

My Accidental Husband is a Billionaire !

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The three people at the table were instantly stunned.

What was that aroma?

What kind of food was this?

How could it possibly smell this good?

Oliver, Selena, and Marisa had all enjoyed a life of luxury for years. They had tasted the finest cuisine around, yet the fragrance of these dishes had them completely caught off guard.

It didn't help that it was already dinnertime, and the Hortons were known for maintaining disciplined eating habits, keeping their portions modest. As a result, they were often genuinely hungry by mealtime.

Now, hunger was gnawing at them, and these mouth-watering dishes were making it unbearable. All three couldn't help but fix their gazes on the plates in front of them.

On the table were hearty dishes: a rich beef stew, slow-cooked pork belly, meatballs in a savory sauce, and even a simple stir-fried vegetable dish that looked unusually fresh and flavorful. And was that a casserole with layers of seafood and mushrooms?

They all swallowed hard.

Keira raised an eyebrow, not even bothering to look their way. Instead, she turned to Lewis and old Mrs. Horton. "Lewis, Grandma, let's eat."

Then she glanced over at Fiona.

Fiona instantly caught the hint and hurried off to the kitchen to grab her own portion.

She couldn't wait any longer!

How could Miss Olsen's cooking be this delicious?

The dining room suddenly grew very quiet...

Keira, Lewis, and old Mrs. Horton ate with their usual grace, though even old Mrs. Horton indulged in extra helpings, savoring the dishes with obvious delight.

Selena awkwardly attempted to break the silence. “Uh...”

But as soon as she opened her mouth, she instinctively had to swallow another mouthful of saliva. It was as if her body wasn’t under her control anymore. She felt utterly humiliated.

Keira shot her a look. “Hungry?”

Selena quickly waved her hands. “I’m not... I mean, I’m not hungry.”

Oliver and Marisa felt embarrassed for their daughter, struggling to watch her stumble through her reply.

They both turned away at the same time, and Oliver decided to speak up. “Well, Grandma, the food here today is really, uh—”

He couldn’t finish before he, too, had to swallow back the excess saliva. There was just too much to hold back, and it was on the verge of spilling out. How mortifying!

Oliver’s face turned red with embarrassment. “Uh, I just remembered something urgent I need to handle. I’ll be going now.”

The moment he left, Marisa and Selena stood up hastily. “We’ll be heading out too.”

They needed to eat something, anything. Staying in the room with that aroma any longer felt like torture.

Keira casually waved them off. “Don’t rush off now. Didn’t you say you wanted to spend time with Grandma? Why don’t you come back for the next meal as well?”

Marisa and Selena both faltered.

Come back? With food this tempting, who would dare?

The two practically fled the house as if something were chasing them. Keira’s lips curled into a smile.

Even Lewis couldn’t resist giving her hand a squeeze with an amused grin.

Old Mrs. Horton chuckled warmly, her eyes full of approval as she looked at Keira. “Keira, you really know how to handle things! Finally, some peace and quiet. Let’s enjoy our meal.”

Keira nodded.

The three continued eating in tranquility. But midway through, Keira paused. “Does it feel like something’s missing?”

Lewis frowned slightly. “It does feel like something’s off, but what could it be?”

Old Mrs. Horton waved it off. “There’s nothing missing. Let’s just finish our meal.”

They had barely finished eating when a cheerful voice floated down from upstairs. “Hey, you guys already ate? How could you start without me?”

Keira quickly turned to see Erin bounding down the stairs, pistachios in hand, curiosity written all over her face. “What did you make tonight?”

Keira felt a headache coming on.

Erin sniffed the air eagerly, her eyes sparkling. “Wow, this smells amazing! What is it? It smells like the best thing ever! Hurry up and bring me my portion!”

Fiona, who had just finished her own meal in the kitchen, froze when she heard Erin’s words.

Erin had joined Keira just the day before. She was bubbly, sweet, and charming and had already won Fiona over completely. Fiona treated her as one of their own.

But now, seeing Erin’s expectant look, Fiona felt a pang of guilt. How could she have eaten the fourth portion that Miss Olsen prepared? She should have saved it for this lovely guest!

Fiona was about to confess when Keira cleared her throat lightly. “Fiona, didn’t we set aside some food for Erin in the kitchen? Go ahead and bring it out.”

Fiona’s heart skipped a beat.

All that was left in the kitchen were the regular dishes they had every day.

The special four-course meal Miss Olsen had prepared? Completely gone...

But Fiona quickly picked up on Keira’s intent and responded with a cough. “Of course, I’ll bring it right out.”

Erin’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Hurry up! Mr. Horton, Mrs. Horton, your chef is a genius! I’ve never smelled anything this good, not even back at the Olsen house! I can’t wait to dig in!”

