

## Beautiful 771

### Chapter 771 771: So-called Ladder

"You don't really remember most of your classmates, do you?" William emphasized the word memory deliberately.

Astrid, however, didn't look surprised. Despite their past friction, she understood Ling Qingyu far too well.

"I might have had a bad memory back then because of academic stress," Ling Qingyu replied casually.

Unfortunately for her, Astrid wasn't letting it slide. "Your memory is exceptional. You could recite entire paragraphs from a hundred-page text after reading it once."

"Alright, fine." Ling Qingyu raised her hands in surrender. "I just didn't bother paying attention to people who were busy fooling around and wasting time. That's why I only remember you, Astrid—my one and only girlfriend."

Astrid hmped but didn't argue, as if the old grievances had never existed. It was almost comical— she had once been the only one taking things seriously, yet Ling Qingyu showed no trace of discomfort now. Somehow, that relieved her.

"Well, turns out Kate wasn't wasting time," William added suddenly.

"Yes," Astrid agreed. "She probably made the most out of all of us." A faint smile curved her lips. "But I don't envy her. Not in the slightest."

Of course you don't. Ling Qingyu rolled her eyes internally. With Astrid's hidden background, what kind of people would even enter her consideration? Ling Qingyu knew better than anyone.

If she hadn't grown strong enough herself, she might not have had the confidence to remain indifferent after uncovering Astrid's secrets and still behave as usual.

That was precisely why Astrid never elaborated on her family background. Most people assumed she came from some painful or complicated past and stopped prying— including the former Ling Qingyu.

"Wait," Ling Qingyu interrupted. "Who's Kate again?"

Astrid stared at her. "Qingyu, don't tell me you don't remember the beautiful girl who was always hovering around us? The one who constantly flaunted her possessions and tried to outshine everyone?"

Ling Qingyu searched through distant memories— and found her.

Ah. Kate.

She almost laughed. The girl who had been jealous of both her appearance and Astrid's.

Truthfully, Kate had been attractive—radiant and sensual in her own way. Perhaps not quite on Ling Qingyu's level—though she insisted she wasn't narcissistic; she had only said it twice.

Still, Kate had her own charm.

Unfortunately, jealousy had clouded her judgment. She had tried to compete in everything— grades, popularity, appearance—with two people she simply couldn't surpass.

So she shifted battlefields. Material wealth.

As far as Ling Qingyu remembered, Kate came from a very ordinary family and had never been content with that reality. And there was nothing wrong with ambition— nothing wrong with wanting to climb higher. Ling Qingyu respected that.

What amused her was the choice of rivals.

Competing with her and Astrid in terms of wealth?

It almost made her nostalgic for those foolish, simpler days.

Who were she and Astrid, truly? If someone dug deep enough into their backgrounds, they would find something far from ordinary. The only reason few noticed was because both of them chose to live quietly— to behave like normal students, to blend in.

From the very beginning, Kate's competition had been destined to fail.

"So, she's very successful now?" Ling Qingyu's curiosity was piqued. "It sounds even more convincing coming from the two of you— a lawyer and a financial analyst from a law firm."

"At least in my opinion, she's the most successful one after you, Ling," William replied.

Astrid elaborated. Kate had started early— actively seeking connections within wealthy circles, attending private venues and exclusive clubs.

Yes, in some ways, she had acted like an escort, deliberately catering to affluent men.

But she had sharp eyes and a sharper mind. She chose carefully— men with boundaries and clear rules. She positioned herself as a temporary companion, sometimes even a short-term girlfriend, while absorbing knowledge like a sponge in an unfamiliar environment.

Ling Qingyu admitted there was one thing she respected: despite operating outside conventional norms, Kate had remained grounded. She wasn't intoxicated by the money showered upon her. She stayed humble enough to learn.

She understood one crucial rule— only what you build for yourself truly belongs to you.

The moment Astrid described that phase, Ling Qingyu immediately understood where the expensive gifts Kate once flaunted had come from.

If Kate had continued down that demonic path— relying solely on fleeting youth with no backup plan— her temporary wealth would have evaporated within a few years, likely leaving behind health risks, psychological scars, and social consequences.

From Ling Qingyu's perspective, that would've been a high-risk investment with no secured return.

However, what Astrid revealed next genuinely surprised her.

Kate had accepted the gifts— but never squandered the money. Instead, she invested it. She experimented, failed, learned, and listened carefully to so-called mentors.

