

The Almighty Dominance

Chapter 141[459 words]

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Jack's eyes narrowed. "You can streak down Main Street buck naked. How's that for a price?"

Alex shrugged. "Fine. But I expect you to do the same if he says my wine is genuine,"

Jack guffawed like he'd just won the lottery. "Deal! Let's see who's stripping tonight."

He stepped away to make a quick phone call. A few minutes later, he returned, practically glowing with the promise of victory.

*Listen up, everyone-this bottle here is labeled

'Romanée-Conti 1945.' Seriously, can any of you picture Alex laying his hands on something so rare? Even the Kingstons don't have a treasure like that!"

He sneered at Alex, fully convinced he'd backed him into a corner.

But Alex just stared back, unflinching. One way or another, the truth would soon be laid bare.

Three days on the private island had changed everything.

Kelly, known for a demeanor as frosty as winter, finally laid down her shield.

In that brief span, she showed Alex a tenderness and warmth she'd never shared with another soul.

For his part, Alex shut out the rest of the world, allowing Kelly to become his entire universe.

They forged memories so intimate and delicate, neither dared to share them with anyone else.

On the last afternoon, Alex stood on the beach, watching Kelly's helicopter touch down in a swirling gust of sand and wind.

She climbed in, and the engine roared to life.

He swallowed hard as the aircraft lifted from the ground, growing smaller in the sunlit sky until it vanished over the horizon.

A familiar tune echoed through his mind, a bittersweet refrain:

"I once spent the night in same room,

Drank her water,

Ate her leftover meals.

Kissed her lips and held her close until dawn.

I saw her bare face when morning came,

Laughed with her, cried with her on the same movie,

Let her become part of me and me part of her-

Saw the most vulnerable pieces of her.

In this life, I've already been her husband in every way that counts,

Even if I'll never truly have her."

Inside the helicopter, Kelly's expression turned cold again.

She clung to that iciness, as if it were the only armor she had left.

Yet one tear escaped, sliding down her cheek as the island receded into the distance.

She had intended these three days to be their final farewell-to walk away and forget him forever,

But the truth gnawed at her: every moment alone with Alex had only deepened her feelings.

A small, rueful smile curved her lips as she whispered into the rumbling cabin, "My heart still hasn't given up on you."

Back on the island, Alex's smartwatch vibrated incessantly with missed calls.

He sighed before finally answering one from Jasmine.

"Alex, where have you been for three days?" she demanded.

He kept his voice measured. "I had something private to handle."

"With Kelly?" Jasmine asked, and though she tried to sound casual, jealousy laced her words.

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Jack leaned back in his chair, smirking like a predator who'd already caught his prey.

"You might as well start stripping, you broke bastard. Once that wine master shows up, you're gonna be running down the street butt-naked. And if you don't, I'll make sure you limp for the rest of your life."

Alex let out a dry laugh.

"You really shouldn't count your chickens before they hatch. It's embarrassing watching you gloat this early."

Before Jack could retort, the front door burst open.

A man in a crisp business suit hurried in, breathless.

"I hear there's an old bottle of wine waiting to be tested," he declared, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Master Jude! You made it," Jack said, beckoning him over. "Thanks for dashing right over. I need you to confirm something

for me."

But Jude didn't spare Jack more than a quick glance.

He spotted the open bottles on the table and strode straight to them.

"Is that a 2005 Romanée-Conti? That's at least a hundred grand a pop, right?"

Jack puffed out his chest. "Bingo. Brought in by Marco here-only the best, of course!"

Florence fussed over Marco, batting her lashes.

"What a gentleman, bringing us such a gra

gift. Not like some folks who show up with gutter-grade poison."

"Poison?" Jude repeated, his brows knitting together.

Florence pointed at a nearly transparent wine in a glass. "That dirty scoundrel brought this swill, probably hoping we'd all drop dead."

Jack rolled his eyes dramatically.

"We're lucky we noticed before anyone drank it. God knows what that lunatic might've done to us."

Ignoring their cries, Jude picked up the glass, swirled it, gave it a sniff, then downed the whole thing in one shot.

Immediately, his eyes seemed to spark with excitement.

"Master Jude, what are you doing?!" Jack yelled, nearly tripping over himself. "That stuff could kill you!"

Instead of choking, Jude looked downright euphoric.

"Kill me? Don't be ridiculous. This is exquisite-smooth, velvety, with a final kick that lingers. Definitely not fake. This is the real deal: a priceless aged wine." The room fell silent.

"You've got to be kidding me," Jack said, mouth agape. "It's practically see-through! How can that be legit?"

Florence jabbed a finger at the glass. "Don't lie to us, Master Jude. That's got 'forged' written all over it!"

"Let me see that bottle." Jude's voice was calm but firm. When Jack handed it over, Jude's hands shook as he read the label.

"Romanée-Conti, 1945... Are you kidding me? The legendary vintage itself."

"What?" The entire family turned ghostly pale.

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"You're all familiar with the story of 1945 Romanée-Conti, right? Jude continued, glancing around the table..

It was the final year before the vineyard was uprooted to fight off phylloxera. Only 600 bottles were ever produced. Most of them were either drunk or went missing over the decades. It's the Holy Grail of wines."

The rest of the room started to realize the gravity of their accusation.

They'd basically labeled a masterpiece worthless trash.

"I was lucky enough to taste a sip of this s once,"

Jude

arties generala hundredth biru. As though savoring the memory.

getting a full glass. The flavors... they're out of this world."

"How much is it worth?" Jack asked, suddenly look

Even that single mouthful was unforgettable. And now here I am,

almost fearful.

"Honestly, it's beyond monetary value at this point. Nobody's selling, and serious collectors would pay a fortune. But if you twisted my arm, I'd say upwards of a million or two on the auction circuit."

"Two million dollars?" someone choke 100

You could've heard a pin drop. Marco's precious hundred-grand bottle

as instantly overshadowed.

Florence's jaw tightened. "How on earth could Alex possibly afford something like that? Master Jude, are you absolutely sure

about this?"

"Yeah!" Jack barked.

"The guy can barely scrape together bus fare. Where would he get two million

bucks for a bottle of wine? This all sounds like some big scam."

"Easy there," Jude said, raising a hand. "I only know what's in the bottle, not how he got it." He turned to Alex.

Alex shrugged. "A friend of mine gave it to

Florence glowered at him like he was?

you lying thief."

me.'

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a cockroach. "Sure, a 'friend handed it over just like that. Sounds more like you stole it,

Jack, who had been salivating at the prospect of seeing Alex humiliated, latched onto this new angle with gusto.

"I knew it! Why else would you shou

up with the world's rarest wine, if not to pretend you're something special?

Marco folded his arms, feigning concern. "Stealing a wine like this could land you in prison for more than a decade, Alex. Was showing off really worth it?"

Alex gave them all a tired look.

"Believe whatever nonsense you want. It's for Granddad Abraham to enjoy, not any of you. Funny how you all called it pig swill five minutes ago, but now you're so sure it must be stolen."

"Don't you twist our words!" Florence hissed. "It's one or the other: you faked it, or you stole it!"

Alex rolled his eyes. "That's enough drama for one night."

Abraham set his fork down with a loud clink.

"I'll have no more of this. I trust Alex. This wine is his gift to me, and I will happily drink it. If anyone can't handle that, they can leave my table right now."

'But Granddad-" Jack started, only to stop short when he saw Abraham's glare. The old man was done playing around. "All right, all of you," Abraham commanded, voice rumbling with inality. "Sit down and eat. Now."

Grudgingly, they obeyed.

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Even Florence and Jack, who looked like they'd swallowed something sour, shut their mouths.

