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Chapter 161

Alex didn't waste any time.

He snapped his leg up and slammed his boot into Kelvin's face, as if the man's skull were nothing more than a cheap welcome mat.

Kelvin's head whipped downward on impact, practically smooching the dirt off Alex's shoe.

Kelvin stumbled back, his fury twisting his features into a hideous scowl.

"You bastard!" he spat, voice trembling with outrage. "Who the hell do you think you are, meddling in my business? You're a dead man!"

Kelvin turned on his heel, barking orders like an enraged drill sergeant. "Security- get your asses over here and take him out!"

The guards rushed forward, but Josephine, always a fuse waiting to be lit, leaped between them and Alex. Defiance blazed in her eyes.

"Touch him, and I'll snap your bones like twigs!" she warned, practically daring them to try.

One guard reached for her, only to find his arm twisted into a pretzel.

Josephine hammered a kick into his groin so hard it could've knocked his ancestors off their family tree.

He collapsed with a strangled wheeze.

Another guard lunged at Alex, but Alex dropped him with a single, surgical strike to the jaw, sending him crashing to the floor like a broken mannequin.

Two more guards charged, hungry for a takedown, but they met the same fate- Josephine and Alex whirled around them like a living storm, each blow landing with brutal precision.

Before long, the bank floor was strewn with guards groaning in agony.

Josephine smirked at Alex, wiping her hands on her pants. Damn, you're good at this."

He shot her an equally smug grin. "You're not too shabby yourself."

Kelvin, staggering from the humiliation, snarled, "You two bastards!" Fury lit his features as he snatched an iron. baton from one of his flattened security guys.

With a wild scream, he swung it straight at Alex's head.

But Alex was already a step ahead. He sidestepped the blow with the grace of a dancer, then pounded a vicious punch across Kelvin's jaw.

The force sent Kelvin reeling backward, his massive form trembling as blood dripped from his nose. When he opened his mouth, a couple of teeth rattled onto the floor.

The entire room fell silent as the reality sank in-Mr. Kelvin, the all-powerful manager of Southern Community Bank, had just been humiliated in public.

"H-how... dare you hit me?" Kelvin sputtered, gawking at the bloody teeth in his palm. His disbelief flared into pure hatred.

Alex shrugged, eyes as cold as a January wind. "I just did. And I'm not taking reservations before I break someone's face. You want another appointment? You can have it in about a minute."

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Kelvin's face contorted with rage. "You worthless piece of shit! Clearly, you have no idea who's pulling my strings. It's the Mafia-the real deal. They'll carve you up like a holiday turkey and pawn your organs for beer. money!!

He spat a wad of blood onto the floor, trying to regain some swagger.

"You're done. I've already called them, They'll be here any second, and I'll be sure to mount your skull on my office wall!"

On cue, two sleek black cars screeched to a halt outside.

A swarm of thick-necked goons in matching outfits surged into the bank, led by a man so massive he looked carved from a slab of granite.

A wicked scar slashed across his face, making him look like a real-life horror story. He oozed malevolence with

every step.

A triumphant gleam lit up Kelvin's eyes. "You're all screwed now," he crowed, voice dripping with schadenfreude.

"Scarface is here. None of you losers are leaving in one piece!"

Fear rippled through the crowd, hushed whispers filling the room:

It was a name that could be a blade sharper than any sword for it cut before the fight even began.

"Holy shit, that's Scarface?"

"Yeah, the new kingpin around here. He's rumored to kill first and ask questions never."

"He's taken out at least a dozen people. This isn't going to end well."

Josephine's jaw tightened, and even she looked a bit uneasy But Alex barely lifted an eyebrow.

"Which fool is looking for a death sentence on my turf?" Scarface boomed, chomping on a cigar like he owned the world. He barreled forward, and people scattered like roaches, terrified to be in his way.

Josephine squared her shoulders. "Alex, get out of here. This is my mess to clean up," she said, stepping in front of him like a protective mother bear.

She was clearly a warrior who did not measure her worth by her own survival, but by those she protected.

Alex just gave her an amused tilt of his head, clearly undaunted.

Kelvin, meanwhile, strutted up to Scarface like a mangy dog expecting treats from its master.

"Sir, it's about time you got here! Look at my face-these lunatics did this to me!" He pointed at his swollen, bloodied nose for maximum pity points.

"I only refused them a loan because her credit was crap! Then she tried to seduce me, but when I said no, that bastard attacked me!"

Scarface blew a cloud of smoke, his dark eyes narrowing. "Did you tell them you're backed by me?"

"Oh, I mentioned your name, all right," Kelyin lied shamelessly. "They laughed in my face and said they'd fight you too if you showed up! Disrespect doesn't even begin to cover it."

A predatory grin curled Scarface's lips. "Good. People around here need a reminder that I'm not a man to cross. Guess I get to have a little fun today."

Josephine couldn't hold back any longer. "That's a load of crap!" she roared, stomping forward.

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"I asked him for a loan, yes, but he shot me down and started messing with me for kicks. All that 'seducing' talk? Nothing but bullshit-"

Scafface silenced her with a dismissive wave. "Sweetheart, you think I care about your sob story?" He snorted.

"Right, wrong-it's all the same to me. You caused a scene on my turf, and that means you spat in my face. Now, I don't let anyone get away with disrespect. I don't care if it's Santa Claus, the pope, or your grandma-if they mouth off, they kneel. End of story."

He puffed his cigar, glaring at Alex and Josephine like they were a couple of ants under his boot.

Kelvin, clearly feeling braver with Scarface at his side, pointed at them, voice shrill with deranged glee. "You hear that, you little worms? You're done for. Not even Jesus himself could save you now!"

His laughter filled the room, echoing through the bank's silent corridors.

The sight of Scarface and his gang-muscles, scars, and murderous intent-had everyone else praying they wouldn't be collateral damage.

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*Kelvin stood there with a cocky smirk etched across his slimy face, practically dripping arrogance.

"Now get down on your knees," he ordered, voice laced with poisonous glee.

"Beg for forgiveness. Grovel enough, and maybe I'll let you crawl out of here when I'm done using you." Safe under Scarface's shadow, Kelvin felt no fear. Josephine's stomach churned.

She never expected Kelvin to come on this strong, and the ugly confidence in his eyes sent a chill racing up her spine.

One of his goons sneered, relishing her discomfort. "Didn't you hear the man, girlie? Hit the floor and start begging, or I can't promise you'll keep all your limbs." Josephine stood stubbornly; she would never kneel!

Kelvin, still puffed up with self-importance, turned to Scarface.