While most of them were still buried in textbooks, Kate had quietly amassed her first six-figure sum. From that foundation, her entrepreneurial journey truly began.

Once she crossed the most difficult threshold, capital began to accumulate more steadily. She leveraged her network strategically, gradually distancing herself from that "dark" lifestyle until she severed ties entirely.

Of course, no one knew what she might have kept hidden. But Ling Qingyu could tell— Kate wasn't reckless. She was rational. Ambitious. Strong-minded.

A hero of her own story.

Someone willing to do whatever it took to reach the summit— walk through mud, swallow humiliation, endure judgment. She prioritized only one thing: her own ascent.

Truthfully, Ling Qingyu was impressed.

There had been no public scandals, no dramatic downfall. Body shaming and moral gossip never truly stuck. Even if they flared up, did a real strong care? The gap between how ordinary people judged and how the powerful operated was vast—almost laughable.

To the truly wealthy, public opinion was often irrelevant.

What mattered was inner discipline.

Build your own nation within yourself. Establish your own laws. Enforce them strictly. And live by your own code.

Some might label Kate a slut— claiming she slept with men, mostly older ones, to accumulate wealth. They would say she had no real talent and merely relied on men.

Even Astrid, despite her broader and more elevated perspective, harbored a trace of disdain. William, meanwhile, clearly looked down on women of that type.

But in Ling Qingyu's eyes, that judgment was overly simplistic. Kate hadn't relied on men—she had relied on power. And in this world, which gender overwhelmingly held power? The answer was obvious.

Kate chose to use what she had to climb upward and seize authority in her own hands, rather than remain decorative and submissive like many others.

Weren't countless "self-made" heroes—men from the lowest ranks— also dependent on those above them? They flattered, switched allegiances, bowed their heads, and swallowed humiliation to climb step by step. Some did so figuratively; a few quite literally.

Men who courted favor with their superiors, abandoned old loyalties, and knelt before the powerful just to sip broth while their bosses devoured the meat—were they not later praised as successful figures once they reached the top?

In cartels, mafias, and criminal organizations, such behavior was even more common. Ling Qingyu did not condone it, but she understood the broader structure of power.

Was there truly a fundamental difference between those men and Kate? Didn't they also sell their dignity— and sometimes their bodies and souls—to secure favor from the powerful?

Though the moral dimensions were undeniably complex, Ling Qingyu saw little distinction in essence.

Even among the wealthy, hierarchy persisted. Bootlicking still existed—often as a survival tactic. A single word from someone more powerful could erase generations of legacy. The higher one climbed, the more treacherous the environment became, the more corruption surrounded them.

Ling Qingyu understood this all too well.

And she was quietly grateful— to fate, to the universe, to Miss System— for granting her the opportunity to bypass many of those perilous paths and exhausting struggles which allowed her to retain her true self.

Perhaps that was why she felt compelled to give back to society when she could— without disrupting the ordinary lives of those who wished only to live peacefully.

In Ling Qingyu's view, Kate was, at most, a controversial figure. A gold digger? Not exactly. A high-end prostitute? Not quite either. She was everything—and yet nothing so easily defined.

Tracing Kate's path in her mind, Ling Qingyu found herself genuinely curious. She wanted to meet her, to speak with her face-to-face. Hopefully, Kate no longer harbored jealousy over something as trivial as appearance.

Otherwise...

Ling Qingyu smiled faintly. She might accidentally crush her former classmate's hard-earned foundation out of irritation.

"With the way you two describe her, I'm becoming more interested in meeting and talking to her," Ling Qingyu said openly.

Her statement surprised both Astrid and William. They remembered clearly how the former Ling Qingyu had disdained associating with people who walked ambiguous, gray paths like Kate. For a fleeting second, they wondered whether wealth had changed her— corrupted her, even.

The suspicion flickered across their faces before they quickly concealed it.

"Sure," William replied. "If I remember correctly, she's in the same city right now."

"And this restaurant happens to be one of her usual spots," Astrid added casually.

Ling Qingyu noticed the subtle shift in their expressions. Her intuition had never failed her.

But she chose not to elaborate or defend herself.

Instead, she simply said,

"As long as whatever you do doesn't involve harming innocents."

Her tone was calm, yet firm.

"Crossing lines for ambition is one thing. Dragging others down with you is another— which is absolutely unacceptable. What she did was merely an exchange of interests."