As she finished her praise, Fiona returned, carrying out their usual dinner dishes with a nervous expression. She placed them in front of Erin.

Erin eagerly grabbed a bite, then hesitated, a frown forming on her face. “Why does the taste feel completely different from what I smelled?”

Fiona’s heart raced.

Erin’s gaze turned toward Keira, brimming with suspicion. “You guys are holding out on me, aren’t you? I want the real food, too!”

Keira raised an eyebrow. “And what would make us share?”

Erin clenched her fists with determination. “If you let me eat it, I’ll tell you a major South family secret!”

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Keira was speechless.

Wait, did Erin just casually spill a South family secret like that?

Keira stared at Erin, wanting to say something, but ultimately decided it wasn’t worth the effort. Instead, she said, “So, if I make you four dishes, you’ll tell me four secrets?”

“Deal!” Erin answered cheerfully, her eyes sparkling with childlike innocence. The look was so pure that Keira almost felt guilty, as if she were tricking a kid.

Keira was silent again.

She stood up and walked toward the kitchen, with Erin trailing behind.

Keira’s cooking style was spontaneous. She glanced at the ingredients left in the kitchen and said, “Alright, for the first dish, I’ll make you a rice bowl with braised meat.”

She grabbed some pork ribs, tossed them into a clay pot, prepped everything quickly, and then looked at Erin. “First secret, start talking.”

Erin didn’t hesitate. “You know how the South family estate can’t be found on any map? Not even on satellite images?”

Keira nodded. “Yeah, I noticed.”

Erin grinned. “Well, the reason you can’t find it is because the South family’s land is cloaked! They’ve developed a kind of camouflage tech that makes their property blend seamlessly with its surroundings, so on any map or satellite image, it just looks like either land, ocean, or forest—whatever’s around it.”

Keira’s eyes narrowed. “So which one is it? Land, ocean, or forest?”

Erin gave her a sly smile. “That’s the second secret! What’s the next dish?”

Keira rolled her eyes and pulled a live fish from the water. “How about a fish stew?”

“Yay, that sounds amazing!” Erin clapped her hands excitedly.

Fish stew took a bit more work, so while Keira was cleaning and prepping the fish, Erin rambled on, “I saw the latest news about you. Olsen Group shares took a dive, and yet you don’t seem worried at all! And Lewis over here looks as calm as ever. It makes me think there’s something big going on behind the scenes!”

Keira’s eyebrow twitched.

Erin chuckled. “So I’m guessing—hasn’t there been word that Dr. Brandt is returning from overseas?”

The knife in Keira’s hand froze mid-cut. She turned around, and the blade was suddenly so close to Erin’s face that one more inch would’ve left a nasty cut on that smooth cheek.

Keira’s eyes were icy. “I’m warning you—don’t mess with them.”

These scientists had endured years of public disgrace for the sake of their country. Now that they finally had the chance to come home, they deserved to do so safely.

But Erin wasn’t fazed. She just kept smiling. “Relax! I’m on your side, remember? My job here is to support Crera, and Crera getting stronger means I get more resources, too! So trust me, I’m not the one blocking their return.”

Keira’s eyes narrowed even further. “So you’re saying…”

“I told you already, there are nine candidates for the South family inheritance. Besides you, me, and Vera, there are still six others who are eyeing you like a hawk.” Erin casually picked up a cucumber from the counter and took a loud, crunchy bite.

Keira frowned.

It clicked for her then. She immediately pulled out her phone and called Uncle Olsen. “Dad, can we pretend to cut ties for four days?”

“What?” he responded, bewildered.

“Just four days.”

“...I guess? How exactly do you plan to do that?”

Erin’s earlier words might’ve sounded like a threat, but they were actually a warning!

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After explaining things to her master, Keira ended the call and turned back to Erin. “Thanks.”

“Just post something on social media.”

Keira hung up without waiting for more questions. Next, she dialed her master’s number. “Hey, Master, can we also pretend we’re cutting ties for four days?”

Her master’s voice was filled with exasperation. “What mess are you stirring up this time? The sect can’t keep covering for you, you know.”

Keira sighed. “It’s just that someone reminded me that the better I look in public, the more suspicious it makes me seem.”

Erin was right. The other South family heirs had no idea that Uncle Olsen, Lewis, and her master were fiercely protective of her. Seeing those three standing by her so openly was bound to make them suspect Dr. Brandt’s involvement.

After all, old Mr. Sims was labeled a traitor because of Dr. Brandt’s case, and Keira’s defense of him would only raise more eyebrows.

