

"By the way, Grandma, I bought you a gift. I'll give it to you now because you'll be busy tomorrow." As she spoke, Sage placed an exquisite bag in Linda's hand.

"I made you an album with photos from our last gathering. I know you love performing religious rituals and offerings, so here's a rosary for you. Here are also some homemade aromatic incense to help you sleep better.

"These gifts might not be worth much, but I put a lot of thought into them," explained Sage.

Linda accepted the gift graciously. "Thank you, Sage. I love them. But the best gift you could ever give me is to remain my granddaughter-in-law."

"Grandma, I..." Sage's voice trailed off when she saw Ian walking into the chapel.

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Ian approached Linda without so much as taking a look at Sage. "Aren't you busy at work? Why did you show up this early? Missing your wife?" Linda purposely directed the question at him.

Sage answered before Ian had the chance to. "Grandma, stop making these embarrassing jokes. Ian and I are soon to be divorced." Linda's eyes remained fixed on Ian. She waited for an answer.

Betraying no emotion, Ian replied, "I'm done with work. I came over to see if there's anything I could help with."

Linda felt a surge of frustration at Ian's obliviousness. She had set the stage for him, yet he seemed unwilling to play along. She couldn't help but wonder if business was his only forte.

Sage understood Linda's intentions and Ian's reluctance to play along. Even if Ian agreed with Linda, Sage wouldn't have believed him. Smiling, Sage changed the topic. "Grandma, let's look through the photos together."

Linda barked at Ian, "Why are you standing there then? Come take a seat."

Ian sat down by an antique table as Sage retrieved a crystal photo stand from a paper box. She said to Linda, "Grandma, you can display this by your bed or on your dresser."

The exquisite letter-sized photo stand held a personal portrait of Linda, who was beaming warmly at the camera.

Linda asked, "Sage, why didn't you choose a photo with the both of us?"

Sage replied, "Because you look stunning on your own! You deserve a solo feature. Besides, there are plenty of pictures of us together in the album. You can enjoy them anytime."

Sage had thought of choosing a photo of her and Linda for the photo stand. But upon second thought, she realized that would be embarrassing given the impending divorce.

Furthermore, Linda might be put in a tough spot if she was asked about the photo. She couldn't possibly introduce Sage as her "former daughter-in-law". Hence, Sage settled on a portrait of Linda.

Linda, of course, figured out Sage's thought process. She felt sorry for Sage and grew annoyed at Ian. "Sage, I'm feeling parched. Could you brew some tea for me?" Linda requested.

Sage readily agreed, knowing that Linda needed to have a private talk with Ian. "Grandma, I'll light up the aromatic incense in your room for your nap later too."

"Thank you, Sage."

Sage put aside the album and exited the chapel with the incense. Ian did not once look away from her as she left.

"What's the point of staring at her now? Why didn't you look at her when you entered?" Linda sounded angry. "And why did you refuse to admit that you missed her?"

He confessed, "Because I didn't miss her."

"You little brat!" Linda gently hit him with her walking stick. "How could you be so stubborn and arrogant at this point? Can't you see how determined she is to get a divorce?"

Wearing a stoic expression, Ian retorted, "She's always been steadfast in her decisions, whether it's marriage or divorce."

"Listen to yourself. You sound like you're the victim." Linda's anger flared. "Sage loved you deeply in the past. Can't you set aside your pride for a moment and try to make her stay?"

Ian remarked, "You too know that she once loved me. She does not have feelings for me now. If she insists on leaving, why should I force her to stay?"

Linda took another swipe at him with her walking stick. "Can't you acknowledge your feelings for Sage? It'll be difficult to reconcile with her after the divorce!"

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"I don't have much feelings for Sage, only guilt for neglecting her as a husband. Without a divorce, I would play the role of a husband better. But if she wants a divorce, I'll sign the papers," Ian explained calmly. "As for reconciling... I don't think that'll happen."

Hearing that, Linda put away her walking stick and let out a helpless sigh. Ian was perfect in every way except for his hubris. His life had always been smooth sailing, and he rarely ran into any setbacks. Hence, he had assumed that he could have everything he wanted in life.

Even if he realized that he had developed feelings for Sage, he wouldn't admit it out of pride. He might even attribute such sentiments to the natural male instincts of competitiveness and possessiveness. Furthermore, he seemed oblivious to the concept of sacrifice, as Sage had always been the one making sacrifices in their relationship.

Linda decided to let Ian learn from his mistakes so that he would learn he wasn't invincible. "Very well. I shall stay out of your matters then." She dismissively ushered him out. "Now get out. I don't want to see you."

Ian was left speechless by her remark.