William nodded in apparent agreement, but the tension in his posture betrayed him. His silence carried clear disapproval.

Astrid, however, pondered more deeply.

Ling Qingyu had never spoken carelessly. Every word she chose was deliberate, measured. It was precisely that trait that made her unsettling at times.

The calmness in her acceptance of Kate's controversial past felt... unusual. Not defensive. Not dismissive. Simply composed.

Too composed.

Astrid couldn't tell whether it was maturity—or something else entirely.

Something seemed to click in yet vanished completely. Astrid grudgingly heaved a sigh, at a loss. She couldn't grasp the deeper meaning that flew by.

Chapter 772: Courage to admit falsehood and stupidity

In the past, Ling Qingyu had judged others quickly, using her own conscience and perspective as the standard. She showed compassion occasionally, but she was still swift to form conclusions.

Now, however, she had experienced too much, seen too much, and reviewed countless real cases—many of them compiled in reports from her own people. She read these files in her leisure, which could be called as social study or humanity study session.

Spirit Fox, acting as Yang Qingyue's enforcement arm, regularly submitted detailed accounts of unusual incidents. Some cases revolved heavily around societal pressure: men driven to madness under unbearable burdens; women, cornered by desperation, turning to quick-money schemes that spiraled into violence and even murder.

There were simply too many.

Fortunately, many of these dilemmas were resolved through stricter enforcement, swift and uncompromising crackdowns—and most importantly, by providing a viable way out.

Yes, the "way out" was the true sanctuary. The final thread of hope that cast light into despair.

Through carefully structured donations and guided intervention, Province N's overall environment gradually improved. That was, to Ling Qingyu, the true meaning of giving back to society—not scattering money blindly, but channeling it with control and purpose.

After all, her foundation and its affiliated law firm were established to help people—not to evade taxes, recycle funds back to her family under legal disguises, or launder dirty money.

Having long surpassed the stage of worrying about wealth, Ling Qingyu now viewed money simply as a tool—a medium of exchange. Nothing more.

Thus, Kate's past—leveraging sexual favors rather than "hard work," as many would frame it—didn't stir much emotion in her. In fact, calling it "not hard work" was unfair. Without discipline, restraint, and relentless learning, Kate would never have achieved her current success, regardless of intelligence. Dying later from poverty and discarded tools.

Prostitution. Sworn loyalty. Dirty tasks. Bribes.

All were simply alternative currencies—forms of trade people preferred not to acknowledge when cloaked under the banners of power and authority.

Compromises made in pursuit of elevation.

From her current position, Ling Qingyu finally understood why people sacrificed so much for even the slightest favor from someone powerful. She used to believe such exchanges were never worth it. And often, they weren't—especially when regret came later.

But those people also forgot that their present comfort and advancement were built upon those very sacrifices.

After all, even the mayor and various officials now sought opportunities to present themselves favorably before her. A word of support from Ling Qingyu could translate into political merit, promotion prospects, and polished resumes.

Her entourage carried firearms legally under special recommendation—while Athena's operations moved through more shadowed channels. Priority access. Privacy. Influence.

Who wouldn't crave such privileges?

And yet, Ling Qingyu knew one thing clearly: she could never become one of the hungry wolves who devoured everything in sight just to climb higher.

Her moral boundary had already been set too high.

Some argued that survival was paramount above all else.

But Ling Qingyu believed that if she had to kill her own principles just to survive—

Then she would already be dead.

Ling Qingyu voiced her disagreement with her two friends openly, without the slightest attempt to conceal her stance. Even Xiao Yue, who knew her well, was slightly taken aback by the breadth of Ling Qingyu's acceptance.

William, on the other hand, fell into thoughtful silence. He sensed that Ling Qingyu had pointed out something fundamental—something worth reflecting on carefully later.

After the heavier topic subsided, the atmosphere gradually warmed. Most of their former classmates were doing well in their respective careers, which was hardly surprising given that they had all graduated from a prestigious university.

Of course, there were exceptions. A few struggled due to weaker social skills or simply a lack of opportunity. Talent alone was never the only factor in success.

Eventually, William asked Ling Qingyu about her plans for the coming weeks, since the reunion was still some time away. Astrid also glanced at her, clearly curious about her whereabouts.

Ling Qingyu felt a quiet sense of relief. At least her efforts hadn't been in vain—Astrid no longer seemed guarded around her because of a man. That phase had once irritated Ling Qingyu to no end.