"See that, Mr. Scarface? They're not paying you any respect. People like this only learn their lesson when they're looking their own graves in the eye."

The way Kelvin drawled those words, the way he licked his lips, told everyone he had no doubt Scarface would back him to the hilt.

Scarface, swirling his machete like a showman's baton, twisted his scarred mouth into a vicious grin.

"Point out whoever laid a hand on you. I'll make sure he doesn't leave here with his arms in one piece."

Kelvin jabbed a stubby finger across the room. "Mr. Scarface, that worthless piece of trash over there!" he spat.

Scarface glanced in Alex's direction...and froze as if he'd stared into Death itself.

His eyes narrowed, his muscles tensing. "Do I know you?" he asked, a strange tremor in his voice.

Alex only shrugged. "Could be," he replied calmly, too calmly.

Scarface shot Kelvin a sideways look. "This woman-she's from the orphanage, right?"

"Yeah," Kelvin answered, still oblivious to how Scarface's demeanor had shifted.

"Her old lady ran an orphanage down in the slums till it burned down. They moved to some backwater mining town. Now that the slum's getting redeveloped, we're reaching out to-let's say-give them an opportunity' to make money.'

Scarface's face went ashen.

A memory flickered through his mind like a horror film he couldn't shut off.

He remembered Alex now-this was the man who singlehandedly leveled an entire compound, took out Scarface's old boss, and cleared the path for Carlos, Scarface's current superior.

In other words, Alex was the one guy Scarface never wanted to cross.

Meanwhile, Kelvin was still flapping his gums, too lost in his own bravado to

notice the electric fear creeping through Scarface.

"Why so quiet, you puny dog?" Kelvin taunted Alex, entirely blind to the dangerous tension in the room.

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"You gave me a good smack earlier-do it again now that Scarface's here. I'll make sure you don't leave with so much as a heartbeat!"

But Scarface saw his chance.

Like a rattlesnake striking, he sent a fist crashing into Kelvin's jaw. The sickening crack as tooth and blood flew made everyone flinch..

Kelvin swayed, his vision spinning. "M-Mister Scarface? A Aren't you beating up the wrong person?" he stammered, pressing his hands against his bleeding nose.

His eyes were wide with shock.

Scarface sneered, his fear morphing into fury. "Me? Beating up the wrong guy? No, you are exactly the idiot I should be beating up!"

Without hesitation, he drove his foot into Kelvin's stomach sending him crumpling to the ground with a pained wheeze.

Kelvin gasped, eyes darting around in panic. He finally started to realize- something was very, very wrong.

As if his rage knew no bounds, Scarface kept landing blows on Kelvin, punching and kicking without restraint, cursing with every hit.

"You fat pig! I feel like throwing up every time I see you!" He spat, his voice filled with disgust. "Why the hell would a stunning woman like her seduce you? Do you actually believe your own lies?!"

Kelvin curled up, shielding his head, sobbing like a child.

"I am the fighter of justice!" Scarface bellowed, his boot slamming into Kelvin's ribs.

"Do you even know what you look like? How dare you throw my name around like some cheap trick? How dare you make a fool out of me? I swear, I'll see to it that you stay dead!"

Each word came with another vicious hit.

Kelvin curled in on himself, arms shielding his bruised head.

Tears and blood smeared his face. He whimpered like a child caught stealing from the cookie jar.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I beg you, Mr. Scarface, please-!"

But Scarface, chest heaving, showed no sign of stopping. Each punch, each kick was fueled by a bigger, darker fear: the fear of Alex.

Scarface would do anything-anything-to keep that nightmare from surfacing again.

Josephine, her heart twisting despite everything Kelvin had done, finally pleaded, "Stop, please! You'll kill him!"

Scarface's fist hovered in the air, and he darted a wary look at Alex. Seeing no objection, he relented.

With a final sneer, he spat on Kelvin's trembling form.

"Count yourself lucky this lady stepped in. Another minute and you'd be a bloody stain on the floor."

Kelvin scrambled onto his knees, his face a swollen mess of ears, blood, and mucus.

"Miss Everheart, please forgive me! I'm so sorry! I swear... I'll never even look at you again!"

Josephine's brow creased in confusion.

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This whole scenario felt like a twisted puppet show-Scarface had changed sides

so fast, and for no reason that made sense at face value.

Her eyes flickered to Alex, and her breath caught in her throat. Could he be the reason?

As if confirming her suspicions, Scarface bared his teeth at Kelvin again. "You want real forgiveness? Show it. Approve her loan right this second."

Kelvin, half delirious, blinked in disbelief. "A-a loan? W-what-?"

"Get her a million," Scarface growled, casually flipping his knife in the air. "No interest, no hidden fees. Don't even think about the first payment 'til next year." Kelvin's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "That's impossible!" "Wanna bet your life on that?" Scarface hissed, pressing the edge of his blade against Kelvin's cheek. "Because I'll be happy to collect."

Kelvin paled, nodding like his head might fall off. "Yes, yes-absolutely! A million dollars, no interest, start payments whenever she wants!"

He stumbled to his feet, blood still streaming from his nose, and darted into the back office.

The hush that fell over the crowd was thick enough to choke on.

Josephine stared at Scarface, then at Alex, still trying to piece together this bizarre puzzle.

Scarface stood there, chest heaving, shooting nervous glances at Alex as if the man were judge, jury, and executioner.

And Alex... Alex just stood calmly, saying nothing, revealing nothing.

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Scarface approached Josephine with a carefully practiced smile, his voice mild yet charged with tension.

"Forgive me, Ms. Everheart. I bear full responsibility for that slob's behavior. Clearly, I've failed in keeping my people in line. I promise to make it right."

Josephine raised an eyebrow, leveling him with a cool, assessing look. "My, aren't you the picture of fairness and justice, Mister Scarface. I'm almost impressed."

He let out a strained chuckle, something guilty flickering behind his eyes. "Just doing what's right, ma'am. That manager's long overdue for a lesson in manners."

He gestured for her to head back into the office. "If you'd follow me, we can wrap up the paperwork. I'll see to it that the money's wired into your account by day's end."

Josephine hesitated, glancing at the contract on Kelvin's battered desk. "I only need a hundred thousand," she said, a cautious lilt in her voice.

Scarface dismissed her concern with a flick of his wrist.

"Trust me, it's fine. This bank is part of Mister Carlos' holdings. He's got a soft spot for needy causes-especially orphanages. He'll happily throw money at any project that helps kids get a better start."

Even as he spoke, Scarface's gaze drifted to Alex, hunting for approval.

The subtle nod Alex offered looked less like a friendly okay and more like a silent command. Scarface swallowed, forcing down a rush of nerves.