The whole mess could only be cleaned up by proving Dr. Brandt’s innocence. It was like old Mr. Sims—those who knew the truth were forced to stay silent while he endured relentless pressure in his isolated post. Only by keeping up appearances could they convince outsiders that they were truly stuck in a tough spot.

Erin’s earlier words might’ve sounded like a threat, but they were actually a warning!

After explaining things to her master, Keira ended the call and turned back to Erin. “Thanks.”

Erin immediately flashed a cheeky grin. “A verbal thank you isn’t enough! If you’re really grateful, how about another dish?”

Keira paused. “Fine.”

Erin blinked in surprise. “Wait, you’re that agreeable? You’re not planning to poison the food, are you? Now I’m suddenly scared to eat it!”

Keira deadpanned. “Then don’t eat.”

Erin giggled. “No way! Even if it’s poisoned, I’d still eat every bite.”

“....”

Keira shot her an exasperated look. “Alright, spill the next South family secret.”

Erin's eyes were almost glued to the frying pan.

She spoke up, "The answer to your question is the ocean."

Keira paused, recalling her earlier question. If the South family's secret location was on land, it would be relatively easy to find. A forest would be smaller, but if it were the ocean, it would be almost impossible to locate, given its vast expanse.

Her brow furrowed.

Erin noticed her reaction and added, "Don't stress too much; overthinking will just give you wrinkles!"

Keira continued cooking and asked, "So, what are the next two secrets about the South family?"

"Sure."

Erin grinned. "I know you're worried about your mom. Don't worry; she's okay for now. Since you're one of the successors, they won't kill her even if they capture her. They'd only do that if you fail and she becomes useless. For now, she's only suffering some superficial injuries."

The mention of "superficial injuries" made Keira's hand tremble slightly. The knife she was using to clean the fish began to show uneven cuts.

Erin quickly interrupted, "Hey, focus on cooking!"

Keira looked at her. "What kind of superficial injuries?"

Erin rolled her eyes. "The South family uses public flogging as punishment. If someone escapes and is caught again, they receive weekly lashes as a public warning."

Keira's fingers tightened around the knife. "How many lashes per week?"

"Five," Erin replied casually.

Keira's breathing became rapid.

So, during these four months, while she'd been trying to rescue her mother, Jodie South had already received sixty lashes?

Noticing Keira's distress, Erin tried to comfort her. "Hey, don't worry too much. It's not as bad as it sounds. "The lashes are meant to humiliate more than cause real pain. The old-fashioned lashes had barbs and would tear flesh, but now it's just bamboo strips. It hurts a bit, but the main damage is the humiliation. Consider this explanation a bonus—no secrets deducted!"

Keira understood. Even if the lashes didn't hurt much, being publicly flogged was deeply shameful.

She still felt sorry for her mother.

She continued to cook and asked, "When will this contest among the successors end?"

"This is your fourth question for today!" Erin said with a playful, high-pitched tone that made her voice sound almost endearing.

Keira couldn't help but feel a bit conflicted. Even though she knew Erin was her rival, it was hard to dislike her. Despite Erin's previous actions that had angered her, Keira found it difficult to stay mad when faced with Erin's cute, hungry demeanor.

As Keira pondered this, Erin continued, "I'd estimate that the contest will end this year. They're in a hurry to choose the next successor."

Keira asked, "Why's that?"

"The previous successor's health is deteriorating, so they need to appoint someone new to take over the South family's affairs. Anyway, that's all for today's secrets! Hurry up with the cooking; I'm eager to eat!"

Keira sighed as she finished preparing the meal. ...

Erin ate voraciously, and when she was done, she stood up with a satisfied grin, patting her stomach. She gave Keira a thumbs up and said, "I never thought the best food would be here with you! Keira, can I come by for a meal every day?"

Keira was about to respond when Erin added, "One secret per dish! But just so you know, there are some things I won't reveal."

With that, Erin bounced cheerfully up the stairs, her happiness apparent.

Keira watched her go, and Lewis approached, asking, "What's wrong?"

"I have this feeling..." Keira said with a frown. "It seems like she's not treating me as a competitor. It's almost like she's trying to guide me."

"One secret per dish... It seems like Erin is the one taking the risk in this deal."

Lewis nodded in agreement. "It does seem like she's not seeing you as an opponent. More like she's preparing you."

Keira frowned.

As they were talking, Oliver and Nathan burst in. Nathan pointed at Keira and declared, “The Olsen family and the Freeman Sect have severed their ties with her. Lewis, I demand that you immediately cancel the engagement!”

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Lewis frowned.

Keira glanced at him and nodded slightly.

She had already called her father, Uncle Olsen, and the Freeman Sect’s leader. Both had responded promptly, showing just how fast things could move.

Now, the only person left was Lewis.