Was sisterhood truly so fragile that a relationship could fracture it? If their bond had been deeper back then, Ling Qingyu might have knocked some sense into Astrid and reminded her that there were countless paths in life—not just one revolving around romance.

Time pressed on, and Astrid and William soon had to return to work. It was fortunate they could spare time at all; their abilities and experience made them highly valued in their firm, especially given their senior positions.

Most people, after all, were trapped in repetitive routines—working simply to support themselves and their families, with little room to pursue what they truly wanted.

When the group descended and exited the restaurant, the female staff member Ling Qingyu had previously comforted came to escort them out.

Ling Qingyu greeted her warmly and subtly reminded her not to forget the contact information she had given her. If she ever needed help, she should reach out.

The woman smiled with genuine gratitude. Perhaps she had gained not just assistance—but a renewed understanding of life's rhythm. Rise and fall.

Beside her, Xiao Yue rolled her eyes. Ling Qingyu had a blatant double standard—she never hesitated to help women, especially beautiful ones. Xiao Yue half-wished Ling Qingyu would encounter a few snakes disguised as flowers just to learn a lesson.

Unfortunately, Ling Qingyu was meticulous. With Athena's intelligence network and her own sharp intuition, she was careful not to extend help blindly.

Life was unfair. Xiao Yue clicked her tongue—then caught herself.

Wasn't her own arrival in this world an opportunity as well? A chance to uplift herself and even benefit her family back in her original universe?

Comparison bred dissatisfaction. Gratitude restored balance.

After all, who truly knew what burdens the people they envied were carrying? Of course, only if she didn't know Ling Qingyu but now...

William left first, his Audi R8 brought around by the attendant.

Astrid remained behind, looking at Ling Qingyu. She said nothing—but her gaze spoke volumes.

"Please, Astrid," Ling Qingyu sighed. "Life doesn't have to revolve around a man. You don't need to guard me like I'm about to steal your precious treasure."

"Steal a man? I'm not!" Astrid flushed. "You're overthinking."

"When did I say anything about stealing a man?" Ling Qingyu teased lightly.

"You just did. Stop talking nonsense."

"Alright." Ling Qingyu's tone softened. "I just want you to hear me out. As your friend, I'm going to be blunt. I was never interested in him. Not before. Not now. Not in the future. Back then, I was simply too foolish to not explain myself—and you know how I am. I don't like clarifying things, and I tend to do things my own way."

"Really?" Astrid's surprise was evident. "Did I misunderstand everything? Did I let it affect our relationship?" She hesitated. "Then... I'm sorry, Qingyu. I hope you didn't take it to heart. I—"

Frankly, Astrid had already begun questioning herself during the meal. She had watched Ling Qingyu carefully—every gesture, every tone. There hadn't been the slightest trace of intimacy toward William. If anything, it was William who subtly tried to draw closer, while Ling Qingyu maintained a clear and effortless boundary.

Still, Astrid couldn't shake her doubt.

She was certain she hadn't imagined it. Back then, she had sensed Ling Qingyu's emotions softening around William. That subtle shift had marked the beginning of their distance.

Had she truly misjudged everything? Had she wrongly blamed her friend all this time?

Unbeknownst to her, the current Ling Qingyu was far more skilled than her former self. Without raising her voice or changing her expression, she had quietly repositioned herself—subtly stepping into the role of the misunderstood party.

Only Xiao Yue saw through it.

"I've long moved past it," Ling Qingyu interrupted gently. "I've had enough of my own messes to deal with."

She patted Astrid's shoulder—and, out of habit, gave a playful squeeze before quickly pulling back. A dry cough followed when she noticed Xiao Yue's expressionless stare.

Composing herself, Ling Qingyu turned serious again.

"Astrid, I'm going to be very frank. Don't take this emotionally, but I have to say it. What do you truly want in life? You can't waste your time orbiting around a man. William isn't going to reciprocate your feelings. Getting closer to him won't change that."

She exhaled in one breath.

"I don't want to see my friend sink deeper."

Astrid held her gaze, searching her face for hidden motives, for subtle manipulation. Ling Qingyu didn't waver.

Astrid understood—at least consciously.

But understanding something in theory was different from accepting it in the depths of the heart.