Later that evening, Sage accompanied Linda for a stroll around the lawn of Holcomb Manor, a vast estate with picturesque surroundings. While the backyard had its own charm, the front lawn was equally impressive. Since the birthday party would take place on the front lawn, the maids were busy with the final touches.

"Mom." They heard a low, baritone male voice as they were walking. Sage turned around and saw Leo coming over.

His presence wiped the smile off her face. However, she obediently greeted him, "Hi, Dad."

He gave her a slight nod without any of the hostility from yesterday. Perhaps it was because he knew Linda doted on her.

But Linda didn't seem that enthusiastic at all about her son. "Oh, you're here. Ian is in a meeting in his room. You should go check on him and get him to rest. You hardly ever visit home. Sometimes I wonder if you've forgotten you have a son."

Leo didn't retort. He merely nodded before making his way into the manor. Linda turned to Sage, asking, "Sage, I heard Leo visited you last night. Did he cause any trouble?"

Sage smiled. "Not really. It was my fault."

"Ignore him. He's arrogant because he's a business legend for turning Holcomb Corporation into the powerhouse it is today." Linda continued, "Ian's mom, Sabrina, clashed with him many times because of his tyrannical attitude. That's why she went abroad with my newborn granddaughter at that time."

This was the first time Sage had heard about the conflict between Leo and Sabrina from Linda.

"Sabrina and Leo now both live abroad, but she hasn't forgiven him," Linda added, shaking her head. "Ian's lack of confidence in marriage likely stems from his parents' tumultuous relationship. For him to have married you, it must have been a decision he made willingly."

Though this was the second time Linda had made such a remark, Sage found herself feeling skeptical. If Ian had entered the marriage willingly, why had he paid her so little attention in her past life, pushing her to finally take her own life in a mental institution?

Sage's phone suddenly rang. It was a call from Donald, which was odd because he usually wouldn't disturb her when she was visiting Holcomb Manor.

A sense of foreboding washed over her as she excused herself to answer the call. Nervously, she asked, "Grandpa, what's wrong?"

As expected, Donald's voice carried a somber tone. "Thomas passed away."

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"Huh?" Sage was taken aback as Thomas seemed perfectly well when she and Donald bid him goodbye yesterday. His voice had been full of energy, but he was gone now.

"The doctor said it was terminal lucidity," croaked Donald.

Sage understood that losing a lifelong friend must have been crushing for Donald. She was also disheartened to learn that Thomas, who had spoken highly of her just the day before, was suddenly no longer alive. After consoling Donald, she went up to Linda. "Grandma, I'm sorry but I can't stay the night. My grandfather is grieving the loss of his friend, and I need to be there for him."

Linda replied, "Silly child. There's nothing to apologize for. It's only natural to want to comfort your grandfather in his time of need. I'll have Ian send you back." Then, Linda attempted to make one of the maids get Ian.

Sage stopped her. "Grandma, that won't be necessary. Let Ian keep on with his work. I'll hail a cab."

"Nonsense. It's only fitting for Ian to pay his respects to Mr. Joyner Senior too."

However, considering the distance to Donald's home, Ian's workload, and the presence of Leo, Sage didn't want to inconvenience anyone. She insisted, "Grandma, it's easier to hail a cab than make Ian make a round trip."

Knowing that the last thing on Sage's mind was romance, Linda did not insist. She instead suggested another method. "Fine. But allow our family driver to take you. It may take some time for a cab to reach our estate." Sage nodded in agreement.

Half an hour into the journey, darkness enveloped the sky as the car ventured into the tranquil suburbs, far from the city's hustle and bustle. Sage, who was getting some shut-eye, was jolted awake at the sound of a sudden crash.

"Madam, we've been rear-ended. I'll take a look," the driver announced before he got out of the car.

Sage went out to check on the car. But as she opened the car door, someone covered her nose and mouth. Panicking, she attempted to break free, but her attacker was prepared.

Not only did he pin her down with all his strength, but he also grabbed her limbs. The cloth that he pressed against her face might have been sprayed with chemicals. As she breathed the fumes in, her headache worsened, and she soon lost consciousness.

When her eyes fluttered open, she found herself lying on the floor with her arms and legs tied up. Her mind raced to piece together the events leading up to her abduction—the car had been rear-ended, and her captor covered her nose and mouth with a cloth before whisking her away.

Everything happened so fast. Her abductors had carried out the task with precision, which suggested a significant amount of planning. Forcing herself to remain composed, she started observing her surroundings.

She noticed that she was in a foul-smelling, abandoned house. The paint on the walls had begun peeling. Although she was immobile, the abductors hadn't gagged her. Clearly, they were not worried that she would call out for help.