When Josephine emerged from the office, her signed contract in hand, she found Kelvin and the entire staff lined up as if they were greeting royalty-each one bowing at a precise ninety-degree angle.

She blinked, taken aback. "Alex, I've never seen a bank with... such warm hospitality."

Alex smirked. "Yeah, they're really pulling out all the stops"

Josephine sighed, checking her watch. "Well, the day's still young. I've got a few hours before my bus home.", "How about we do a little shopping?" Alex

suggested, the corners of his mouth curling up.

"Lunch too, maybe a new phone while we're at it."

Josephine huffed a laugh. "Please. I'm not made of money."

Alex flashed a playful grin. "I'll pay. I won the lottery last week."

She shot him a skeptical look. "Really?"

"I'm swimming in spare cash. Do me a favor and help lighten my wallet, would you?" He gave her a winning smile.

Josephine set her hands on her hips. "I'm not comfortable taking handouts."

Alex heaved a melodramatic sigh. "Fine. I guess I'll suffer alone, weighed down by all these bills."

Rolling her eyes, Josephine shook her head. "You're impossible."

"Come on," he teased, voice dropping to a gentle plea. "You spend your money on kids, helping everyone else. Let someone return the favor for once. Or are you just too proud to accept a little kindness?"

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A flicker of hesitation crossed her face. "But-"

"Nbuts," Alex cut in, mischief sparking in his gaze. "Just humor me for the afternoon."

Before she could protest, he was guiding her toward a waiting taxi and whisking her straight into downtown Vancouver.

Their first stop-a high-end boutique with dizzying price tags.

Josephine's heart nearly stopped the second she glanced at row of dresses.

"Alex," she hissed under her breath, "are these people out of their minds? That dress is fifteen hundred dollars. And that one's pushing five grand!" 1

Alex shrugged, looking comically unbothered. "Pretty sure that's just the real price."

"Are you out of your damn mind?" Josephine blurted, eyes blazing as she jabbed a finger at the obscene price tag.

"Five thousand-for a dress? Do you know what that kind of money could do? That could feed an entire orphanage for two months! Who the hell throws that much cash on a piece of fabric?"

She turned on her heel, marching out of the store in stony silence, her lips pressed tight.

But then, just as the absurdity of it all hit her, a bitter, mocking laugh slipped past her lips.

She shook her head, eyes dark with something unreadable.

"Must be nice," she said, voice laced with quiet scorn.

"Must be real nice to live in a world where money's just something you waste... instead of something you fight to survive on."

They wandered further down the street until Josephine spotted a more wallet- friendly store-jeans and shirts ranging from ten to fifty bucks.

She practically marched inside and emerged triumphantly moments later, a small bag in hand and a grin on her face.

Seeing Josephine glow with satisfaction, Alex decided to up the ante by taking her to one of Vancouver's swankiest restaurants.

But a single glimpse at the thousand-dollar entrée prices sent Josephine's jaw to

the floor. She snatched his arm again and dragged him back outside.

"What kind of racket are they running in there?" she burst out, eyes blazing.

"Calling it a restaurant is an insult to real thieves." (1)

Alex just slipped his hands into his pockets, unruffled. "But I told you-I can afford

it."

Her glare could've melted steel. "You're missing the point, Alex."

His laugh rumbled low. "Alright, so you want something simpler. Name it."

Josephine scrutinized him, arms crossed. "You sure you have money? You're not just blowing smoke?"

"I promise, my bank account's more than healthy."

She weighed his answer, then pointed down the block. "Fine. In that case, let's go

get the best food truck barbecue in town. The plates are a little pricey, but nowhere near what we just saw."

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Minutes later, they were relaxing in a park near the slums, digging into Franklin BBQ's brisket.

The mouthwatering aroma of spices and smoked meats curled around them in the afternoon sunshine.

Josephine took one bite, closed her eyes, and just about melted.

"This is... oh my God," she moaned, practically inhaling the rest of the meal.

"I've dreamed of trying this for ages. You might've just made my entire year, Alex."

The park bustled with chatter, warm sunlight filtering through the tall trees. Alex found himself watching her—really watching her.

How her lips curved into a soft smile, how the light in her eyes shone when she was happy, how she never seemed to notice the way passersby stole second

glances.

She didn't demand luxuries or soak in attention; a good meal and decent company were all she needed.

And she was gorgeous. The kind of beauty that turned heads without her even realizing.

They were so lost in their conversation and the easy comfort of the day.

Alex had money—more than he could ever spend. Cars, penthouses, designer suits. He could buy anything.

But this?

This moment with Josephine-the way her laughter spilled into the air, the way her eyes lit up over the smallest joys-this was priceless.

People chased happiness like it was something you could buy, something waiting behind glass windows and neon signs. But happiness wasn't out there, hidden in

luxury.

'Happiness, not in another place but this place... not for another hour, but this hour.'

Josephine's laughter wasn't just sound. It was light. It was warmth. It made Alex forget the weight he carried, if only for a little while.

"Well, look who's decided to lurk in the gutter," a venomous voice cut through the peaceful air.

He turned.

Megan strode toward them, arms crossed, sneering down her nose at the food

truck setting. "Figures you'd be eating at some second-rate stall, you little nobody."

Alex's entire posture stiffened.

"Megan," he greeted coldly, "what do you want?"

She plastered on a saccharine smile. "Miss Lancaster's been asking after you. It's adorable how quickly you forgot your place just because Miss Sophia divorced

you and now Miss Kingston likes to keep you as her-well, let's call it a 'pet

project.'"

Josephine tensed beside him, but stayed quiet, observing.

Alex frowned, keeping his voice steady. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Megan barked a laugh. "Oh, spare me. The Lancaster Group's collapsing. You think that just happens by chance? Don't act like you're innocent, sweetheart. If you have even a shred of decency left, you'll fix this mess. Because trust me, if you don't, something very nasty will be coming your way."

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She glared at him with raw contempt, lip curling in disgust "I've never seen such a pathetic, vile man in my entire life. You're a disgrace-

Splash!

"1

A cup of ice-cold lemonade smacked Megan straight in the face, soaking her hair and blouse in a sugary cascade.

"Alex, do you need me to knock some sense into this woman?" Josephine asked, her voice syrupy sweet, but her eyes sharp as steel.

A slow, almost playful smile curled on her lips, but the glint behind it was anything but gentle—it was the kind of smile that promised trouble.

Alex smiled.

'Well, a true friend is someone who thinks you're a good egg even though he knows you're slightly cracked.'

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"What the hell are you doing?!" Megan yelled as the cold drink drenched her from head to toe.