Keira moved closer, ready to explain her reasons, but Lewis spoke first. “If something happens to you, some people will take advantage of it, and others will distance themselves to avoid getting caught in the mess. But someone has to stand up for you. Since my reputation as a love-struck fool is already out there, I might as well embrace it.”

Keira was at a loss for words.

Lewis was right. She couldn’t overcompensate just to appease outsiders, or it would seem insincere.

If the three families released statements severing ties, it would look like a show...

Clearing her throat, Keira said softly, “Then I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“Serving my wife is no trouble at all.” Lewis replied with a soft laugh.

Their exchange caught Oliver’s attention, and he sneered. “Dad, did you see that? My little brother is completely enchanted by this woman! He’s disregarding the reputation of the Horton Group!”

Nathan’s face tightened. “Lewis, if you don’t cut ties with her, get out of this house!”

Lewis was about to stand up and declare his loyalty to Keira when a sharp “slap” interrupted him. He turned to see old Mrs. Horton standing up in anger, glaring at Nathan and Oliver.

Unaware of the full context, old Mrs. Horton was visibly furious. Her chest heaved as she pointed at Nathan and Oliver, shouting, “Both of you, be quiet!”

She took a shaky step forward with her cane, directly pointing at Nathan. “Is this how I raised you? If everyone bails when disaster strikes, who can we trust in this family?”

Nathan was taken aback.

Old Mrs. Horton turned her gaze to Oliver. “And you! You’re so cold-hearted that you abandon people at the first sign of trouble. And you still ask me for shares? How can I trust you with the Horton Group?”

Oliver stiffened. “Grandma, that’s not fair. Look at the Olsen family and the Freeman Sect. They’ve distanced themselves too. Her own family and mentor have turned their backs on her. We can’t risk the Horton Group being dragged down by her.”

Old Mrs. Horton took a deep breath. “I don’t care about others, but I can control you! To me, Keira is already my granddaughter-in-law. You two get out! And don’t ever bring up severing ties again!”

Nathan argued, “Mom, do you realize how severe the public backlash is? The Olsen Group’s stock has dropped by ten percent. The Horton Group is being criticized online, and if we don’t disassociate ourselves, people might boycott our products!”

Oliver immediately pulled out his phone. “Grandma, let me read some comments for you.”

“I thought the Olsen Group was involved, but they cleared things up quickly. Restored their reputation.”

“Stock down ten percent. Looks like they’ve realized their mistake. Next on the chopping block? @Horton Group. Heard Miss Olsen is your CEO’s fiancée!”

“Horton Group hasn’t said a word. A reporter even spotted Miss Olsen at the Horton house, proving you’re backing her. Such a disgrace. Unfollowed...”

“Ugh, I used to buy their products, but not anymore!”

“Just canceled everything I bought online!”

“If I could return my house, I’d do it. The cost is just too high...”

“...”

The comments kept coming, and the online discussion was relentless.

Nathan said urgently, “Mom, you see? The Horton Group is being condemned online. If we don’t respond, our stock will plummet!”

Old Mrs. Horton responded resolutely, “Let it drop. Under Lewis’s management, our stock has risen by twenty percent. A ten percent drop won’t ruin us.”

Nathan was speechless.

Before he could respond, old Mrs. Horton shooed them away. “Get out! Stop embarrassing yourselves here!”

Nathan and Oliver exchanged glances, sighed, and left in frustration.

Once they were gone, old Mrs. Horton turned to Keira. “Don’t be afraid, Keira. As long as I’m here, no one will trouble you!”

Keira moved closer to Mrs. Horton and took her arm. “Grandma, don’t worry. My issues will be resolved in four days.”

She didn’t want to add to old Mrs. Horton’s worries, especially given her age.

Old Mrs. Horton’s eyes brightened as she relaxed. She patted Keira’s hand. “I knew you weren’t one to shy away from responsibility. There must be something we don’t know. But as long as you have a clear conscience, don’t worry about what others say.”

Keira nodded.

At that moment, Erin came downstairs, holding her phone. “Charles sent me a message. He and the other brothers are waiting outside.”

—

Outside the Horton house, all of Keira’s brothers had arrived except for Ellis. James, who was closest to Keira, stepped forward, concern etched on his face. “Sis, I understand. Holly Sims, your best friend, is in trouble. It’s only natural you stepped up. Even if it was a mistake, it’s unfair for Uncle to kick you out. You should go speak with him and smooth things over.”

Keira was about to respond when another car pulled up.

The door opened, and Uncle Olsen stepped out, striding toward them.

The brothers immediately stood at attention as Uncle Olsen approached and shot a fierce look at Keira. “Come with me.”

Keira nodded obediently and followed him to the side.

The brothers watched in shock.