But who was behind her abduction? Ivy had only just played the victim to turn Ian against Sage. Besides, Ivy was busy with the project discussion, so she likely wouldn't have the time to plan the abduction. Furthermore, Priscilla had mentioned Benjamin being taken in for questioning by the police.

So who was the culprit? Suddenly, the door creaked open, allowing a cold draft to sweep into the room. A moment later, a man approached her.

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Sage immediately recognized the lanky figure as the man who had covered her face with a cloth. Upon realizing she was awake, he chuckled and called out, "Sir, she's awake."

As he spoke, he inched to the side to make way for someone else. Soon, they heard a flurry of footsteps as a man with a beer belly and wearing a dark jacket entered the dilapidated room.

Seeing Benjamin walk in surprised Sage. She couldn't help but wonder, "Shouldn't he be under police questioning? Why is he here?"

Her heart sank. Benjamin harbored a grudge against her and had even gone as far as sending his men to warn her previously. Moreover, Ian had taught him a lesson, which likely deepened his animosity toward her. Now that she was in his clutches, she knew he wouldn't go easy on her.

"Wow, you look even better in person than in photos," Benjamin remarked with a malicious gleam in his eyes. "Shall I address you as Sage or Mrs. Holcomb?"

This was Sage's first time speaking directly to Benjamin. He looked disheveled compared to the last time she saw him at the hotel.

His hair was unkempt, and a bald patch was visible. His jacket was creased and stained at the sleeves. He looked nothing like a successful businessman.

After scrutinizing him for a moment, Sage tried to reply calmly, "It doesn't matter. Call me whatever you like."

Upon hearing this, he arrogantly ordered his subordinate, "Help Mrs. Holcomb up. How could you let her speak to me while lying on the ground?"

The lanky man hurried over and dragged her over, attempting to force her to kneel in front of Benjamin. Feeling humiliated, Sage resisted against the fierce-looking man, who didn't bother to handle her

gently. She had no choice but to let herself be thrown in front of Benjamin, falling onto her knees.

The cold, hard concrete floor caused her knees to ache. Her arms were bound behind her back, making it impossible to move.

Benjamin scanned her from head to toe, relishing in her plight as he let out a mocking laugh. "What's so special about Ian Holcomb's wife? She's in my grasp in the end."

"Why have you brought me here, Mr. Xenith?" Sage attempted to conceal her fear.

"Why, you ask? You little bitch—you landed me in this situation! I sent my men to warn you, didn't I? But you ignored my warning, and I'm not going to let that slide!"

Sage was well aware of Benjamin's pariah status in the industry. His reputation had been tarnished beyond repair.

Facing potential imprisonment, he had nothing left to lose. She knew better than to provoke a man at his breaking point.

She said quietly, "Mr. Xenith, I admit that I helped Priscilla, but it was all for personal gain. You can't accuse me of hurting you. I don't have a grudge against you."

"Enough with your deceitful words. I've heard from others how you went out of your way to cause me trouble.

"But setting that aside, I must make you pay for what your husband did —sending me to the authorities and causing me to lose my winery!" Benjamin's fury escalated with each word. He slapped Sage across the face, sending her sprawling to the ground. Her ears rang, and her cheeks stung.

As Benjamin's lackey hoisted her back up, Sage realized reasoning with Benjamin was futile. Through gritted teeth, she whispered, "Mr. Xenith, as I've said, I do not hold a personal grudge against you and

had no reason to ruin your life. Given your circumstances, I can offer you some financial assistance if that's what you want."

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"Trying to bribe me now?" Benjamin snickered. "If it weren't for you, I would have signed the deal with Holcomb Corporation by now. I could have achieved financial independence after Mimosa's IPO. How can you ever make up to me?"

"I don't know what financial independence looks like to you, but as you know, I'm pretty rich and married to Ian Holcomb. Our marriage might be on the rocks, but he can afford to give me a few million. How does 100 million dollars sound to you?" Sage countered, attempting to sway Benjamin.

She added, "Mr. Xenith, I know you abducted me here to vent your anger. But even if you beat me up, your circumstances won't improve. Take the money. Isn't that better?"

"Your negotiation skills surprise me. But do you take me for a fool?" Benjamin scoffed. "I'm aware you'll report me to the authorities once you're freed, and Ian Holcomb won't let it slide. What good is money then?" Benjamin sneered. "The moment I decided to abduct you, I vowed not to be swayed by money."

Undeterred, Sage persisted, "Mr. Xenith, I can persuade Ian Holcomb to reinvest in your winery. We can pretend this abduction never occurred. You've run into a tricky situation, but let's have a discussion to solve the problem."

"Enough of your nonsense!" Benjamin's smirk turned sinister as he traced her lips with his fingers. "I wonder how your glib tongue feels." Repulsed, Sage recoiled, earning herself another slap.