Josephine replied without missing a beat. "Right back at you, you psycho! Why'd you come here just to harass people? What's your problem?"

Megan narrowed her eyes. "Do you know who this guy is?"

Josephine shot her a bright grin. "Sure do. He's my bestie. If you've got an issue with him, you'll have to deal with me first."

"He's a scammer—a total gigolo! He trashed his ex-wife's company out of petty jealousy because Jessica Hilton treated him like a toy boy. Ask him if I'm lying!" Megan pointed a furious finger at Alex.

Josephine placed her hands on her hips, meeting Megan's glare with a fearless smirk. "I don't believe a single word coming out of your mouth. So scram, crazy woman."

Megan opened her mouth to retort, but all that came out was a frustrated hiss.

Her cheeks burned with anger. "Oh, so that's how it is, huh? Alex, big man that you are, always hiding behind a woman."

She shot him a bitter sneer. "Don't think you'll escape your problems. I've already called the whole Lancasters. You'd better not run."

Josephine lunged forward, ready to tear into Megan again, but Megan spun around and stormed off before she could say another word.

Alex broke the tense silence with a low laugh as Josephine walked back.

"Thanks," he said, lips curling into a half-smile.

She sighed, frustration still vibrating through her. "Next time, protect yourself from these nutjobs."

"Gentlemen don't fight with women-especially the crazy ones.'

Josephine rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, you give them an inch, and they'll take a mile. You can't just let people like that walk all over you."

She groaned, rubbing her temple. "Ugh, she completely killed my appetite."

Alex chuckled, trying to shake off the encounter. "Tell you what-since you saved me, I'll treat you to some extra brisket. Sound good?"

She brightened instantly. "I'm a bottomless pit when it comes to good food."

He raised an eyebrow, amused. "How about a cold beer, too?"

"Perfect."

They laughed together, letting the tension of the encounter slip away.

In no time, they were back to chatting, sharing a second round of food and enjoying chilled beers

A few minutes later, Josephine's gaze wandered, landing on a woman stepping out of a sleek car. "Hey, Alex... check out that girl."

Alex followed her line of sight. The woman wore a designer outfit, her posture as polished as a runway model.

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Josephine heaved a small sigh. "Look at her bag. Probably costs a fortune. Must be nice to be so rich you never have to think about money.

She frowned. "I'm up at dawn every single day. Cook for the kids, then run to the restaurant, work till I drop..."

Alex leaned back in his seat, fixing her with a sincere look. You're more gorgeous than she is."

Heat rushed to Josephine's cheeks.

She swallowed hard and quickly took a swig of her beer, unsure how to respond.

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Sure, people said she was pretty, but she never believed them, always assuming they were just messing with her.

Nobody had ever said something like that in such a straightforward, honest way.

It lodged in her chest, made her heartbeat quicken.

Before the moment could settle, a voice cut through the air.

"So... here you are, Alex."

Josephine stiffened, realizing the poised woman she'd been admiring was now standing right before them.

Sophia Lancaster.

"What do you want?" Alex asked, his tone chilling the atmosphere.

Sophia hesitated, clearly unsettled by his cold reception. "I heard what Megan did.

I wanted to apologize on her behalf. She was out of line."

Alex shrugged, staring off into the distance. "No need. It doesn't bother me."

The mood shifted into an awkward hush.

Sophia looked like she was searching for the right words. Josephine could sense her anxiety-like something big was riding on this encounter.

In a small voice, Sophia asked, "How's the brisket?"

Alex didn't respond, so Josephine answered instead. "It's really good."

Sophia gave a soft, polite smile. "Thanks."

She ordered a plate from the food truck, then returned, standing there with eyes lowered like she was gathering her courage.

"May I sit with you?"

Josephine scooted closer to Alex, opening up space. "Sure."

The three of them sat in a heavy silence that drowned out the usual hum of the afternoon.

Eventually, Sophia inhaled, her voice tight with apprehension. "Alex... can I ask for your help?"

Josephine, feeling Alex's reluctance, nudged him. "Seriously, she's right here asking for help ignore her?"

Alex let out a slow breath. "What is it?"

Sophia's eyes flickered with a mix of desperation and relief.

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"Lancaster Group employs over a hundred people. If things go south, all of them lose their jobs. I'm begging you -please help me."

Alex's jaw tensed. "Remind me again-wasn't I just a fake a braggart with nothing to offer? You didn't exactly trust me last time. I warned you about Marco, got Jasmine to drop the grudge against your mother so you could sign a contract... and instead, you backed Charles. How'd that work out for you?"

Sophia's gaze fell.

She looked like she was trying to steady herself. "I know... we made a mistake. We shouldn't have doubted you. But right now, we have no other options."

Alex studied her for a heartbeat that felt like an eternity.

"What do you want?"

"Talk to Jasmine." Sophia replied.

"You want me to talk to Jasmine?"

Sophia's shoulders sagged.

Swallowing what was left of her pride, she nodded. "Yes. I need you to ask Jasmine to help us."

There was a bitterness in her voice, like the mere thought of depending on Jasmine stung her pride.

But the stakes were too high-Lancaster Group was on the brink, and she was determined to save it.

Alex regarded her carefully, then pulled out his phone. "I'll try. But no promises." Sophia breathed a trembling "thank you" as Alex stepped away to make the call. "Alex? Wow, you actually dialed me first. What's the occasion?" Jasmine's voice was light and playful, that teasing note that usually made him smile. But Alex couldn't bring himself to laugh this time.

He let out a long breath, shifting his gaze to Sophia, who looked like she was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"Jasmine," he said softly, "Sophia came to me, asking for help with Lancaster Group."

Instantly, Jasmine's tone went razor-sharp.

"If you're asking me to call off the police investigation, unfreeze their assets, and drop my accusations against my dear brother Charles, then yeah-that's the only way this whole thing blows over." She paused, her voice turning cold.

"You know that means I'd be sacrificing a lot, Alex. So tell me... is this really what you want?"

Alex glanced at Sophia-her eyes were hollow, desperation etched on every line of her face.

He felt a tightness in his chest, knowing how much he was asking. "Then... I owe you one, Jasmine," he murmured, voice thick with guilt.

He heard a quiet sigh on the other end. "No need," she replied softly. "You know

I'll always say yes to anything you ask... even if it hurts me."

Alex swallowed, suddenly at a loss for words.

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"Just give me some time, okay?" Jasmine added, her voice gentler now.

"Thanks..." he whispered before ending the call, feeling like he'd just signed away a piece of himself.

He ended the call and walked to Sophia.