Master Jude surveyed the room, then abruptly fished a small wine flask from his pocket and gulped down whatever was inside.

Without missing a beat, he fixed the group with an almost desperate look.

"Would it be alright if I took just a little of that wine home?" he asked, hope shining in his eyes.

Before Alex could even respond, Jude exclaimed, "Thanks!"

He hastily filled his flask from the rare bottle, then bolted out the door like a man who'd just laid hands on pure gold.

Moments later, dinner finally commenced.

Each of them-despite having called Alex every insult under the sun-poured themselves a taste of his incredible vintage. Even the non-drinkers couldn't pass

up the chance to sample a wine that might be worth two million dollars.

Alex looked on, incredulous at their shamelessness.

"They love to mock, but the truth, they will steal in silence."

But he kept his mouth shut.

-no matter

One thing became crystal clear tonight: some folks are so hell-bent on hating

you, they'll never swallow the truth-how flawless the wine or delicious it tastes on their tongue.

Unknown to other, Marco's gaze hardened, turning downright predatory in an

instant

He'd sweetened the pot for the Lancasters, reeling them in with every calculated word and gesture.

Now came the moment to set the hook for these gullible fools who believed in him

so blindly. 2

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Marco raised his spoon and rapped it smartly against the rim of his wineglass.

A bright, ringing note sliced through the air, snapping heads around to face him. He cleared his throat, letting the hush settle. "Folks, I have some damn good news," he began with a wide, self-assured grin.

"I made a killing today, and I want to celebrate with all of you."

The crowd stirred, excitement flickering in every eye.

Florence straightened in her seat, practically brimming with curiosity. "Well, don't keep us in suspense, Marco! Spill it already!"

With exaggerated pride, Marco leaned forward. "I just sunk my entire fortune-one hundred million dollars-into a stock. In a week, that investment will shoot straight to a billion."

Gasps rose around the table. Jack nearly choked on his drink, eyes bulging. "A billion? Are you out of your mind?"

"Oh, I'm in my right mind," Marco retorted, his tone smug.

"It's Vermont National Life Group-Vermont's top company. Jericho Kane owns it, and everyone knows him. This isn't some rinky-dink operation."

Florence nodded so vigorously her curls bounced.

"Of course we know it. Vermont might be another state, but National Life Group has made headlines everywhere. It's enormous. Pays hefty dividends, too-just as big as Kingston in Vancouver."

A faint buzz ran through the group.

Someone spoke up with uncertainty. "But isn't Vancouver under Kingston's state laws? As far as I know, Vancouverites can't invest in out-of-state companies."

Marco's grin widened, like a wolf that just spotted easy prey.

"Not anymore. Vermont National Life is about to open a branch here in Vancouver. They'll start selling stock locally for the first time. Right now, the shares go for only ten bucks a pop, but once the official launch hits, I'm betting on a tenfold-no, maybe twentyfold-jump."

Jack narrowed his eyes, still skeptical. "You sure about that?"

Marco, as if letting them in on a grand secret, lowered his voice.

after the announcement, "You know my ties to Charles Kingston, yeah? He just signed the approval papers for Vermont National Life to enter Vancouver. By tomorrow morning, it'll be front-page news. I threw in my entire hundred million. Believe me, those shares will explode in value."

A hush hung over the gathering, thick with tension and greed.

Jack finally broke the silence. "Marco... think you can help me get in on this?" Marco drummed his fingers on the table, feigning hesitation.

"Oh, I don't know. Normally, it's forbidden. But since I'm tight with Charles Kingston and Jericho Kane-two of the biggest power players around-they'll let me buy as many shares as I want

"If you want a piece of the action, I can sneak you in before the price goes through the roof. You'd be considered a new investor, and trust me, you'll be rolling in money when it all goes up."

That lit a fire under the group.

Whisnars became a chorus of eager pleas as they jockeyed for Marco's favor. Chapter 143

"I can put in half a million!" Jack practically shouted, slapping his palm on the table.

"I do five million!" Florence's eyes shone with excitement.

"Sign me up for four million!"

"Five for me-I'll scrape up everything I have!"

Their voices overlapped in a chaotic scramble.

The fear of missing out took hold, turning rational folks into desperate gamblers.

When the clamor finally eased, Marco set his gaze on Sophia, giving her a smooth, almost predatory smile.

"How about you, Sophia? Care to join the party? I can swing some extra shares for you, given our... relationship."

Her hesitation was palpable.

Sophia had learned the hard way never to leap without looking.

She took a steadying breath. "I appreciate the offer, Marco. But I have to be cautious. My current dealings with the Kingstons- and the whole Chris Roland fiasco-have left me on edge. I can't afford another disaster."

Florence snorted, impatience creeping in. "Don't compare Chris Roland's bumbling nonsense to Marco's business savvy. That's apples and oranges, Sophia."

Marco, seizing the moment, softened his tone.

"Look, I get it. But trust me-your money is safe. If this deal goes south, I'll personally give every cent back. Now, how much have you got on hand? Let's be real about this."

Sophia shifted, feeling the weight of all the stares.

"Forty million, it is company money," she said quietly.

Marco's eyes nearly gleamed with triumph. "Perfect. Honestly, you'll only have it in there for a week-maybe less. Once the official news hits in three to five days, you sell, and we all pop champagne to our fortunes."

Florence flashed her a bright, almost desperate smile. "Don't be a fool, Sophia! This is the kind of break people pray for."

"Come on, sis," Jack chimed in, nodding vigorously. "Mr. Ashford's looked out for you before, hasn't he?"

Marco exhaled in a long, theatrical sigh, sounding both exasperated and indulgent.

"If you believe in me, invest in National Life. If not, that's your choice." He spread his hands,

"But I've already pumped in a hundred million of my own money. You really think I'd risk all that if I wasn't dead certain?"

Sophia hesitated, glanced around, then exhaled. "Alright... I'll do it"

She told herself it wasn't greed-she owed Marco for all his help, and refusing him now would have seemed like a slap in the

face.

Besides, the deal sounded genuinely lucrative.

In that moment, Marco's gaze shifted like a hawk to Alex, who'd been quietly observing the frenzy.

Marco's lip curled. "What about you, Alex? You want a piece of the pie? Minimum buy-in's a million, but for Sophia's sake, I'll let you in with just a hundred grand.

I'd hate for you to sit on the sidelines looking like some sorry cheapskate."

Alex didn't even blink. "I'll pass."

Laughter flickered across Marco's face, but his eyes brimmed with condescension.

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"Come on, Alex, what's the matter? Don't have the cash? Or maybe you're just

too dense to see a good deal staring you in the

face?"

Unmoved, Alex crossed his arms. "Neither. I'm simply not interested in a company that's about to pack it in."

A charged silence descended, the festive buzz turning icy.

Marco's self-assured smile wavered, and the crowd glanced warily from Alex to Marco.

Insults and opportunism hung thick in the air, and in that moment they all wondered if Alex knew something they didn't-or if he was just a fool.

Marco's expression hardened as though he hadn't heard Alex correctly. "What did

you just say?" he asked, his voice turning cold.

"I said I'm not interested in a business that won't make it in Vancouver," Alex repeated, calm as ever.

"That company's headed for bankruptcy sooner rather than later.

The room went dead silent. A few guests looked ready to spit out their drinks.

"Bankrupt?" someone finally echoed, disbelief lacing their voice.

"How dare you!" Florence sputtered, her face coloring with anger. "That's utter nonsense!"

Marco's shock gave way to simmering outrage. His jaw tightened, and he stabbed a finger in Alex's direction.

"Fear-mongering, that's what this is! Vermont National Life is turning a profit every single day-it's at the top of its game! Don't go spewing garbage you can't back up."