James was puzzled. “Is Uncle scolding our cousin? Should we intervene?”

Charles said, “Uncle usually dotes on her. If he’s suddenly kicking her out, it must be to appease the shareholders, not to scold her.”

Almost as soon as he spoke, Uncle Olsen’s face darkened. “What are you doing?”

His tone was harsh.

James and Charles hurried forward, placing themselves protectively around Keira.

James, with a forced smile, said, “Uncle, let’s talk this over calmly…”

Charles added, “Yes, Uncle, she’s a girl. Please don’t be too harsh…”

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After exchanging a look, James couldn’t help but sigh inwardly.

As “Keera’s” older cousin, it was his responsibility to stand up for her!

Sure, her actions might’ve been a bit over the top, but she had her reasons. Besides, “Keera” was the only girl in the family—how could he just stand by and do nothing?

James made up his mind then and there. Even if it meant risking getting an earful from Uncle Olsen, he’d protect his cousin today!

He stepped forward and stood in front of Uncle Olsen, squaring his shoulders. “Uncle, if you’ve got something to say, take it out on me!”

Charles quickly added, “Yeah, count me in!”

But right after they spoke, Uncle Olsen said to “Keera,” “You want me to publicly announce that we’ve cut ties? Let me tell you, I’m giving you four days. Four days from now, no matter what’s happening on your end, I’ll make sure you’re back home, and I’ll do it in style!”

James and Charles blinked in confusion. What?

James turned to look at “Keera,” still puzzled.

She gave a resigned shrug. “Okay, Dad. I understand.”

James’s mind raced. Wait. “Keera” asked Uncle Olsen to kick her out of the house?

His mouth twitched as he looked back at Uncle Olsen, unable to resist asking, “Uncle, aren’t you known for being super patriotic?”

Uncle Olsen’s reputation in Clance was built on the respect everyone had for his principles. Being the leader of the five major families, the Olsen Group was always the first to answer national calls, never hesitating to contribute whenever they could.

The Olsen Group’s strong sense of patriotism made them widely loved by the public. If this scandal had involved any other family, their business would’ve collapsed by now.

The Olsen Group held strong through this crisis largely thanks to Uncle Olsen's leadership, which was why he was held in such high regard in the business world.

Uncle Olsen glanced at James and asked, "Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem at all. I was just curious—what exactly did Keera do that made you decide to punish her?" James asked cautiously.

Uncle Olsen gave him a sidelong look and scoffed. "Punish her? She didn't commit murder or arson, so why would I punish her?"

James nearly choked. "Seriously? For the rest of us, the slightest mistake gets us lectured or punished, but for Keera, she practically has to break the law before there's any talk of consequences?"

The favoritism was unbelievable!

Of course, James didn't dare say that out loud. He just let out a deep sigh of relief, glad that Uncle wasn't truly at odds with "Keera."

After all, she was the only girl in the family!

With that settled, Uncle Olsen handed Keira a bank card. "There's a few million in here. Use it as you need. If you're staying at someone else's place, don't rely on their money."

He said it as casually as if he were giving her pocket change.

James was speechless.

Keira took the card and was about to say something, but Uncle Olsen waved her off, held up four fingers, and got into his car before driving away.

She could only tuck the card into her pocket, her lips twitching.

James leaned in. "If you don't want it, you could always pass it to me."

Keira immediately pocketed the card more securely.

Charles gave James a disapproving look. "Really, James? You're asking your cousin for money? Have some shame!"

James was quick to defend himself. "I wasn't serious. I was just saying."

As they were talking, another car suddenly pulled up. James immediately straightened up. "The Sect Leader is here!"

It was rare for the Sect Leader to leave his place. If he was here, was it also because of “Keera”?

James couldn’t help but glance over at “Keera.”

The car stopped in front of them, and the window rolled down to reveal the Sect Leader’s face. He didn’t even bother getting out, looking thoroughly displeased.

Seeing his expression, James thought this time, the Sect Leader was definitely here to reprimand “Keera.” After all, the backlash online had been intense, and the Sect Leader was even more patriotic than Uncle Olsen!

But then, to everyone’s surprise, the Sect Leader snapped, “I have no idea what you’re playing at, but I’m telling you, four days! You’ve got four days, and then you better be back at the sect! Or else I’ll... I’ll...”

He trailed off, clearly struggling to come up with a threat. Seeing Keira’s indifferent expression, he finally spat out, “I’ll cry if you don’t!”

Keira looked exasperated.

James felt even more at a loss.

“Seriously, Sect Leader, where’s your patriotic duty?”

The Freeman Sect’s first rule was literally, “Never betray your country!”