"I made the call, but I don't know if it'll help you or not. Let's wait for the good news."

They ate in silence, the air between them heavy with unspoken thoughts.

Half an hour passed.

Suddenly, a loud voice broke through the quiet.

"Sophia, step away from that deadbeat!"

Everyone turned. Florence and Megan were marching toward them, faces set with grim determination.

Sophia stood, eyes darting between them. "What's going on?"

Florence's voice was clipped with urgency. "You don't need that loser's help anymore. We've found a better way to save Lancaster Group."

Sophia felt her stomach twist. "And what exactly is that?"

A deep voice spoke from behind Florence. "I'll help you."

Sophia's eyes flickered with confusion. "Charles?"

Florence nodded, stepping aside to reveal Charles Kingston, looking far too self-assured.

"We visited him in the hospital. His mother used that miracle pill, and now he's fully recovered. When we explained what was happening at Lancaster Group, he offered to help."

Sophia stared at Charles. Memories of betrayals and regrets surged through her. "...But-"

Florence lifted a hand to silence her. "No buts. Marco and Chris were the real culprits. The investigation proved Charles wasn't to blame. Jasmine pulled out of the accusations half an hour ago, so now everyone knows he's innocent." Charles moved closer, determination in his eyes. "I'll fix everything. For you."

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"What do you mean, fix everything?" Sophia asked, her brows furrowing.

"Sophia," Florence stepped forward and grabbed her hand

"Charles has regained his position as the Prince of Vancouver. Right now, he has all of the Kingston power back. Our Lancaster Group and partnership are already safe."

"And he promised to help us cagerly. Meanwhile, he'll try to recover the money that Marco took from us."

Jack arrogantly walked over, a smug grin on his face.

"That means we can get our money back. This is all thanks to Charles."

"Really?" Sophia asked, still finding all of this hard to believe.

It felt unreal.

"Of course," Megan sneered. "Or do you seriously believe Alex is capable of this?"

"No!"

Alex had only made a call to Jasmine, and as far as she knew, nothing had come from it yet.

Charles had solved everything.

Apart from his good looks, Alex was just an average man. There was nothing special about him.

She must be delusional.

"Sophia, Charles saves the Lancasters! We owe him." Florence's eyes lit up as she smiled excitedly thinking the possible of Charles become her son in law.

People on the street were drawn to Charles' sudden appearance, especially with Sophia standing beside him.

She had been a model once, her beauty still captivating. The sight of them together attracted a crowd.

Whispers spread through the gathering.

"Who is that handsome man?"

"He's the Prince of Vancouver! Can you believe it?"

"He's not just powerful-he's incredibly good-looking. How does one even resist a man like that?" A few women in the crowd fawned over Charles, their voices filled with admiration.

Megan, shooting Alex a look of pure disdain, sneered, "Miss Sophia, this man didn't want to help you at all. When I went and asked him kindly, he even told his friend to throw a cold drink at me. There's no way he wanted to help you."

"Yeah," Jack chimed in. "It was impossible from the start, Sophia. He's just a toy boy."

"Sophia, Charles wants to take us to dinner. Let's go join him," Florance urged, her tone dripping with superiority.

"Why would you even eat that dirty, cheap food from a food truck? That's the kind of shit only someone like Alex would eat."

Josephine stood, ready to erupt-her temper hot and wild but Alex grabbed her hand. "Let's take our bus. It's

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useless to waste time here with people like that."

Josephine wanted to protest, but Alex was already dragging her away.

"Yeah," Megan scoffed, her tone dripping with disdain. "People like you will never reach our level. It stings, doesn't it? That's why you're so desperate for money- trying to con Miss Sophia like some pathetic loser."

"Wait there," Florence called out. "Hey, Alex, Charles just solved the mess you caused in Sophia's life. Aren't you going to thank him?"

Alex stopped and turned around. "Why should I thank him?"

Florence scoffed. "Why? You told Jasmine to destroy Sophia's partnership, don't think I don't know about the cruel things you did behind our backs!"

She crossed her arms, unwilling to admit that she was the real reason Jasmine had stormed out of the Lancaster building days ago.

Alex sighed, doubt creeping into his mind.

Had calling Jasmine to hold the legal process against Charles been the right decision?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

"First things first, I didn't cause trouble with Jasmine's partnership-you did," Alex said plainly. "Secondly, he had nothing to do with solving Sophia's problem."

"Hmph! How stubborn! Do you think you solve her problem?" Florence scoffed, full of disdain.

"Charles just saved your mess, and not only are you unappreciative, but you're also shamelessly claiming you saved the day. Have you no conscience?"

"Precisely! What's wrong with him? That's so rude!" Megan added. "What a bum loser."

"Forget it," Charles said with a dismissive wave of his hand, his tone smooth and magnanimous.

"It's just a small matter. No need to make a fuss."

"Oh, Charles, you're just too kind! Ungrateful bastards like this one deserve to suffer!" Florence snapped, her voice sharp with indignation.

Charles smiled slightly, his gaze shifting to Alex. "Speaking of which, I should be the one thanking you. Thank you for taking care of Jasmine."

"But tell me, what kind of man are you? Divorcing your wife and chasing after my little sister? You must have wanted her money and encourage her to fight our family, didn't you?"

Alex sighed, "It's your own greed, Charles. You destroyed everything. Don't blame your sister for your own mistake."

Without another glance, he turned around, guiding Josephine away.

'You can't wake a person who is pretending to be asleep.'

"Hey, Alex! I'm warning you-you better watch your mouth!" Florence yelled.

Sophia stayed silent, but her brows furrowed.

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Even she thought Alex had crossed a line. He should have at least been polite.

"Alex," Charles called out, his tone calm but laced with something darker.

He walked forward, closing the distance between them. "I'm serious about Sophia. You won't have a chance with her anymore." His voice lowered as he neared.

Alex smirked, unfazed. "Is that so? Well, good luck with that. I have nothing to do with her."

Charles's expression hardened.

"I've been thinking deeply. Every problem started with you. You cured Jasmine, then used your dirty ambition to manipulate her into fighting me for power and money. I finally know you're the devil that caused the crack in the Kingston family." Alex's eyes narrowed. "What do you want?"

Charles straightened his suit, his smirk filled with arrogance. "I want to destroy you and everything you hold dear.

His voice was smooth, but the venom in it was unmistakable.

"Alex, you should know where you stand. You and I-we're in completely different leagues. You may be a talented doctor, but with my Kingston power, I could erase your name from existence."

His gaze burned with superiority. "Can you even begin to comprehend the difference between us? Everything you wouldn't even dare to dream of is already within my grasp. That is the difference between us."