Alex merely shrugged.

"You can decide whether it's garbage or not. All I know is, Charles Kingston is in hot water with Jasmine Kingston. And if that rift gets any worse-especially with Jericho Kane involved-the big plan to move into Vancouver is dead on arrival. Word on the street is, there'll be an investigation soon."

Gasps rippled through the crowd. "Family trouble? Between Jasmine and Charles?" Florence asked, baffled.

Everyone glanced at Marco, demanding an explanation.

Marco glowered at Alex, his voice curling with anger. "This is all crap-pure gossip you're peddling. Vermont National Life signed the damn deal today-Charles Kingston endorsed it himself. You keep spouting this nonsense, and I'll have good cause to sue you for defamation!"

Outwardly, he sounded bold, but inside, his heart hammered like it was trying to punch its way out of his chest.

He'd sunk ten million into greasing the wheels for Vermont National Life's Vancouver entry, banking on Charles K influence to make it all happen.

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But Charles Kingston was in hot water-like Alex implied-Marco's shiny investment already turned into worthless scraps of paper overnight.

His only shot now was to milk this gullible crowd and pocket at least fifty million before the deal went belly-up.

That payday would secure him for life, even if the company crashed and burned

the next day.

Yet here was Alex, calm as a rock, somehow aware of secrets Marco had paid plenty to keep hidden. It was enough to make Marco's stomach churn. "Alex, do you even realize what you're saying?" Florence snapped her cheeks burning red with indignation. "Vermont National Life is rolling in profits. Nobody with half a brain would believe your ridiculous rumors!"

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Jack jumped in with an indignant scoff, shooting Alex a mocking glare. "Everyone

knows Vermont National Life is the darling of the industry. Quit lying just because you don't have two cents to invest!"

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Alex could practically feel the scorn in the room suffocating him.

The Ashford family had ruled Vancouver's social circles for generations with a spotless reputation; it was no wonder they refused to believe they might be in over their heads.

Meanwhile, Vermont National Life-a so-called top ten powerhouse-had been flexing its influence for twenty long decades.

Folks in that room acted like it was the safest bet since gold bars.

Marco, wearing a smug grin, shook his head as though he'd just been accused of an unspeakable crime.

"Now, listen up, people," he drawled.

"I'm not forcing you to buy these stocks, but I figured I'd celebrate this 'opportunity' with all of you."

"If you wanna join me, that's your choice. If not, nobody's twisting your arm."

"Oh, and by the way, Vermont National Life's stock is good here in Vancouver and back home in Vermont. So if anything goes south, you can still cash out there."

At that, some of the family started nodding like sheep.

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"It's a bargain to buy it cheap in Vancouver, and worst-case scenario, we can sell

in Vermont. Besides, we only have to hold onto it for a week or so. It's practically free money!" one relative enthused.

Florence slammed his palm on the table so hard the plates rattled.

"Alex, you bastard!" he snapped, jabbing a finger in Alex's direction.

"If you can't help us, fine. But don't you dare ruin Marco's generosity. You're nothing but trouble!"

"Damn straight! You're just jealous!" someone else chimed in.

"Ugh, Alex, you're pathetic!" another voice joined the chorus.

Their jeers piled up, one after another, until Alex wanted to roll his eyes.

It was no secret: Alex was flat broke. Marco, on the other hand, had money to burn and the connections to match.

Who were they going to believe-the pauper or the prince?

Alex's jaw tightened.

He had only spoken up to warn them, but apparently a broke man's truth didn't count for much

"Don't any of you understand that Vermont National Life won't make it into Vancouver?" he asked, locking eyes with Sophia, his gaze unwavering.

Sophia, who had poured forty million dollars into the company, shot him a suspicious glare.

"Got any proof? Or are we supposed to gamble on your guesswork she demanded.

"I can't give you a smoking gun," Alex replied icily.

"But if you do your research, you'll see what I'm talking about."

Sophia's expression darkened to a stormy gray.

She had actually expected something more substantial from him maybe a real lead.

Now she felt she was staring at a resentful boy crying wolf.

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Marco seized the moment like a seasoned actor.

"Well, folks, since Alex here thinks I'm just a low-down scammer let's forget the whole stock idea," he said with an exaggerated sigh.

"I'd hate to rob you blind." He paused to check his watch.

"Of course, there's only a few hours left until Vermont finalizes how many shares will be available, but we sure don't want to make Alex uncomfortable. Let's just keep celebrating Grandpa Abraham's birthday."

As if on cue, the crowd bristled.

Nobody wanted to miss a golden chance to make more money.

"Marco, you can't just let this slip away because of him," Florence insisted, glaring daggers at Alex.

"We believe you! Let me transfer the money now!"

"Don't let that fool stop us from making a killing," another barked, pointing at Alex.

"If he keeps whining, I'll show him the door myself!"

Alex surveyed the scene, more disgusted than surprised.

"None of you question Marco's honesty? You'd throw your savings at a sweet- talking con man without blinking?" He folded his arms, refusing to back down.

"That's not your call to make," Jack growled. "We'll do what we damn well please." "Exactly," Florence snapped.

"If we get scammed, that's our business. It's not like you have any cash on the line. Quit butting in where you're not wanted."

Alex let out a dry laugh and shook his head.

"You want to toss your hard-earned money into a pit? Be my guest" he said. "I tried to warn you, but clearly, I'm wasting my

breath."

He actually couldn't wait to see their faces when they realized how blind their greed had made them.

Florence sneered. "Why don't you keep your trap shut if you've got nothing useful to say? I'm tired of looking at you."

She would have kicked him out on the spot if it weren't for Grandpa Abraham's presence.

Thankfully, Abraham stepped in.

"Enough, Florence," he said calmly. "I believe Alex is sincere, even if you don't. But I'm not here to babysit you. Do whatever you want with your money." Abraham then attempted to pivot.

"So, Sophia, how's the partnership with the Kingston family coming along?" he asked, hoping to break the tension.

Sophia's expression brightened instantly. "We made it official. In two days, the new company name and brand will be launched. There'll be an opening ceremony, and I hope everyone can come.

Everyone knew the Kingston family was a powerhouse, so hearing this news had Abraham beaming.

"Marvelous! This could change our future in Vancouver. I'll definitely be there."

"I didn't think you could seal a deal with the Kingstons," someone remarked, raising an eyebrow.

Sophia nodded. "Marco helped us secure it. If he hadn't called Charles Kingston personally, the Kingstons never would have considered us."

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"Exactly," Marco added. "I'm just trying to help-especially after someone, jealous of Sophia's connection to the Kingstons, tried to sabotage the partnership." He didn't name names, but the way he pointed his chin and flicked his gaze toward Alex made it obvious.

Jack jumped in. "And don't forget how Harlan tried to kidnap Sophia. Marco made one phone call, and boom-Sophia was rescued. But that all started because Alex picked a fight with Harlan's son."

Abraham gave Marco a respectful nod. "Thank you, Marco. We owe you a big one."

Marco raised his glass modestly, taking a sip. "Just doing my part, Grandpa." Jack, meanwhile, didn't miss a chance to toss more insults.

"Clearly, Marco's got real pull. Unlike certain loudmouths who fling accusations around."

"Funny how some folks call him a scammer when they're the real con artists- pathetic losers who lie and brag with nothing to back it up. Seems like he's the one too eager to bring disaster to this family."

Alex just sipped his wine, unruffled. Let them spit their venom. It wouldn't change the truth.

Before long, the wine flowed freely, and the mood at the table turned jovial-at least for those basking in Marco's glow.

Laughter bubbled up around him, people raising their glasses in constant toasts.