Just as that thought crossed his mind, the Sect Leader turned to him. “What are you standing around for? Listen up—take Keera as an example of what not to do. Don’t engage in anything that could harm the country, and don’t make any statements that damage our national dignity. Understood?”

James was dumbfounded. “Am I and Keera really under the same Sect Leader?”

He was deep in doubt.

After the Sect Leader left, James turned to “Keera,” his lips twitching. “Sis, I’m starting to think we don’t even live in the same world.”

Keira patted his shoulder. “Don’t doubt yourself. You’re on the right track.”

James sighed, then spoke seriously. “But you really did mess up this time. I think you should apologize to the public...”

James was full of concern, carefully watching “Keera’s” expression as he spoke, worried she might get upset.

But seeing her face remain completely expressionless, he awkwardly coughed before saying, “Cousin, if you really don’t want to apologize, just let it slide. People forget things quickly, and in a few days, this will all blow over.”

Keira waved her hand dismissively, not interested in responding, and turned to head back to the Horton residence.

But just as she turned, she noticed Marisa and Selena lurking nearby. They quickly ducked out of sight when they realized they’d been caught. Keira’s brows knit in irritation. They had clearly been snooping.

Given the distance between her and Uncle Olsen and the Sect Leader earlier, it was doubtful those two had heard anything of substance. But seeing the suspicious way Selena was eyeing her, it was clear they were guessing something.

Suddenly, Keira turned toward James and raised her voice, “Do you also think I’m embarrassing the family? Do you expect me to apologize? Well, let me tell you—it’s not happening!”

James blinked in confusion. “What? No, that’s not what I meant. I was just—”

But before he could finish, Keira cut him off, “I might not come from some grand family like you all, so I don’t understand the ‘sacrifices’ you make for family interests. What I do know is that Holly is my friend, and I’m going to stand by her!”

James was even more bewildered. “Cousin, what are you even talking about? I—”

“Enough! I’m not apologizing, not even if Dad and the Sect Leader show up and demand it! You’ve already cut ties with me, so why are you still trying to interfere?”

With that, Keira spun around and stormed into the house, slamming the iron gate shut behind her with a loud clang.

James stood there, stunned.

He exchanged a puzzled look with Charles. “What just happened?”

Charles was equally baffled. “No clue!”

As they stood there, trying to make sense of things, the sound of pistachio shells cracking echoed from behind them. They turned to see Erin approaching, casually munching on snacks.

She stopped in front of Charles, grinning. “You guys really can’t figure it out?”

James and Charles immediately asked, “What’s going on?”

Erin smirked. “Keira’s on her period, and her mood’s all over the place. You two just had the bad luck of catching her at the wrong time.”

With that, Keira spun around and stormed into the house, slamming the iron gate shut behind her with a loud clang.

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James blinked in surprise. “Oh.”

Charles sighed in relief. “That explains it.”

Erin patted them on the shoulders. “Alright, time to head home. Nothing to worry about! I’m heading inside.”

She walked past them to the iron gate and knocked. When the guard saw her, he immediately smiled. “Miss Martin, please come in!”

Erin nodded and handed him a handful of pistachios. “Thanks for the hard work!”

Her sweet, charming demeanor was impossible to resist.

Meanwhile, Keira, now back inside, was glaring at Selena and Marisa with obvious irritation.

Selena crossed her arms and remarked, “Keira, don’t take this the wrong way, but what you’re doing is really bringing shame to the family. The Olsens have already distanced themselves, and even the Freeman Sect has cut ties. If you keep this up, the Hortons might decide they don’t want you either.”

Marisa nodded in agreement. “Exactly. You’re married now, so you should listen to Lewis more and think about the Horton family’s reputation. You’re not the Olsen family’s star anymore. You need to start considering your future standing.”

Keira raised an eyebrow, about to retort, when a voice cut in from behind her, “I hear that back in the day, some women had to bind their feet. I guess nowadays it’s not the feet—they’re binding their brains.”

Marisa’s face stiffened.

Keira glanced over to see Erin standing beside her, still munching on pistachios. Erin continued, “It’s embarrassing just looking at you. No wonder you’re only good for being a side chick, slinking around like that. You want to be a homemaker? Fine, but keep it to yourself and stop dragging others down.”

With that, Erin stepped forward, brushing past Marisa and Selena.

Keira’s lips twitched into a faint smile as she followed Erin. She had to admit that Erin’s sharp and lively personality made her a perfect ally. With her around, Keira hardly needed to say a word.

The two walked past Selena and Marisa and headed back to old Mrs. Horton’s room.

...

Three days later, late at night.

Keira and Lewis had both dressed in black, ready to head out.

Lewis whispered, “Professor Barry Brandt is attempting to sneak back into the country tonight. I don’t trust the situation, so I’m going to help with the extraction.”