"I can make sure you have no place to stay in Vancouver," Charles murmured, his voice so low only Alex could hear.

Alex didn't flinch. "I don't know where you got your inflated ego from, but if there's one thing you should know- it's that you don't mess with me."

Charles let out a mean-spirited snigger. "Very well. We shall see."

He reached out as if to pat Alex's shoulder but stopped midway.

A second later, he retracted his hand, as though touching Alex would dirty him.

The gesture was small but packed with humiliation.

"Alright, alright, let's not waste time talking to people like him. The sooner we walk out of this poor area, the better," Florence said with a smirk.

"Sure," Charles chuckled, turning away.

"Come on, let's go." Without waiting, Florence grabbed Sophia's arm and pulled

her along.

Sophia hesitated, glancing back at Alex, wanting to say something. 1

But the words never came.

Meanwhile, Alex had already pulled Josephine away, dragging her burning temper with him.

They walked in opposite directions once again.

And maybe the crack between them had grown even bigger now.

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The next day morning, Raymond called Lyra.

"Do you still remember our bet, Lyra? A week has passed, and I'm still fit as a fiddle. Isn't it time for you to make good on your promise? Your herb plantation," he reminded her smugly.

Lyra remained calm. "Why are you so impatient, Uncle Raymond? We still have a day left before time is up.

"Hah! You can't really believe what that little swindler said can you?" Raymond scoffed.

"I've been healthy for years. How would I not know my own body? Look at me! Do I look like there's anything wrong with me?"

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Lyra leaned back with a smirk curling her lips. "Well, Uncle Raymond, I'm not sure you resemble anything in particular... but I trust Alex's opinion on the matter."

Raymond snorted so hard it nearly rattled the phone line. "uh! I have no idea how that tiny fraud managed to brainwash you. What's his secret?"

She shrugged with practiced indifference.

"Beats me. Maybe it was just meant to be. Anyway, the clock is ticking. You've got half a day left before our bet closes. If you're still as healthy as an ox by sunset, I'll hand over the goods I promised. But I hope you've set aside your 'payment' for the cure if-and when-you need it."

Raymond's voice turned coarse. "Payment? You're not talking about those rare herbs from my vault, are you?"

Lyra's eyes rolled skyward as if she couldn't believe his stupidity.

"Don't get confused, Uncle. The bet is simple: I wager my entire herb plantation; you wager that precious stash of yours. That's separate from any cure you might suddenly find yourself begging for."

Raymond burst out laughing, the sound harsh and biting. "Oh, you think you'll make a quick buck off me? Fine, let's entertain your nonsense. If I do end up poisoned-and that's a pretty big 'if'-what's your asking price?"

Lyra's smirk grew predatory. "I hear you own Cheval Blanc, the biggest fancy hotel and restaurant in all of Vancouver. Let's have that."

Raymond scoffed, though there was a nervous edge to it. "My Cheval Blanc Hotel? Aren't you ambitious!" 1 "Go big or go home, right? Shoot for the stars, and if you fail, at least you land on the moon," Lyra quipped. He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Sure, sure. But don't come crying to me when you lose your precious herb plantation. I'm guessing you've already prepared the contract?"

Lyra let out a quiet chuckle. "All drawn up and ready. Just waiting for your signature later today. And I hope you've done the same-wouldn't want you to keel over before you transfer Cheval Blanc to Alex, right? Could be messy finalizing that paperwork after you drop dead."

"Funny," Raymond said through clenched teeth. "Laugh all you want. In half a day, I'll prove that your little miracle worker is nothing but a worthless con artist!" He ended the call with a slam.

Still fueled by his own amusement, Raymond dialed another number right away.

"Hey, Joe Thompson, it's your old pal. Get that plantation contract ready. Because by tonight, it's going straight into my pocket."

Joe chuckled on the other end. "No worries, old friend. My daughter's got the papers all set. One signature from you, and it's done."

Raymond poured himself his usual supplement tea, rolling his eyes. "I don't get it, Joe. Your daughter's brilliant, but she still sticks by that puny swindler. What on earth does she see in him?"

Joe just laughed. "It's called love, my friend,"

"Love? Spare me." Raymond snorted, then paused. "By the way, Joe, your daughter says she wants my hotel. You really think I'm handing that over?" "You will," Joe said.

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"Old Pal Joe, ever since you got outplayed by Kingston, you've been getting sloppy," Raymond teased.

'Shoppo? Don't push your luck.' Joe barked a short, humorless laugh.

Raymond tossed back his tea-only to freeze when a stabbing jolt shot through his chest like someone driving a spike into his rib cage.

At first, he tried to ignore it, but the pain swelled, gouging deeper and deeper until he was gasping

He crumpled to the floor, eyes wide and sweat pouring down his face as if he'd just run a marathon in a desert. It felt like a twisted blade was burrowing into his heart.

"T-Tony!" he croaked, calling for his bodyguard, face contorted in agony,

"Could that damn kid actually have been right?" Raymond seethed through gritted teeth, clutching his chest. As his vision blurred, he saw Tony rushing over. "What's going on, sir?" Tony asked, alarmed.

Raymond's voice came out as a ragged wheeze. "Hospital! Now!"

Within minutes, they scrambled for the helicopter, heading to the best facility in Vancouver.

Raymond's mind spun with a hundred thoughts as he writhed in pain.

This can't be a poison. Maybe bad food. Why the hell would sign away my hotel just to get some second-rate quack to treat me?

When they landed on the hospital's helipad, Tony practically dragged him through the doors, shouting at staff like a madman.

A flurry of tests followed, but the conclusion was as humiliating as it was baffling: Raymond was, in the doctors' words, "absolutely fine."

The doctor looked at him uncertainly. "Are you sure you're in pain, sir?"

Raymond's fury erupted in a raspy snarl. "You think I'm faking this? My chest is on fire! Why in hell would I make this up?"

The doctor stepped back, hands raised in surrender. "We... we can't find anything wrong. You might want a second opinion elsewhere."

"Worthless amateurs!" Raymond spat, storming out.

He tore across town to two more hospitals, but each time, it was the same conclusion: perfectly healthy, with no explanation for the searing pain.

They only gave him a painkiller, but it was ineffective.

"How the hell can they all be clueless?" Raymond hissed, sweat soaking through his shirt as the relentless agony twisted in his chest.

He prided himself on decades of healthy living, but this pain was impossible to endure.

His vision blurred again, and he feared he'd lose his grip on reality if it didn't stop soon.

Desperate, his bodyguards huddled around, hands trembling with indecision. "Sir, the hospitals can't figure it out ... what do we do?"