Meanwhile, Alex remained on the fringes, watching the family indulge in false hope, sinking deeper into a pit they had dug

themselves.

Much wants more and loses all.

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Kafe Mansion, Vermont - Early Morning

Jericho Kane, the wealthiest lord in all of Vermont, sipped his tea in the heart of what he called a "garden"-though it more closely resembled a small forest, artfully tamed to appear wild.

Tall pines and manicured undergrowth rustled in the breeze, while the sweet scent of damp soil hovered in the cool morning air. Across from Jericho sat Vetala, an elderly man with a slender frame and an ageless glint in his dark eyes.

A bodyguard strode in, halted by Jericho's side, and leaned down to whisper.

"What?" Jericho murmured, his brow creasing in disbelief. "Harlan and Luke are dead?"

His hand clenched around the fine porcelain teacup, and a wave of anger washed over his sharp features.

Harlan was no mere associate he was Jericho's ultimate weapon in Vancouver.

Luke, on the other hand, had been trusted with guarding Charles Kingston, another piece of Jericho's larger plan.

"Who did it?" Jericho demanded, voice vibrating with fury. "Who dared touch my men?"

The bodyguard cleared his throat, choosing his words with care.

"It's rumored Harlan was killed by Hugo, his own right-hand man sir. But... it's also said he died just minutes after declaring war on Jasmine Kingston."

"Jasmine Kingston?" Jericho repeated, narrowing his eyes. He drummed his fingers on the ornate wooden table, each tap louder than the last.

"And Luke?"

"He was killed during a chase. He went after Kelly Kingston, that girl who's close to Jasmine."

Jericho inhaled slowly, a spark of annoyance flashing in his gaze.

"Kingston..." he hissed through clenched teeth.

Vetala leaned forward, gently setting his teacup aside. "Mr. Kane, this situation seems more complicated than it appears." Jericho raised an eyebrow, his attention shifting to the old man. "Tell me."

Vetala stroked his beard, recalling the previous day's events.

"Harlan called me for help curing his son. He mentioned he was busy tracking someone who'd injured the boy. I planned to meet him today... but now he's gone."

His voice quivered with an undercurrent of suspicion. "I think he was set up."

Jericho's cold stare intensified. "And Luke? Did someone set him up too?"

"It's possible," Vetala replied. "Luke died chasing Kelly. She should have succumbed to my Aphrodite poison, yet not only did she survive, but she also took Luke's life in the process."

"Clearly, someone powerful is interfering. I fear that someone is baiting them- intent on killing both of them-and baiting you in the process."

Jericho eased back in his chair, his mind racing.

He had reserved all his resources to control Vancouver, confident that the

Kingston family was his only obstacle in the city- Charles Kingston already in his pocket.

It was Jasmine Kingston who posed the real problem.

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Now, it was clear that another hand was at work-an unknown player who could prove far more dangerous if he acted rashly.

Vetala spoke again, his voice low and cunning. "Sir Kane, I believe have a plan to handle this without drawing too much attention to ourselves."

Jericho gestured for him to continue.

"Harlan's family," Vetala reminded him.

"The Drakes. They have a powerful presence, here in Vermont and operate the Drake Group. Their Vancouver branch was under Harlan's supervision. Perhaps you can demand they recover whatever stuff we lost. Force them to do your bidding-let them pick a fight off your behalf."

Jericho's lips curved into a wry grin.

"The Drakes... yes. Jarvis Drake is a King's soldier, a lieutenant commanding thousands of men. I'll make them do the dirty work. And whoever's lurking in the shadows will be forced to show themselves."

Vetala returned his grin, his eyes glinting with equal mischief. "How about Luke?"

Jericho chuckled darkly when Vetala brought up Luke once more.

"Yes, Luke was my disciple," he said with a dismissive shrug.

"But I have hundreds, if not thousands of disciples. Losing a few here and there is a small price to pay for victory."

Drake Family Mansion, Vermont - Afternoon

The Drake family convened in a grand hall lined with ancestral portraits.

Anxiety clung to the air like a mist, thick and stifling.

Their Vancouver branch lay in ruins, its assets seized by newly empowered authorities there-Vancouver Securities.

And as if that weren't bad enough, Jericho Kane had come calling with demands for repayment.

At the head of the room, the family's aging patriarch surveyed his kin.

He was frail in appearance, yet his voice carried the hardened resolve of a man who'd fought for his family's survival for decades.

"Sir Kane invested three hundred million into Harlan's operations on Vancouver," the patriarch announced, his ton

"He wants that money back. In a week."

Silence dropped like a hammer.

Some looked away, as though the patriarch's eyes were spotlights searching for a scapegoat. ave.

A hot-tempered man in his fifties slammed his fist on the table. "That damned Kane has no loyalty! Uses us when he sees fit, then throws us aside the moment we fail."

A woman with a delicate face and an air of practiced detachment exhaled a curl of cigarette smoke before crushing the butt into an ashtray.

"Loyalty? Jericho Kane is loyal only to himself. Even his own family would be targets if they blocked his path."

A tense hush followed.

"So what do we do?" someone asked, voice taut with fear.

The patriarch pressed his knuckles onto the table.

"We have one option. We call Jarvis. We've put a fortune into securing him a rank in the military. It's time he earned his keep."

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Chapter 145

Vancouver - Late Evening, Outside the Drake Family's Secret Mansion

Engines roared through the night as a convoy of military vehicles arrived in formation.

Headlights cut through the darkness, revealing the mansion's imposing iron gates.

When the vehicles halted, row upon row of soldiers climbed out in precise unison, their collective presence crackling with discipline and threat.

A stern-faced commander stepped forward to the lead vehicle and saluted. "Sir, we've arrived!"

The door to the armored car opened, and Lieutenant Jarvis Drake emerged.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and wore the air of a man who had seen war too many times.

His gaze was cold and direct, scanning the perimeter with the razor-sharp focus of a hunter.

The heavy gates of the estate groaned as they opened inward.

From within, two attendants helped a frail young man approach.

Jasper Drake, trembling and pale, recognized his uncle at once.

"Uncle Jarvis," Jasper croaked. "Thank God you're here."

Jarvis barely spared him a glance, his impatience blatant. "Where is that bastard?"

Let me see his body."

With a shaky nod, Jasper led Jarvis into a wide foyer lit by elegant chandeliers.

The scent of incense hung in the air, masking but not quite hiding the stench of death.

A single coffin stood in the center, polished to a mirror sheen.

Inside lay Harlan Drake, face ashen and unmoving, his features frozen in a final scowl.

Jarvis stared down at his brother's corpse with a strange mix of anger and apathy twisting his rugged features.

Without a word, he pulled out his gun and fired a series of shots into Harlan's still form. "Even in death, you make trouble for me, bastard!" he spat.

Jasper trembled at the horrifying sight, his silence betraying the terror coursing through him.

"What happened?" Jarvis demanded, his voice a razor-edged snarl

His eyes bored into Jasper's, a silent, unyielding warning-do not dare lie.

Swallowing hard, Jasper's voice quavered. "They say... Hugo, Dad's own right- hand man, betrayed him. Killed him in cold blood."

Jarvis inhaled slowly, his eyes narrowing into dangerous slits.

He might not have loved Harlan, but the brutal reality was undeniable: his family

was now shackled to Kane's ruthless demands.

And they expected him-the soldier-to clean up this mess.

A family's strength, like a fortress wall, is only as strong as its weakest stone.

"Alright," he growled through clenched teeth. "Start talking. Every detail, every bloody shred of it-now."

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Jarvis pinned Jasper with a gaze so sharp it felt like a razor at his throat.