If the operation failed, Barry’s return to Crera could be delayed indefinitely, which would drag out Keira’s chances of clearing her name even longer. That was why she and Lewis decided to take action.

They were just stepping out when they saw Erin grinning at them from the doorway. “Heading out? Take me with you!”

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Erin had been waiting outside for who knows how long. Judging by the number of pistachio shells in the trash can beside her, she had been there for quite some time.

She had even dragged a chair from somewhere and parked it right there, sitting comfortably like she was waiting for something to happen.

When Keira spotted her, she immediately frowned and exchanged a quick look with Lewis.

Their mission tonight was to head to the border—a dangerous operation to help Barry Brandt return home. It was crucial that everything went smoothly, with no unnecessary complications.

Erin was unpredictable. One moment, she was cheerful and agreeable; the next, she was impossible to read. Keira couldn't afford to bring someone like that along, not with stakes this high.

But Erin just got up from her chair, completely unbothered, and chirped, "Let's go! I'm all set!"

She patted the small backpack she had slung over her shoulder.

"What exactly are you 'set' with?" Keira asked suspiciously.

They were traveling light, carrying only what was necessary for the mission.

Erin, without the slightest hint of shame, replied, "Pistachios, of course! It's a long drive to the border, right? Gotta have snacks, or it'll be so boring!"

Keira stared at her, trying to keep her patience. "Erin, you know I'm not taking you with us."

Erin grinned mischievously. "Then I'll just let the other South family heirs know what you're up to!"

Keira's eyes turned cold in an instant.

Erin leaned in, voice laced with mock innocence, "Or better yet, I don't even need to tell them. I could just tip off Country A—after all, Barry Brandt is trying to defect from them..."

Keira lunged forward, intent on restraining her, but Erin anticipated the move and tried to dodge. However, she wasn't nearly as agile as Keira, who quickly caught her and pinned her arms behind her back.

"Ow, ow, ow! Keira, let go!" Erin yelped, wriggling in pain.

Keira didn't budge.

Erin glanced up at her. "I've already set up a timed email. If you try to keep me here, that email gets sent out in two hours. I'm the only one who can stop it. You can tie me up or even kill me, but the intel will get out either way!"

Keira narrowed her eyes in frustration.

Erin batted her lashes playfully. "Your best bet is to take me with you. Keep an eye on me the whole time, and that way, you can relax!"

Keira sighed, realizing Erin had her cornered.

If it were anyone else, Keira would've dealt with them already. But Erin, with her spoiled, princess-like demeanor, was just too delicate to hit.

Taking a deep breath, Keira finally released her.

Lewis stepped forward. "Let her come."

Keira looked over at Erin, still conflicted.

Even though they were technically rivals, Keira couldn't bring herself to genuinely dislike Erin, who, despite her antics, never seemed to mean any harm.

"On this trip..." Keira began.

"I'll be on my best behavior!" Erin interrupted, eyes wide with exaggerated innocence. She raised two fingers in a scout's promise. "Cross my heart!"

Her expression was almost rabbit-like in its sincerity.

Keira just shook her head, giving up on arguing. She and Lewis headed downstairs, with Erin happily skipping behind them, still snacking on pistachios.

When they reached the parking lot, Keira and Lewis chose the most reliable vehicle for the trip.

"I'll drive," Lewis said. "We're on a tight schedule."

"Fine by me."

Keira climbed into the passenger seat, securing her backpack beside her.

She was just getting settled when she heard rustling from the backseat. Turning around, she was shocked to see Erin inflating an air mattress. Within minutes, Erin had transformed the backseat into her personal cozy nook, complete with a blanket, pillow, and even a small folding table she'd somehow hauled out of her own car.

Erin stretched out on her makeshift bed, took a sip from a teacup she'd brought along, and sighed contentedly. "Ah, too many pistachios. They make you thirsty... Why are you two staring at me? Let's get going!"

Keira's jaw clenched. "Is she serious?"

Lewis could only chuckle, shaking his head in disbelief as he started the engine.

As they drove, Keira occasionally glanced back. After a while, she noticed the soft, rhythmic sound of breathing. Turning around, she saw Erin curled up in her blanket, fast asleep.

Completely unguarded.

Keira stared for a moment, then whispered to Lewis, “Is she really that confident I won’t hurt her?”

Lewis kept his eyes on the road. “Keira, you might act all tough and aloof, but deep down, you’re a softie.”

“What?” Keira blinked, taken aback. “Soft? Me?”

Lewis smirked. “She’s got you all figured out.”

Keira sighed, realizing he was right.

—

They drove for twelve hours straight, finally arriving at the border by dawn.