Raymond's lips curled back in a snarl, blood pounding in his ears. "Damn it... that rascal... maybe he really is the

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only one who can fix this.'

He snatched his phone and punched in Lyra's number.

When she answered, her voice was maddeningly calm. "Yes Uncle Raymond?"

He could barely choke out the words. "Lyra! My chest... it's killing me. Get that conniving brat over here right now!"

She took her time responding, as if his agony was pure entertainment. "Uncle Raymond, it looks like Alex was spot-on after all. He said you'd be down for the count within the week. Doesn't seem very fair to keep calling him a swindler, does

it?"

Raymond clenched his jaw so hard, he thought his teeth might crack. "Fine! I was wrong-he's not a swindler. Just get him here, to Vancouver's First Hospital!"

Lyra's tone was smooth and icy. "So, about that payment... You know, the paperwork for transferring Cheval Blanc?"

"Damn it, why would I hand over a hotel and restaurant worth a hundred million just to fix one person?"

Her laugh was downright cruel. "Suit yourself. We're not forcing your hand."

Raymond let out a ragged breath. "I'll find another doctor then. We'll see about your boy's so-called miracle." "Sure," Lyra said sweetly. "Best of luck. Call us before you die, though-you can't exactly bring your hotel and restaurant to the afterlife, can you?"

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Chapter 167

Raymond frantically dialed number after number, desperate for anyone who could save him.

But every time the call connected and people arrived, the answer was the same- was tearing him apart from the inside.

His breath came in ragged gasps, and blood oozed from the corner of his eye.

no one could handle whatever

A sudden wave of horror crushed him: he was running out of time. He practically stabbed at his phone.

"Lyra...!"

Lyra's voice sounded maddeningly calm on the other end. Uncle Raymond. So... have you finally prepared the Cheval Blanc paperwork?"

"You little wretch," Raymond snarled, his voice cracking with anguish. "I told my people to handle it, all right? Tell your man to get over here and fix me!"

Lyra only snorted. "You're the one begging for help, Uncle. Doesn't seem polite to order him around like some lapdog, does it?"

Raymond's pain spiked; his vision blurred red. Still, he forced down his fury and stammered, "Fine-where's Alex? I'll come to him myself."

Lyra sounded almost amused. "Oh, I'm with him now. We're at a small village about two hours outside Vancouver by bus. I'll send you the location. Hurry, unless you'd rather drop dead first."

The moment Raymond got the GPS pin, he barked at his pilot, "Move, dammit! Find that brat-now!"

The helicopter tore across the sky, slicing the trip down to ten minutes instead of the usual twenty-five.

One hour earlier, at a small orphanage in a dusty mining town...

Alex was busy sorting out donation funds with Ruth, the orphanage caretaker.

She felt overwhelmed by the sudden windfall-exactly one million dollars.

Josephine helped the restaurant while Alex patiently explained the paperwork to Ruth.

Lyra called. "Alex, where are you?"

"Why?"

"My father says Raymond's collapsing from whatever poison you predicted. I want to come see you. Mind if I drop by?"

Not long after Lyra arrived, the thundering chop of helicopter blades overhead sent children running outside in wide-eyed excitement.

It was their first time seeing a real helicopter land in the fields behind the orphanage.

Raymond staggered out, drenched in sweat, looking like a man on the brink of death.

He spotted Alex calmly standing beside Lyra.

"You-!" he wheezed, clutching his chest. "I've been healthy my entire life. Explain why I'm suddenly keeling over with this goddamn pain, you-little punk! Did you do this to me?"

Alex arched an eyebrow. "Uncle Raymond, you think I poisoned you? Sounds like paranoia."

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Raymond glared, jaw clenching through waves of agony,

"I don't care who's behind it. Just fix me! Now! Come here!!

He doubled over, nearly collapsing.

His bodyguards exchanged panicked looks-if their boss died, nobody would sign their paychecks.

One of them, Tony, turned a hostile stare on Alex. "What the hell is wrong with you, doctor?"

Tony spat out the word like an insult. "Get over here and cure him, or I'll make you regret crawling out of your mother's womb."

Alex was just about to step forward when those venomous words slapped the air. His expression turned ice-cold.

They're the ones desperate for my help... and this is their attitude? Who the hell do these fools think they are?

"Find yourself another miracle worker," Alex said, his voice dripping with contempt. "Because I'm sure as hell not wasting my time on you."

A shocked silence fell over the group. Nobody had ever dared show such blatant disregard in front of Raymond's men before.

"You arrogant punk!" one bodyguard snarled, veins bulging in his neck. "Our boss is a goddamn VIP. If you don't get on your knees and help him, I'll slaughter your entire family!"

"Yeah," another guard chimed in, eyes narrowed. "Unless you're dying to have your skull caved in, get over here and do your damn job!"

Alex's lip curled in a sneer. "Try me, you mouth-breathing thug."

The first bodyguard let out a scornful laugh. "Big talk for a nobody who doesn't know what pain feels like. If you don't fix our boss, I'll burn this place to the ground-every last board and brick, and every miserable soul in it!"

He lunged forward with a crackling punch aimed straight for Alex's face.

His fist blurred through the air-a clear sign he was no amateur.

The raw arrogance in his eyes looked unsettling, almost toxic.

He was a power-addicted tyrant who demanded worship, and by working for Raymond, he seemed unstoppable.

But before the punch even grazed Alex's cheek, Alex's arm snapped up.

There was a sudden crack-the guard's neck twisted at an impossible angle.

He didn't even manage a scream before collapsing, dead on impact.

"The graveyards are full of men who thought they were indispensable. Go join them." Alex flicked his hand as if shaking off dust.

"Watch your mouth. Threatening me-or my family here leads straight to the grave."

The other bodyguards jumped back, eyes wide with terror. They whipped out their firearms, trembling with adrenaline.

Alex's gaze darkened. "So you all came here to kill me, is that it? You really want to die on this orphanage lawn?"

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Lyra stepped forward with a slow, mocking clap. "Gentlemen, if you're here for trouble, I suggest you load your boss back into that helicopter and go buy him a coffin. You'd be doing him a favor."

Raymond was half-collapsed, panic warring with agony as more blood bubbled at his lip.

"Lyra! This arrogant bastard not only refuses to save me, he just murdered one of my men! How are you going to handle this?"

Lyra's lip curled in disdain. "Uncle Raymond, you and your crew started this. Why come here just to die together? Go find another place. Don't die in this small village, only to be left as nothing but scraps for the vultures to feast on."

Raymond stared at his dead bodyguard, and for the first time in years, true fear flickered in his eyes.