"Did you see it with your own eyes?" he demanded, his voice low and precise. Jasper swallowed hard. "No," he admitted, "but Hank told me he saw him do it." For a moment, Jarvis simply stared, and Jasper's pulse thundered his ears.

He could swear his fate dangled by a thread beneath Jarvis's cold scrutiny.

Then, with a curt jerk of his head, Jarvis turned and strode toward the front entrance of the sprawling mansion.

Soldiers had already forced Hank and Hugo down on their knees, and they trembled under the weight of his judgment.

He halted in front of them, his voice as steely as his glare. "You-both of you. Who killed Harlan?"

Hank, sweating bullets, jabbed a finger at Hugo. "It was him! Hugo killed Boss Harlan!"

Jarvis's gaze shifted to Hugo. "Explain."

Hugo's voice came out dull,

spent.

"When I got there, Harlan was already on the floor. He was dead."

"Liar!" Hank spat. "You killed Boss Harlan!"

Jarvis repeated himself, his voice dropping ominously low. "Did you see it with your own eyes?"

Hank couldn't hold Jarvis's gaze.

"No," he admitted reluctantly, "but Hugo was the last one with the boss. When I walked in, Harlan was on the ground."

Jarvis moved faster than thought.

He drew his gun and fired a single shot.

Hank slumped forward, blood painting the floor in a harsh stroke of reality.

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Jasper staggered back, heart pounding. The instant shift from accusation to execution made his stomach churn.

Meanwhile, Hugo watched Hank's body collapse with a quiet acceptance.

He'd walked this dangerous road for too long, fully aware that one day-be it a rival's bullet or a friend's betrayal-the underworld would claim him too.

By choosing this life, he'd already signed his fate.

JV

So he knelt there, unflinching, the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

Jarvis turned to Hugo, eyes burning with ruthless intent.

"Now tell me everything. If you didn't kill Harlan, who did?"

Hugo took a slow, steady breath.

"The last time I saw him, he was with a woman. When I returned, he was already on the floor...and she was gone."

"A woman? Who?"

Hugo's gaze flicked upward.

"Sophia Lancaster. Jasper remembered her-she's the one who got humiliated at the Kingston Banquet. I'm not saying she's

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the killer, but I'm certain she knows something."

A chill settled over the mansion as Jarvis's voice thundered.

"Somebody start digging-now! I don't care what it costs or who stands in our way.

Find her, even if you have to tear Vancouver apart!"

Then, in one swift motion, Jarvis pressed his gun to Hugo's temple "I'm not leaving any loose ends,"

A single gunshot shattered the silence.

Morning dawned on the grand opening ceremony of the Lancaster Group's new partnership with Kingston.

By eight o'clock, sleek luxury cars were already lined up like trophies at the entrance of the new Lancaster Building

High-ranking guests poured in, each one eager to show face and offer congratulations,

Meanwhile, Jasmine sat in a discreet coffee shop across the street, sipping her latte with a casual grace. She looked up when Alex walked in, lifting a hand in greeting.

"Over here, Alex," she called, standing. Her black blouse and fitted skirt exuded confidence.

He took a seat across from her, eyeing her choice of attire. "Why meet here of all places?"

She leaned in, voice light but laced with intent. "I'll get straight to the point," she said, tapping her manicured nails on the table. "Mr. Alex, did Harlan's death have anything to do with you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "And why would you think that?"

A mischievous glint lit her eyes. "Because you knocked me out for the night, and the next day, Harlan was conveniently dead."

Alex chuckled, settling back into his seat. "A man like him makes a lot of enemies. He was always a ticking time bomb. Let's just say it worked in my favor."

Jasmine studied him, drumming her fingertips on her coffee cup. "Harlan's death won't shake Vancouver. But men like Harlan usually have powerful forces behind them."

Alex's gaze hardened. "You mean Jericho Kane?"

She nodded. "He's one, but he won't stick his neck out just because Harlan's gone. He's cautious. Not our biggest concern." Alex tilted his head. "So, who else was backing Harlan?"

She exhaled. "His cousin. Jarvis. He's a lieutenant with a dangerous amount of influence—someone even the mighty Kingston family is hesitant to provoke."

A cold smile tugged at Alex's lips. "If he's coming for me, let him come. Another enemy in my life doesn't change much." Jasmine let out a soft laugh, though her eyes remained calculating.

"You really do live by that motto, don't you? 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.'"

Then her tone shifted. "By the way, Charles Kingston's in town today. He wants to flex his power and rally new supporters in Vancouver."

"Does that worry you?" Alex asked, studying her face.

Her smile was smooth, unbothered. "No. But there's another issue-Bill. He's one of Jericho's disciples, the same type as the guy Kelly killed. I have a hunch he'll try something...and I'd like a little backup."

Alex lifted a brow. "What's your plan?"

"I want to clip Jericho's wings." Her words were sweetly spoken but rang with sharp intent.

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"My men can't handle Bill. That's where you come in."

Alex shrugged, lips curving with easy confidence. "Just lure him into an opening, and I'll handle the rest."

"Thank you, Alex. I will pay you with whatever you want." She smiled and winked

in a way that made her look both dangerous

and alluring.

They finished their coffee without lingering.

Before long, they were at the Lancaster Building, where a large crowd buzzed around the sleek entrance.

Among them stood Sophia and the Lancaster family, greeting guests in waves.

A sneer cracked through the hum of voices. "Alex. Why am I not surprised?" Alex turned and found himself face-to-face with Marco Ashford. The loathing in Marco's eyes was almost tangible.

"I don't recall Sophia inviting you," Marco went on, his tone oozing disdain. "What,

did you weasel in without an invitation?"

"I'm the one who invited him," Jasmine cut in, her presence cool and commanding. "Is that a problem?"

Marco recoiled for a split second, then covered it with a derisive laugh.

"How pathetic, a man who needs a woman to fight his battles. And you," he spat

at Jasmine, "don't come crying to me when this worthless bum drags you down."

Jasmine didn't even blink. "Whatever happens between Alex and me has nothing to do with you. Get lost if you know what's good for you."

With that, she took Alex's arm and guided him toward the entrance.

But just as they stepped inside, she paused, glancing over her shoulder with a saccharine smile.

"Oh, by the way, Marco Ashford," she said, her voice carrying a playful lilt, "I heard you were trying to bring Vermont Company into Vancouver. Let's just say I've made sure they're barred from setting foot here."

She let out a musical little laugh and turned away, her heels clicking decisively on the polished floor.

Marco stood rooted in fury, his face blotchy and his fists clenched at his sides. "That arrogant bitch...she won't get away with this," he snarled under his breath.

His gaze followed Jasmine and Alex, seething with a mix of confusion and hate.

He couldn't stomach the sight of Alex-this man he deemed unworthy-constantly surrounded by women with power and influence.

"I swear," he hissed, "you'll be mine one day, Jasmine. And you... His hatred for Alex ignited like a fresh wound.

"I'll make you regret crossing me."

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Marco stormed into the room, his anger barely contained.

Charles Kingston sat comfortably, flanked by Bill and a few bodyguards from Vermont.

"Marco, you're here to join the fun too?" Charles grinned, leaning back in his sofa.

"Charles, I transferred my money. You said Vermont National Life Group would enter Vancouver, but why hasn't it happened yet?" Marco demanded.

Charles chuckled, swirling his drink.

"I promised they would come, but I never said it would be today. Be patient, Marco. Are you already running out of money? I heard your gigolo business is thriving. Those old ladies are practically throwing their fortunes at you."

Everyone in the room was aware of Marco's primary business, but hearing Charles mock him still stung-especially since it was his money that had been lost.