"Ungrateful little bitch!" Then, Benjamin turned to his subordinate. "Force her mouth open and feed it to her. Let's see if she'll end up begging for some love and attention on the ground."

Sage realized what Benjamin intended to force upon her. She frantically tried to devise an escape plan, but she was bound in a room devoid of anything except two chairs and a bed. The abandoned house seemed to be in a desolate area, rendering her cries futile.

"Don't exhaust yourself. My advice for you is to behave. You'll suffer less than way." Benjamin brandished a sharp knife and pressed it against her face. "If you don't, you will bid goodbye to this lovely face of yours."

Worried he might hurt her, she kept quiet. The lackey brought a medicine bottle, forced her mouth open, and poured some unknown liquid down her throat.

She felt the bitter liquid flowing down her throat and into her stomach. She tried spitting it out, but it was too late. She glowered at Benjamin. "What did you just make me ingest?"

"Don't worry. It's just some hallucinogen. You might find me disgusting now, but you'll be on your knees begging for some of this later." He chuckled gleefully. Even his lackey looked eager to have a taste of her, which sent her spiraling into despair.

Ian was at the Holcomb Manor, oblivious to her plight. Donald, unaware of her visit, would not seek her out. The Holcombs' driver was injured and probably too incapacitated to ask for help. Who else could come to her aid?

"No one can save you today. Pleasure me, and I might consider going easy on you if I'm in a good mood." He read her mind, looking smug. "Mrs. Holcomb, your husband has declared war on those who thought of supporting me. The girl from the orphanage must have changed her testimony because of him.

"You have only your rotten luck to blame for marrying Ian Holcomb. I cannot challenge him because I can't measure up to his wealth, but I can circulate videos of me fucking his wife!"

Sage was appalled by Benjamin's madness.

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How could Benjamin pin all the blame on her and retaliate against Ian in such a repugnant manner? Sage felt sick in her stomach and dizzy in the head. She bit her tongue to distract the odd sensations in her body with pain.

"A mere hallucinogen isn't enough. Let's enhance the experience!" Benjamin's voice dripped with malice as he attempted to force a white pill down her throat.

Knowing she couldn't win, she feigned submission and put on a pitiful expression. "Mr. Xenith, I'll behave. There's no need for more pills."

A lecherous grin twisted Benjamin's lips as he taunted her. "Woah, look how quickly you've come around. Or are you a slut deep down?"

She continued acting weak. "Survival is more important. Mr. Xenith, may I suggest only serving you and no one else? I'm Mrs. Holcomb after all. I want to preserve my dignity, and I don't want to sleep with any rando..."

She subtly hinted at Benjamin's higher social status, to his growing delight. "Still concerned about your dignity, I see. But isn't two better than one?"

"Mr. Xenith, just say yes. I'll do my best to keep you happy." The effects of the hallucinogen softened her demeanor. A slight blush tinted her cheeks.

Benjamin was aroused by her coy remark. "Fine. I shall grant your wish, but on the condition that you perform well in our video recording. I want Ian Holcomb to watch his wife having fun with another man!"

"Sir, we should proceed with caution," the lanky subordinate protested unhappily, but Benjamin already had a raging erection.

Benjamin dismissed him, thoughts clouded by lust. "What's there to be afraid of? She's taken the drug. In a few minutes, she'll be begging me for some good loving without needing me to force myself on her!"

"Go out. Don't worry. Once I've had my fill, you can have your turn if she remains unsated." Benjamin displayed some generosity.

Flushed from the drug's effects, Sage exuded a flirtatious allure that any man would fall for. Benjamin's subordinate was tempted by his boss's promise of some action later. Gulping, he agreed, "Fine. I'll keep watch."

Benjamin crouched in front of Sage and reached out to grope her breast, but she dodged his advances. She tried not to barf as she cooed, "Mr. Xenith, you have to untie me. You can't have much fun if I'm under restraint."

"Makes sense!" Carried away, Benjamin relented. "Whatever. I'll untie you."

He did not fear a defenseless woman who couldn't cause much trouble. Besides, his subordinate was standing guard outside by the door.

He eagerly untied Sage. There were dark red marks on her wrists from being tied up, and she pretended to groan in pain. Rubbing her wrists, she delivered a sudden blow to his nose when his guard was down. "Ouch!" he yelped, taken aback by her unexpected strike as blood trickled from his nose. She ignored the pain in her wrists and grabbed a chair to hit Benjamin with.

The chair fell apart after hitting Benjamin. The weight and force of the chair sent him crashing onto the floor.

Sage didn't dare stay any longer. She grabbed a chair leg and made it to the door. When the lackey opened the door to check on the commotion, she swiftly struck him on the head with it.