Which idiot dared to admit that he or she was a simp all along for many years? The courage to fix oneself and accept her stupidity. She knew Ling Qingyu was right. So many years without results but she was reluctant to accept the truth.

Chapter 773: Funny little arrogance

Astrid rolled her eyes. "Quit it. It's not like you're never going to find a man yourself."

"Well, maybe I won't," Ling Qingyu said lightly, looping an arm around her friend's shoulders. "But I'm pretty sure I'll find a beautiful woman like you."

Astrid stiffened.

She stared into Ling Qingyu's eyes, searching for any hint that the remark was nothing more than a joke.

Yet although the tone and gesture carried the usual teasing familiarity, there was a sliver of seriousness behind it.

Astrid pushed her away slightly. "Why do I feel like you're actually serious?"

"Only a fool like William would kick you away," Ling Qingyu said, spreading her arms in an exaggerated invitation. "Come to my heart instead. I'll welcome you anytime."

Seeing no further sincerity in her expression, Astrid shrugged it off, deciding she had probably overthought things.

Ling Qingyu couldn't possibly be interested in girls... right?

In truth, Ling Qingyu was attracted to Astrid—both to her beauty and her personality.

But she knew perfectly well that bending her best friend that way was impossible, no matter how tempting the thought of pulling Astrid under her wing might be.

And then there was her queen, Yang Qingyue.

Whether Yang Qingyue would tolerate it remained a delicate question.

Back when Ling Qingyu had first grown close to her, Yang Qingyue had shown a subtle kind of tolerance toward Ling Qingyu's occasional flirtations with people around her.

But if Ling Qingyu ever started picking strangers on her own and recruiting them into some expanding harem beyond Yang Qingyue's knowledge...

Police Chief Yang would probably kill her.

"As a friend," Ling Qingyu continued, her tone turning softer, "I suggest you quit your job and travel for a while. Take a step back and detach yourself. Seriously—think about it."

"You're asking your friend to become unemployed and struggle financially," Astrid shot back. "What kind of friend are you?"

Ling Qingyu smiled lazily. "I know my friend is filthy rich. Money follows you wherever you go."

She added with a teasing tilt of her head, "And if you really can't find a job later, come work for me. I'll feed you forever. Six figures a month, plus full allowance."

"You wish."

Astrid paused, then looked at her with a more thoughtful expression.

"But are you serious about recruiting me? Your business wouldn't suffer from having my talents, right?"

"It doesn't matter what talents," Ling Qingyu replied calmly. "If I can't take care of the people I'm close to—the ones I love—then what am I even running this business for?"

Astrid said nothing, most likely considering Ling Qingyu's suggestion. After all, so many years had passed without success while she chased William.

Although she spoke about the risk of unemployment, her personal savings from investments in earlier years, in addition to the family's relocation, were actually enormous. Not to mention the stocks and net worth she owned outside of her family's reach. She merely disliked relying too much on her surname, so she wasn't worried about being jobless.

The amount was already enough to spend lavishly for a lifetime. Ling Qingyu also knew Astrid's real wealth, excluding the possessions allocated through her family name. She also understood and guessed why Astrid refrained from touching that money from her family.

Aristocratic families had annoying conservative rules and blackmailing traditions, as if being born there and enjoying the rights meant one had the obligation to return whenever the family head called for it.

After all, one could resist such outrageous blackmail like Astrid by citing that she hadn't touched the wealth, so she wasn't obligated. Much less the inherited rights and responsibilities of a family to raise a child to adulthood. They didn't have the right to exploit that at all.

So, in summary, Astrid was totally free from the control of her family, even if there were a few factors that benefited her because of her surname.

Then the talk shifted to politics and economics. Xiao Yue also joined the chat, as her hobby focused on the game theory of rulers. She enjoyed dissecting every rule and event that brought changes to the system.

The conclusion was that in the near future, an economic crisis was already doomed to erupt. Only nations' counterstrategies could mitigate the risks and damages involved. Should some powerful nation utilize war to recover, the situation would become even more terrible.

The conversation stopped short when another seductive voice interrupted.

"Astrid, you're here too?"

Astrid, Ling Qingyu, and Xiao Yue turned toward the source and discovered a silver shiny tulle dress with a pleated skirt. The sparkling fabric brightened the radius around the girls' group.

It was quite a sight to witness so many beautiful women gathered in one small place. Many men—and a few women—laid their eyes on them.

"Hey, Kate, are you here for lunch?" Astrid asked.