"I heard your sister, Jasmine Kingston, is stopping the expansion. My money-I want it back."

"She did?" Charles laughed, the sound casual, almost amused.

"Marco, if you're too scared to take a loss in business, maybe you shouldn't be in it. The stock will reach Vancouver when the time is right-just not now."

"And remember, you invested through Bill, not me. I'm just the middleman."

Marco clenched his fists, understanding all too well that Charles had no intention of returning his

And he didn't dare demand it from Bill.

His eyes darkened. "Charles, would it be a problem if I helped you... control your little sister a bit?"

Charles raised an eyebrow, then smirked.

money.

"Please. However you plan to change her mind, that's your business. The only thing I can promise is that I won't interfere. Hell, I might even support you."

"Fine." Marco lifted his chin, looking proud, arrogant. "I know some guys-a gangsters who'll do the dirty work for the right price. It's time to teach you how to control your little sister."

He turned and walked toward the door, his footsteps echoing in the silence. Charles didn't bother looking up.

He smiled lazily, taking another sip of his drink. "Just don't die."

If only Jasmine Kingston were that easy to handle.

People called her "Immortal" for a reason-no matter how many tried to kidnap or kill her, none had ever succeeded.

Not long after, two figures dressed in black entered the hall.

The moment they stepped in, an unsettling stench filled the air.

Charles wrinkled his nose at the foul mix of ash and decaying blood.

It clung to them, thick and suffocating, yet Bill welcomed them without hesitation.

"Who are they?" Charles asked, turning to one of Bill's managers the man had come all the way from Vermont with him.

The manager hesitated before nodding toward the newcomers. "They are disciples of Vetala. They deal in poison and black magic."

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"Black magic?" Charles frowned, his skepticism evident. "People ill believe in that nonsense?"

The manager's expression darkened.

He leaned in and whispered, his voice barely above a breath. "Mr. Kingston, please... don't do anything reckless with them.

Black magic requires a transaction with demons, with the dark side. And every transaction must be paid for-with life and blood.

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Charles scoffed, though something about the manager's tone unsettled him.

His fingers curled against his glass, cold seeping into his skin.

Then Bill spoke with the two figures, their conversation hushed, unreadable.

But when all three of them suddenly turned to look at Charles and chuckled, his gut twisted.

Something was very, very wrong.

As time passed, more guests arrived, filling the venue with laughter and conversation.

Crystal chandeliers glowed overhead, casting soft light over the luxurious setting.

A well-known entertainer performed on the main stage, drawing polite applause, while below, guests sipped wine and exchanged pleasantries.

Sophia and her family-Florence, her mother, and Jack, her younger brother- stood near one of the grand buffet tables.

Florence was practically glowing with pride, while Jack looked bored out of his mind.

"Wow, Sophie," Florence gushed, her eyes drifting over the champagne fountains and carved ice sculptures.

"Just look at this! And to think one day, this might all be under your name."

Sophia tried to keep her tone modest. "Mom, I'm just a partner. The Kingston family still holds the majority. I'm a smaller stakeholder-secondary, really."

"Secondary is still plenty!" Florence cackled, throwing a smug glance at a passing guest.

"Once we're tied to the Kingstons, we'll never have to worry about money again. Right, Jack?"

Jack perked up, though his tone held a wry edge.

"Sure, sure. But Sis, if you're raking in the dough now, how about financing me a new car? Something flashy, maybe a convertible?"

Sophia's patience thinned. "I already give you more spending money than you need. Manage that first."

Jack's expression soured. "I was managing fine, until I dumped all my savings into Vermont National Life. Now, I'm begging for coins on the street."

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Sophia's knuckles tightened around her wineglass.

"Then do me a favor, little brother-hang tight for a few days. Sell when you get the chance, buy with your own money, and quit bothering me about it."

She turned away, but out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Alex-and Jasmine.

"You invited Alex here?" Jack followed her gaze, his face twisting with annoyance. "What a downer!"

"I didn't," Sophia replied flatly.

"He showed up uninvited? That's so shameless!" Jack grimaced, shaking his head.

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But then his eyes landed on Jasmine, and his expression shifted in an instant. He straightened, his interest piqued.

"Hey, who's that beauty next to him? She's stunning!"

"Beauty?" Florence scoffed, her voice dripping with disdain. "She's a vixen! She's

the one who took Alex from our apartment, treating that gigolo like a prince. I nearly slapped her that day!"

Jack's annoyance flared.

"So that's the tramp who's been parading Alex around? Did he bring her here just to rub it in Sis's face? That worthless piece of garbage!"

He turned to Sophia, righteous fury simmering in his eyes. "We can't let him get away with disrespecting you. Want me to knock him around a bit? I've been itching for a reason."

Sophia's expression hardened, but she managed to keep her voice steady.

"Don't you dare. Today's the opening ceremony. We're here to make connections, not start a street brawl."

Florence crossed her arms, face twisted with anger. "To hell with that. This is the Lancaster Building-our territory. I'm not letting that scumbag and his new woman waltz in here like they own the place. I'll make both of them kneel if I have to, show them who's in charge."

"Mom-"

"No, Sophia," Florence snapped, pushing her daughter's hand away. "I've had enough. Jack! Move your lazy butt!"

A dark grin spread across Jack's face. "With pleasure."

Before Sophia could stop them, Florence and Jack were already storming across the ballroom, guests parting in confusion and mild horror at the fury radiating off the pair.

Alex and Jasmine were blissfully unaware-until Florence and Jack closed in, det

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Sophia's heart nearly stopped when she realized no one knew that the woman they were all so eager to banish was actually Jasmine Kingston.

If her hotheaded mother and brother made a scene, the entire deal would be done for.

The Lancaster family had clawed its way back from near-ruin once before- another disaster now might just seal their fate.

But before she could make a move, Marco gently caught her by the wrist.

"Sophia, there you are. I've got someone I want you to meet,"

"This really isn't the time, Marco," she shot back, voice tight with nerves.

He didn't budge. "Wait. Tell me what's going on."

She exhaled sharply, words tumbling out in a rush.

"My mother wants to toss Alex out of here-and she has no clue that Jasmine Kingston is involved. She's basically ordering him and Jasmine to leave, and if that foolhardy plan actually goes through, the partnership with the Kingstons might go up in smoke."

Marco shrugged like it was no big deal. "Sophia, that might actually be for the best."

She blinked. "What are you talking about?"

He offered a sly grin. "I wanted to introduce you to Charles Kingston. He said if you won't continue with Jasmine, you can partner up with him instead. He'll throw in twice the investment Jasmine promised."

Sophia's jaw went slack. "Double what Jasmine's offering?"

"Exactly. And I'm sure you've heard Charles and Jasmine are butting heads."

She nodded slowly, trying to hide her skepticism. "I've picked up rumors, but I didn't think they were serious."

Marco's tone darkened slightly.

"Oh, it's deadly serious. Lines are being drawn. People are picking sides-some are with Charles, others stand with Jasmine. Listen, if you side with Charles, he'll protect you. In fact, your mother and brother might be doing you a favor by scaring Jasmine off. Less competition, more profit."

Sophia's pulse hammered in her ears. The math made perfect sense-a safer deal, more money.

Still, her gut churned with unease, warning her this was all too convenient.

Meanwhile, across the hall, Florence barreled straight toward Alex and Jasmine with an air of self-appointed royalty.

Her lips twisted in open disdain.

"Alex, who gave you permission to set foot in the Lancaster building?"

Alex stiffened, trying to keep his temper in check. "Must you always be this difficult?"

Florence let out a short, bitter laugh. "Difficult? This place belongs to Lancaster, and you think you can waltz in without so much as an invitation?"