Cautious and alert, Keira and Lewis disembarked, with Erin trailing behind. Together, they boarded a boat to cross into Country A and ensure Barry Brandt’s safe return to Crera.

690 Chapter 689

Keira and her team set out under the cover of night.

Standing on the deck, Keira stared ahead. The night sea was an endless stretch of pitch black, an abyss with no bottom in sight.

Lewis stood behind her and asked, “You scared?”

“Of what?” Keira shot back.

This dark, empty sea was just like the life she’d lived in the shadows—nothing new or frightening about it.

Lewis’s tone remained calm. “It’s about a four-hour trip to the Country A border. No signal out here, just satellite phones. I just got word that Professor Barry Brandt’s already en route. We shouldn’t run into any trouble. If everything goes smoothly, we’ll pick him up and head straight back home.”

Keira nodded, then asked, “And if it doesn’t go smoothly?”

“Then we move to Plan B. Don’t worry—we’re getting him back, one way or another,” Lewis said with the kind of steady confidence that put Keira at ease.

She didn't know much about Lewis's connections abroad, but hearing him speak so assuredly made her nod again. "You know people in Country A?"

He nodded. "I know a few."

He then reached out and gave her a reassuring pat on the head. "Either way, no need to stress tonight."

Keira nodded once more.

"Teehee..."

A teasing laugh interrupted their conversation. Both of them turned to see Erin leaning casually against the ship's railing, still snacking on pistachios. Noticing their attention, she grinned. "Go on, don't mind me. Watching you two lovebirds is way more entertaining than I thought. Even someone like Mr. Horton knows how to tell little white lies, huh?"

Keira frowned. "What lies?"

Erin pouted. "If there's really no danger, why would Mr. Horton be here with you in person? You two are the strongest fighters in your whole crew, right?"

Lewis shot her a cold glare.

Erin immediately mimed zipping her lips shut. "Alright, alright, I'll stop poking holes in your story! But honestly, Keira's not exactly the type who needs a pep talk. So what's with the comforting words?"

Lewis's face darkened further.

Erin didn't stop. "Oh, I get it now! Is it because Keira's afraid of the water? I remember hearing something about how Keira and Keera almost drowned in Oceanion? And Keera... didn't make it out, right?"

Keira's gaze turned sharp.

Lewis's expression grew even more menacing, but Erin wasn't the least bit scared of him. It was only when Keira's cold stare landed on her that Erin finally closed her mouth.

She still acted tough but at least went quiet.

Keira turned her attention back to the dark ocean.

Erin's comment had hit close to home.

She was, in fact, uneasy. The ocean had almost taken her life once, and it had claimed her sister's. Those memories made her wary of the water even now.

Lewis's reassuring words had eased that tension, but Erin's insistence on digging into it wasn't exactly helpful.

Keira furrowed her brows and refocused on the sea ahead.

The boat sped across the waves, and true to Lewis's word, they arrived near the Country A coast four hours later.

As they neared the shore, all the lights and engines were shut off. They let the boat drift in silently until they were close enough to land. Then they hid quietly, waiting in the darkness.

Lewis checked his phone. "Five minutes. Professor Brandt should be here soon."

As he spoke, Keira noticed shadows moving along the coastline.

"Border patrol," Lewis explained.

Keira's heart raced. But he quickly added, "Don't worry. They'll be gone in under a minute. We've timed everything perfectly."

Sure enough, the patrol officers swept the area with their flashlights and then moved on, leaving the coast clear.

Keira finally exhaled a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

Erin sidled over, her breathing a little heavier. "This is so nerve-wracking... feels like we're pulling off a heist or something..."

Keira just shot her an exasperated look before returning her focus to the shoreline.

Erin continued with a cheeky smile. "You think it's really going to go off without a hitch?"

Keira eyed her. "As long as you don't stir up trouble, everything will go according to plan."

Just as she finished speaking, headlights appeared in the distance.

"They're here," Lewis said calmly.

Erin blinked in surprise. "Only one car?"

Lewis glanced at her dismissively. "We're extracting Professor Brandt, not his entire research team. We're not here for a mass evacuation, so what were you expecting?"

Erin pouted. “Geez, no need to be so harsh.”

“Too noisy,” Keira muttered, shutting her up instantly.

Lewis didn’t know what to say.

Keira’s tension grew as the car drew closer. Her jaw clenched as she focused intently on its approach.

Almost there...

Just a few more seconds and the car would be right at the dock. Then they could extract Professor Brandt and be on their way...

But just as everything seemed to be going according to plan, the same patrol officers from earlier suddenly reappeared, flashlights blazing as they surrounded the car.

“Freeze!”

Motorcycles roared to life, closing in and blocking the vehicle from the front and rear.

No data found.