Speak of the devil—Ling Qingyu finally managed to see Kate firsthand. Fortunately, no one had been gossiping about her earlier and gotten discovered in embarrassment.

Scanning Kate up and down, Ling Qingyu inwardly praised Kate's fashion sense and demeanor. There was something seductive about her, based on her tone, expression, and gestures.

It seemed like Kate had trained herself so well that they had become second nature. Ling Qingyu sighed inwardly at how her former classmate had transformed into an enchantress. It was a relief to sense from her intuition that Kate now had more self-confidence and assertiveness. She could no longer see the past inferiority complex when Kate talked with Astrid and her in the past.

"Oh, Ling is also here. It's been a long time," Kate noticed Ling Qingyu and said. "Yes, Astrid, I have an informal meeting and decided to dine here."

"Uhh," Astrid nodded and didn't speak much.

Kate didn't mind Astrid's behavior at all. She had seen worse treatment behind her back among her former friends. Who knew what they gossiped about behind her back?

However, Astrid was the only one who hadn't changed the slightest in her opinion and behavior in front of her, as if she didn't care whether Kate succeeded in her career or about her past lifestyle. Hence, Kate felt really comfortable mingling around Astrid, though the two obviously didn't communicate much.

"Nice to meet you, Kate. We just finished ours," Ling Qingyu greeted back. "It's a pity that you don't have time right now."

"Indeed, I am a little busy," Kate replied. Her eyes flickered with envy as they hovered back and forth between Ling Qingyu and Astrid.

She still lost in terms of appearance competition, and she accepted it. Nonetheless, her confidence stemmed from her wealth.

What Kate didn't realize was that none of the trio were ordinary. Ling Qingyu didn't need to say much as the main protagonist. Astrid was also a self-made millionaire about to reach a multi-million level, while Kate had ventured as an entrepreneur and surpassed the conventional multi-millionaire.

"No need to feel pity. We can meet later and talk," Ling Qingyu shrugged. "I suppose you have time in the evening."

"Let me check my schedule." Kate paused and checked her phone.

At this move, Ling Qingyu's brow raised. Sometimes people used such excuses to avoid offense and finalize a rejection.

As expected, Kate frowned and looked apologetic. "I feel like I might have to overwork this week to keep up with the pace. I'm sorry."

Ling Qingyu almost laughed out loud at the poor performance and shook her head. This girl really needed to be taught a lesson.

Though she was certain Kate wouldn't behave with her nose in the air toward people in her own circle, this girl had definitely swelled with arrogance. Perhaps she still remembered the record of trying to compete with Ling Qingyu and Astrid and failing, causing Kate to want to teach her a few lessons.

Or who knew—maybe she thought Ling Qingyu was only speaking to her because she was doing better.

Ling Qingyu could only make a few guesses, but she found Kate's childish acts comedic and entertaining.

"It's alright. I'm going to be staying here for a long time. We will meet when you're free."

She signaled her girls to prepare the convoy and turned toward Astrid.

"Should I send you back to work?"

"No need. I will hail a taxi."

"Oh, no. Astrid, it's my duty to send you safely. Also, come with me to the hotel. We have much to talk about."

"But my work..."

"Can't you take leave for your dear friend?" Ling Qingyu pouted and sold her cuteness.

The attack had an impact, as Astrid's refusal faltered.

"So, Ling, are you here for a reunion?" Kate asked.

"Of course. I barely managed to squeeze out some available time and hope to see my friends again," Ling Qingyu winked, not sparing the irony in her words.

Astrid's lips twitched as she shifted her glances between Ling Qingyu and Kate. The latter totally quieted down and smiled back, her skin already thick from her past unscrupulous means.

Soon, a pair of Chevy Suburban SUVs rolled to a stop near the trio. Xiao Yue opened the door and hopped into the second one.

Astrid looked at Ling Qingyu and wondered which secretary had ever let the boss hold the door. Then, she nodded to say goodbye to Kate and climbed in.

Ling Qingyu, holding the door, paused and turned her eyes back toward Kate. "Kate, believe me. We are going to meet soon, and you'll be the one asking for it. I'm also more curious about you and your journey. Here's my card in case you want to give me a call."

Without waiting for Kate's response, Ling Qingyu sat down and waved at her before slamming the door shut.

"See ya later, Kate."