Jasmine raised a hand, hoping to clarify. "Excuse me, ma'am, but"

Florence snapped around, shutting Jasmine down with a glare cold enough to freeze the air.

"And you, young lady, you might be a decent sort, but that man you're clinging to is a no-good show-off. My daughter tossed him aside already because he's all bark and no bite."

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She let out a shrill, mocking chuckle and beckoned Jack to step forward. "Why don't I introduce you to my son instead?"

Jastaine found herself speechless, eyes flicking to Jack, who swaggered over with a smug grin.

He flexed his biceps as though he were auditioning for a cheap fitness commercial.

"Check out these guns!" he declared, oblivious to how ridiculous he looked.

Florence nodded with sickening pride. "That's my boy, Jack-yourg, strong, handsome. And now that his sister is about to partner with the Kingstons, he's practically a VIP. Perfect for you, Miss...?"

Jasmine's eyes bulged.

Alex could only glance away, wondering how on earth Florence's all could stretch so far.

She let out a delicate sigh, then looped her arm through Alex's. "Thank you for the offer, but I've made my choice."

Florence's face curdled like sour milk.

"You're turning down my son for this broke loser? Do you even understand the insult? I'm being gracious enough to present Jack, yet you're too blind or too stupid to appreciate it. Fine-get out of my sight."

Jasmine's mouth fell open. "But-"

Florence jabbed a finger toward the door. "Tell me, do either of you have an invitation card?"

Jasmine hesitated. "No."

"Then get lost," Florence snapped. "The pair of you parading in here without an invite is downright pathetic. I'd be well within my rights to have security haul you out by the collar. If you've got any shred of dignity, you'll leave right now." Jasmine's expression twisted between fury and disbelief-no one had ever shown her the door before, let alone in such a humiliating fashion.

"But I was supposed to sign something here..."

Florence barked a dry, humorless laugh. "Sign what? Forget it. Run along, little girl."

Jack, brimming with arrogance, added, "Wow, your nerve is impressive. Already kicked out, yet you're still yapping about business?"

Alex let out a resigned sigh, placing a hand on Jasmine's back. "Let's just go."

Jack shrugged, lips curling into a sneer. "Should've done that an hour ago."

They were barely out the main doors when Sophia rushed over with Marco in tow. "Mother, where are they?" she asked, panic flickering behind her eyes. Florence crossed her arms and gave a disdainful sniff. "Who do you think? That useless Alex and the woman latched onto him. I threw them out."

Sophia pressed a hand to her forehead, exasperation dripping from every syllable.

"Mom, that woman was Jasmine Kingston."

It took Florence a second to process.

Her eyes practically bugged out. "You can't be serious. That was Jasmine Kingston?"

Jack's bravado melted instantly. "Sis, I had no idea. She said she came here to sign something, but Mom threw her out. Told her to forget it."

Sophia went pale. "So you just chased away our biggest partner? Did you actually throw our deal with the Kingstons straight into

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the trash?"

Marco eyed them both with a self-satisfied smirk tugging at his lips.

He'd already funneled the Lancasters' money into covering his own losses from a disastrous stock investment.

Their destruction was precisely what he needed: a broken family would never come looking for stolen funds.

He cleared his throat, slipping on a mask of concern. "So, Florence, do you plan on running after Ms. Kingston and begging for her forgiveness on your knees? Or would you rather let Sophia sign with Charles Kingston instead?" Florence's posture stiffened, chin raised with stubborn pride. "I am not crawling to that woman. Ever."

Sophia could only let out a weary sigh. She knew her mother's temperament too well-pleading was not in Florence's vocabulary.

"All right, Marco," she said at last. "Where can I find Charles?"

Marco gave a triumphant grin. "He's waiting right this way. Allow me to make the introductions."

The serpent that stings you the worst is the one you nourished at your bosom. 2

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Outside the Lancaster Building

"Jasmine," Alex said gently, "would you mind giving Sophia another shot at finalizing the deal with Kingston?"

She lifted an eyebrow, crossing her arms. "And this is for your ex-wife's benefit?"

He hesitated. "I'm doing it for Abraham Lancaster. I promised him I'd see this through."

Jasmine regarded him for a moment, weighing his words. Finally, he exhaled, her posture relaxing.

"All right. I'll wait until they call me for the signing, then I'll sign everything professionally. But I'm not stepping back into that hall-not after the way that woman treated me."

Relief washed over Alex. He squeezed her hand lightly. "Thank you"

Inside the Private Suite

The scent of expensive cologne and polished wood filled the air as Sophia stood face-to-face with Charles Kingston, her heart hammering in her chest.

He lounged in a leather chair, exuding a confidence so smug that it made her skin crawl.

"I've heard everything from Marco," Charles began, flashing a thin, calculating smile.

"Don't worry-Kingston Enterprises is in my hands. My father wanted me to have controlling interest, though my dear sister is fussing for more power."

His words felt smooth yet treacherous, laced with hidden traps.

"But that won't last," Charles went on, leaning forward. "If you sign with her, that contract could be worthless by tomorrow. Sign with me instead, and we'll finalize everything publicly-today."

Sophia swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

Charles tapped his fingers on the armrest.

"Just hand over your Lancaster documents. My legal team will take care of the details. In minutes, you'll have a contract that completely overshadows anything Jasmine offered-double the profit."

His voice was too polished-a seasoned predator's lure concealed by tempting promises.

Sophia nearly fell for it. The numbers were irresistible-so perfect on paper that caution seemed to slip from her hand.

Yet her pounding heartbeat reminded her that deals like these often exact a steep price.

Marco, sensing her hesitation, spoke in a low, urgent tone.

"Come on, Sophia. Charles Kingston is your only shot now. Everyone's waiting for you to seal the deal with Kingston. Jasmine walked out; that opportunity is gone. Charles is the only one who can save you."

Sophia's fingers tightened around the papers. She took a shaky breath.

People only see what they are prepared to see.

In the Grand Hall

Minutes later, the master of ceremonies stepped onto the stage, his voice resonating across the expansive hall.

"Welcome to our grand opening ceremony for the Kingston-Lancaster partnership! Let's have a warm round of applause for Mr. Charles Kingston!"

A ripple of polite applause spread through the audience, mixed with a few uncertain murmurs.

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Charles strode forward, each footstep echoing across the polished marble.

Taking the microphone, he surveyed the crowd with the trademark Kingston poise.

"As many of you know, the Kingston family is entering a new era, he declared smoothly.

"My father, Alfred, has moved to Los Angeles, leaving me to oversee our Vancouver interests. Under my leadership, Kingston will grow stronger."

He paused for effect, confidence brimming in his voice.

"And now, Lancaster is our newest partner. I look forward to rising together." He swept an arm toward Sophia. "Please welcome Miss Lancaster!"

He clapped, prompting the audience to do the same.

"Sophia! Your turn!" Florence urged, giving her a gentle push.

Despite the swirl of whispers most centering on why Jasmine wasn't onstage-

Sophia lifted her chin and stepped forward.

"She's gorgeous," someone whispered.

"Is there any man good enough for her?" another murmured.

Charles slung an arm around Sophia and placed a staged kiss on her cheek for the cameras.

Flashbulbs went off, capturing every second.

"You're fortunate, Miss Lancaster," he said in a theatrical tone meant to be overheard.

"Kingston will protect you and elevate Lancaster to heights you never imagined."

Outside the Entrance

Alex and Jasmine stood by the large doors, watching as Sophia and Charles signed the contract for the cameras.

"I had no idea your ex was tied to Charles Kingston," Jasmine remarked, a wry smile curving her lips.

Alex sighed, jaw clenched. "Looks like she won't be needing my help after all. Does Charles really have full control over Kingston now?"

Jasmine shook her head, arms folded.

A glint of amusement and scorn lit her eyes. "My father bought several Kingston subsidiaries in his own name. The last time Charles tried to take over the entire Kingston empire, he used stolen funds from Chris Roland and Bianca."

Alex's frown deepened. "He tried to buy into your companies too?"

She nodded. "He did. But once I reported the theft, his assets were frozen. Two days ago, he tried to move what was left of his money from Vancouver to Vermont through the Vermont National Life Group."

but I blocked the transfer legally-and I also seized the She let out a low chuckle. "He thought he could sneak it past me, Vermont National Life Group funds. I got my money back-and a little of his, too."

Alex's eyes widened. "So he's-"

"Elat broke," Jasmine said, her satisfaction palpable.

"Now he's desperate for new partnerships, hoping to gobble up other businesses under legal pretenses. He's offering double the profits, but the risks are enormous. My lawyer says anyone who signs with him is basically signing away their property."

Alex looked back at the stage, his expression darkening.

Sophia seemed unaware she'd just struck a deal with the devil.

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Back in the Hall

Charles tapped the microphone again, à triumphant gleam in his eyes.

"I'm sure everyone here can see how charming Ms. Lancaster is! Next, I'd like to introduce another individual. Not only is he strikingly handsome, but he's also been an invaluable asset to the Kingston family. Some might even call him our savior!"

A low murmur spread through the crowd.

"Marco," Jack muttered under his breath, "he's talking about you, right? Who else would he mean?"

Florence patted Marco's arm. "Wow, I didn't realize you were so vital to Kingston. Congratulations!"

Marco flashed them both a wide smile. This was exactly what Charles had promised him-a moment under the spotlight, proving himself a worthy investment partner. At Charles's cue, Marco walked onto the stage.

"Please welcome Marco Ashford!"

Applause filled the hall as Marco stood tall, soaking in the moment

Charles had promised him this platform-a chance to make people believe in him,
luring them into hollow investments they would later split fifty-fifty.

In the cutthroat jungle of business, predators thrived.

And for those who weren't careful, they'd be devoured completely leaving no trace
behind, not even bones to tell their story.

Sunshine Author

Please Re-Read Chapter 144.

Dear Readers,

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Alex and Jasmine stiffened as a sharp, rotten stench drifted toward them.

Bill sauntered forward with a casual arrogance, flanked by two grim-faced men whose clothes reeked like they'd been unearthed from a grave.

He gave Jasmine a thin smile.

"Miss Jasmine," he said smoothly, "would you mind coming with us? There's some important business we need to discuss."

Nerves on edge, Jasmine pressed herself behind Alex.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Bill let out a low chuckle. "Well, I'm hoping you can return Charles's money."

Jasmine's eyes blazed. "He stole that money from me!"

Bill shrugged, sounding almost bored. "Your family drama doesn't concern me. If you don't want things to get ugly, hand it over."

He lifted a hand, and the two men in black stepped closer, their rank odor intensifying.

Before they could advance any farther, Alex spoke in a calm, measured tone.

"There are too many reporters here. Let's head to the parking lot. If you can beat me, Jasmine will give you the cash." Jasmine shot him a worried glance. "Alex..."

He leaned in and lowered his voice. "I'll be fine. Stay here with the reporters. They won't risk touching you in front of a camera." His gaze flicked toward the two foul-smelling men. "These two are my mortal enemies. I need to make sure they don't slip away."

Jasmine's breath trembled as she whispered, "You're certain you can handle them?"

"One hundred percent," Alex said, a confident grin lighting his face.

Jasmine clenched her jaw. "Go get them, Alex. I'm sick of all this."

"You got it, Princess." With that, Alex turned back to face Bill.

Bill cast a sidelong glance at Jasmine.

"You heard my man," Jasmine said firmly. "If he loses, I'll wire the money over to you."

"Let's go," Alex said. He started walking, with Bill and the two men trailing behind.

They made their way downstairs to the underground parking lot. The space was dim, hollow-sounding, and deserted.

Their footsteps echoed off the concrete walls.

"Kid," Bill sneered, "you've got a real talent for digging your own grave."

Alex pinned him with an icy stare. "You're the one who gave Charles those poisoned pills for Kelly."

Bill shrugged, mouth twisting into a cruel smile. Yeah, so what? He's too weak to

fix his love life on his own. We just gave him

a nudge. We even had plans to help him 'tame' that wild woman in bed."

Something dangerous flickered in Alex's eyes.

He strode forward, raised his hand, and snapped his fingers in front of Bill's forehead,

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"The woman you're talking about," he said, releasing the snap, "happens to be mine."

The force of that single motion whipped Bill's head back with a crack.

He hit the ground hard, eyes rolling back.

The two men in black-Tim and Tom-rushed over Bill's side.

Their faces twisted into something inhuman as they drew small, wicked-looking knives and plunged them into Bill's chest.

Both chanted in unison, "To our gods, accept this sacrifice. Grant us protection." Alex's voice thundered in the enclosed space, echoing off the walls

"So you're willing to perform this disgusting black magic here?" He lunged, foot connecting with Tim's midsection in a savage kick that sent him flying into a parked car.

The impact blared the car's alarm.

Alex pivoted and delivered another bone-crunching kick to Tom, knocking him flat.

Amazingly, both men stood as though nothing had happened.

Tim sneered. "We have protection spells. Physical attacks won't work."

"You think cheap tricks can save you?" Alex spat, then charged again.

Tim and Tom scrambled to counter, but Alex's speed overwhelmed them.

They slammed into walls and cars with heavy thuds.

Still, Tim staggered upright. "It's no use! We're immune to your attacks!"

Alex's lip curled. "You think dabbling in black magic-defiling corpses and offering sacrifices-makes you untouchable?"

"Obviously," Tim gloated.

But his grin vanished in an instant. He clutched his stomach, contorted in pain, and dropped to his knees.

Tom's face turned ashen as his breath came in ragged gasps. "W-what...what did you do to us?"

"Just beating you," Alex replied, footsteps echoing as he calmly walked toward them.

"Impossible..." Tim choked out, eyes wide with terror.

Suddenly, a voice boomed from the entrance. "Alex! Your time is up!"

Marco appeared, flanked by a gang of hardened thugs. They brandished machetes, metal pipes, and bats spiked with nails.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "Marco. Came to join the party?"

"Join the fun?" Marco echoed with a scoff. "I'm here to bury you. Today's the day you die."

Alex rolled his shoulders, remaining strangely calm. "Don't remember doing you any wrong."

Marco spat on the ground. "You don't need to. I just can't stand you.""

"You gathered all these people for that?" Alex asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Shut up and die!" Marco snarled. He had long since loathed Alex, and learning Jasmine's true identity only deepened his hatred.

Alex didn't so much as blink. "If you try this, you'll regret it."

Marco barked a laugh. "My men are killers. Even if you know a little military martial arts, you'll be hacked to pieces."

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He flung out an arm. "Kill him!"

The thugs closed in with a roar.

But before they could swarm Alex, Tom lurched upward like a puppet on strings.

He plunged his sacrificial knife into the nearest attacker, shouting, "I offer these mortal lives to the gods. Grant me more power!"

Weapons slammed into Tom from every angle-machetes, pipes, and bats.

None of them left so much as a scratch.

Slowly, methodically, Tom began cutting through the thugs as if he were slicing paper dolls.

Marco stumbled back, face white with fear, watching his men fall. What...what are you?" he choked out.

Tom loomed over the fallen, eyes empty and pitiless, the stench of death and dark magic thick in the air.