Chapter 774: Ling Qingyu's manipulation

As the pair of SUVs departed, Kate narrowed her eyes and calmly recalled Ling Qingyu's words. Was it a threat?

Would she be begging? Hmph, in her dreams.

Then, before she could snicker, her brows furrowed as she noticed the width of the door frame when Ling Qingyu had opened it. It was nearly twice the length of her palm in thickness. The thick windows and strange tires also came to mind. Now that her memory sifted through these details, cold sweat drenched the back of her neck.

Her classmate, Ling, wasn't a simple character. Owning more than a Chevy SUV meant nothing, since they could be rented out for temporary visitors like Ling Qingyu.

However, driving an armored version was totally different—something ordinary wealth could not afford. Not to mention, very few options existed for renting armored vehicles without appropriate connections and wealth.

What had her classmate become? She had no idea, because news about Ling Qingyu rarely reached her.

Yes, she kept records and intelligence about every classmate in Country A. Those outside the country, she barely obtained information about. Yet Ling Qingyu's status was almost blank, other than being a successful businesswoman in the fashion and clothing industry. So at first, she reckoned Ling Qingyu still couldn't compare to her in terms of wealth.

Kate couldn't think much further because she had an important meeting to attend. However, her clenched fist showed how unsettled she had become from Ling Qingyu's simple statement.

She would never know Ling Qingyu had said it on purpose. The latter had subtly asserted dominance and power without emotions, without confrontation—just a simple reminder to send a hidden message: know yourself.

In fact, Ling Qingyu didn't realize she had psychologically manipulated and dominated Kate. There was no strategy involved—just pure awareness of her own power and control.

At the same time, the female staff whom Ling Qingyu had promised to aid witnessed Kate's behavior toward her benefactor. She inwardly scowled at the comparison between the real deal and the fake. No—the real noble and the nouveau.

Sure enough, as Miss Ling had said, the world was always grey, rarely pure black or white.

Although she felt uncomfortable about Kate, Kate was still her customer, and her professionalism did not allow emotions to affect her work.

Poor Kate, wrongly judged by first impressions—just because she wanted to compare and compete.

Inside the Chevrolet Suburban, Ling Qingyu flinched at Astrid's straight gaze that seemed to pierce through her.

"What? Why are you looking at me like this?" she asked.

"What do you mean by she'd be begging to see you later?" Astrid asked.

Ling Qingyu pretended to be dubious. "Huh? Who's begging?"

"You threatened her, Qingyu."

"Stop spreading nonsense. I didn't. I never did. I'm just predicting she'll call me first. Don't overinterpret," Ling Qingyu chided.

"Quit your pretense. Where's the original cold goddess who would only express warmth to her closest friends?" Astrid scowled. "If your words weren't a threat, what did you mean?"

"Just literally," Ling Qingyu rolled her eyes.

"I'm a fool to believe your nonsense," Astrid shook her head. She was curious what her friend intended to do because Ling Qingyu always adhered to her words.

Ling Qingyu smiled at their banter and sighed in relief. Whew, just a man wedged between their sisterhood. From now on, she'd bar any male creatures from coming between Astrid and her relationship.

Even male dogs and cats weren't allowed. Well, female ones did explode in population, but she could handle them easily with wealth.

Afterward, she chuckled at her weird thought and remembered there wasn't a man in her residence. A pure fairy kingdom, hehe.

After all, those heavy-duty tasks could easily be accomplished by her Spirit Fox girls. Not to mention, there were automated machines to complete the rest.

She ignored her elders' complaints about not seeing any male presence and sprinted away whenever their conversations revolved around it.

Pulling out her phone, Ling Qingyu acted like she was dialing and spoke, "Athena, investigate my friend Kate. Her business, her networks, every piece of dirt and loophole. Summarize the files and report to me."

"Okey-dokey, Mom." Athena was used to her mother's acting and complied. A few seconds passed and all related files appeared. Half a minute later, all rumors and data were extrapolated with several conclusions backed by evidence.

Then each conclusion was further confirmed and dug deeper. Several iterations and simulated scenarios illuminated the final truth.

In under a minute, Athena had organized Kate's biography and even her sexual history.

Through the AR glasses, Ling Qingyu almost collapsed when Athena included the number of sexual partners. She didn't need those numbers!

Generally scanning the summary, Ling Qingyu was relieved to see that Kate was totally free from the grey and dark zones, proving her former classmate still upheld moral boundaries and rules.

Those tax evasions and money laundering weren't surprising given the capitalist nature of this country.

Of course, Kate wasn't stupid enough to launder finances herself. There were accountants and lawyers to cleanse the dirt. However, in front of Athena's tracking, nothing could escape.

Most of them weren't Kate's. They utilized Kate's connections as an additional cover for the original anonymous protective layer. Should things go south, Kate would become the target, allowing them to prepare secondary measures.

So thorough and condescending to use Kate like this, Ling Qingyu sneered. Though the latter was arrogant, she was still her classmate—and not too bad of one at that. Ling Qingyu had already decided to help Kate cut off her so-called 'mentors.'

Through the AR lenses, she read everything quietly, but from the surface Astrid only saw Ling Qingyu scrolling nonstop. She almost puked at the outrageous speed of Ling Qingyu's reading and her comprehension.

In addition to those issues, Ling Qingyu spotted mistakes and mishaps among Kate's businesses—several vulnerabilities that, if exposed to her opponents, would bring Kate down to her knees.

Heck, she even discovered a mole within Kate's circle encroaching the latter's wealth without her knowledge. Not an enemy, but a familiar mentor who was preparing to devour the entire industry.

What shocked Ling Qingyu the most was that this bastard planned to murder Kate once he had ensnared everything.

In fact, this mentor had previously suffered severe setbacks and fallen terribly. With no one to help him, he had almost reached the brink of despair until Kate remembered the old times and helped him recover.

Even then, his stabilization couldn't compare to his former wealth. Like greed knew no bounds, he thought Kate owed him her success. But Kate wasn't someone who could be manipulated easily. Still, she would never expect someone to kill her outright because of this.

Sure, Kate received gifts in exchange for sexual favors. Both sides owed each other nothing. Mentors? Did those men even teach her properly? No. It was her learning ability, observations, and relentless effort that constructed her own path.

None of those men were kind enough to share their secrets—much less their paths to success. Everyone hid their secrets; there wasn't anything wrong with that. Perhaps connections and opportunities were what truly aided her rise.

Therefore, for those reasons, Kate helped the man to the extent she believed was sufficient to return the favor. Not the man's favor, but the experiences and lessons she gained from her journey.

Ling Qingyu couldn't help but murmur that Kate was lucky to have met her and piqued her interest enough for her daughter to investigate.

Otherwise, she might have been attending Kate's funeral at the end of the month. Alas, the truly cruel world of the rich.

So, Ling Qingyu decided she was about to teach Kate a profound lesson about personal security—and that wealth meant nothing in front of power.

Dialing her phone again, Ling Qingyu spoke, "Athena, send an email to Kate. Talk about her loopholes, vulnerabilities in her mechanisms, and her tax-evasion firms. Don't say she evaded taxes or laundered money. Just write down the firms' names.

"Slightly hint that someone is going to betray her soon, and expose the market's secret moves from several accounts that she'll lose soon if she doesn't act. Of course, don't forget to remind her not to be impulsive. Finally, conclude with a statement: I will be waiting for your call. No email address, no number. She'll know who it is."

Ling Qingyu hung up the call and let out an evil laugh. Anyway, a pretentious moment was necessary in front of outsiders. Her daughter, Athena, should understand.

Noticing Astrid's strange gaze and disbelief, Ling Qingyu coughed. "Ahem, I think I overplayed it. My dear Astrid, now do you believe why Kate will definitely call me this evening, like I said straight to her face? Why don't we make a bet?"

Only fools would bet, Astrid cursed inwardly. Her friend looked totally unrecognizable and dangerous. Sure enough, those circles would change a person's temperament outright.

She was right to leave and distance herself from that circle. Poor Kate—why did you provoke her of all people?

But there was one thing she definitely noticed and was shocked by. Ling Qingyu's intelligence network was far too fast. She dared not fathom the machine behind the scenes.

"Hey, Astrid, don't look at me like I'm a scumbag. I'm helping Kate right now. She's really in big trouble if I hadn't intervened or taken an interest. She's lucky to have piqued my favor."

"Bullshit Good luck. You're really a demon to play with Kate like this. Who among the rich doesn't have problems? Poor Kate," Astrid rolled her eyes. "Let me leave this demonic chariot. Return my original best friend. A goddess out of mortal reach. Where is she?"

Astrid gripped Ling Qingyu and shook her hard as she talked. Everyone inside the vehicle chuckled.