The pain in his chest spiked, his nostrils flaring as blood trickled out.

"Lyra... I... I said some foolish things earlier. And my bodyguard made a mistake.

I'm sorry," he blurted, his voice shaking. "Please... get Alex to help me."

Lyra shrugged. "Not my call. You need to talk to him."

Raymond steeled himself, forcing out the words in a rasp. "Alex... I'm sorry. I lost my head. Didn't mean to insult you. Please, just make this pain stop..."

When Alex didn't respond, Raymond blurted out in desperation, "I've got the paperwork-my hotel and restaurant! You can have them. Just... please, do something."

Alex turned away, clearly unimpressed.

Raymond's face twisted with realization-the violent threat from his bodyguard had pushed Alex past reason.

He had to sweeten the deal, and fast.

"Wait, wait!" Raymond babbled, head spinning. "I have an entire vault of rare herbs-stuff no one else can get. I'll give you any one you want!"

That finally made Alex pause. He needed rare herbs to raise his level. He glanced over.

"Herbs, huh? I'm picky. Maybe your collection's worthless to me."

Raymond scrambled to appease him. "No, no-I can get whatever you name! Just tell me!"

"Fine. I want five-hundred-year-old wild American ginseng," Alex said, his voice clipped.

Raymond sagged in relief. "I-I've got that exact one in my vault!"

Alex nodded slowly. "Hand it over first. Then I'll cure your poison." Raymond nearly doubled over from another surge of pain. "Please! I can't stand it!"

Just fix me now, and I swear I'll have the ginseng delivered in a few days."

Alex shot Lyra a look-he didn't trust Raymond not to double-cross him the moment he got what he wanted.

Raymond, seeing the doubt on Alex's face, pleaded, "Lyra... help me out here.

You know I keep my word. If I say I'll deliver it, I will."

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The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 168[1,175 words]

"Uncle Raymond." Lyra crossed her arms and leaned back with a casual sneer.

"Truth be told, I don't believe in anything but cold, hard cash," she said.

"Speaking of which, how about the Cheval Blanc Hotel paperwork? Let's skip the drama. Why don't you have Alex sign and hand it over?"

Raymond went deathly pale.

Cheval Blanc had always been his golden goose-he'd never let go of that gem without a fight.

But he forced a thin, unconvincing smile. "My lawyers are handling it," he lied, fishing for time. In truth, he'd already told his bodyguards: if Alex refuses to cooperate, use force-hostage, murder, whatever it takes to cure him.

Yet, the Plan needed to be changed, everyone suddenly realize Alex was no easy mark.

One slap could kill a man, and the bodyguards seemed hesitant to test him again. Raymond realized he'd have to shift gears before things turned ugly.

"Fine," he spat, snatching his phone and barking at his legal team through a video call, "Draft the transfer papers for Cheval Blanc immediately!"

"Why so sudden?"

"Just fucking do it!"

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "We'll need about twenty minutes."

Suddenly, Raymond coughed, crimson droplets staining his lips.

Pain coursed through him like wildfire, and his vision blurred. Even two minutes seemed too long now.

"Just do it now!" he roared in desperation.

"But, sir," his attorney stammered, "forcing the transfer so quickly might-"

"Just do it!" Raymond's voice cracked as he retched up more blood.

All at once, panic clenched his heart. When you're staring death in the face, money and power become meaningless.

A soft ping on his smartwatch signaled the document's arrival.

A shimmering 3D hologram of the opulent Cheval Blanc Hotel sprang up.

Raymond's trembling hands hovered over the device, his eyes clouded with agony and regret.

"Sign here, Alex," he rasped, barely able to lift his head. "Take the hotel... just... please... help ..."

A bodyguard lurched forward to hold him upright.

Lyra watched coldly, remembering all the times she'd been desperate and alone, with no one offering sympathy.

She wasn't about to shed tears for Raymond now.

"Alex," Lyra said flatly, "since Uncle Raymond is suddenly being so generous, why not help him? Take Cheval Blanc as a down payment, then secure that herb from him later."

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Alex nodded, barely interested in the property but fully aware he needed Raymond alive to get that crucial herb. With measured calm, he pulled a small bottle from his pocket and shook out a single pill. "This is an antidote to a thousand poisons," he said, tossing it to Raymond.

Raymond fumbled with shaking hands, dropping the pill in the dust.

In sheer terror, he clawed at the ground, retrieved the pill, and popped it into his mouth-dirt and all.

A bone-deep chill surged through him, neutralizing the venom raging in his veins. Alex followed up with another small pill.

"This one will help heal your body," he said quietly. The bodyguard took it and gently fed it to Raymond.

Warmth spread through his limbs, easing the agony.

Raymond gaped at Alex in disbelief. "It's working," he whispered, pressing a hand to his chest where the searing pain had been just moments before.

His entire body trembled with relief, finally free from the grip of death.

Lyra smirked. "So, Uncle Raymond, pretty impressed by Alex's skills?"

Raymond swallowed hard, eyeing Alex with newfound awe. "What... what was in those pills? Give me more. Whatever you want, I'll pay it."

Alex's expression turned to cool detachment. "They're called Panacea Pills, and the recipe is secret. Ingredients are so rare I only had one batch. If you can track down certain herbs for me I could make more."

"Could you sell me the recipe?"

"I told you, the prescription is confidential. There's no way I'm selling it," Alex stated firmly.

Then, after a brief pause, he continued, "Of course, if you can find me another rare herb, I'll give you the prescription for the Panacea Pill. Let's barter."

"Sure. Tell me what kind of herb you need," Raymond replied.

"Ambrosia Bloom," Alex said.

Raymond's eyes widened. "That's extremely rare. I've never even seen a picture of it. Any other options?"

"Moonshade Petal," Alex offered.

Raymond shook his head, looking perplexed. "I've never heard of it..."

"How about Phoenix Fern?" Alex prompted.

Raymond's reluctance was obvious as he shrugged helplessly. "Still no clue. I've never heard of that one either, let alone where to find it."

"Otherwise, forget it."

Raymond's shoulders slumped, the fire in his eyes flickering with desperation. He'd never even heard of those rare plants.

But Lyra cut in, gently rubbing her stomach. "First things first. Uncle Raymond promised to get Alex a five-hundred-year-old Wild American Ginseng. We'll worry about exotic herbs later."

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She paused, quirking an eyebrow. "Besides, I'm starving. Let's celebrate at the Cheval Blanc Restaurant. You just transferred the whole hotel to Alex; I think it's time he met the executive team."

Raymond's heart sank.

Cheval Blanc was the crown jewel of his empire, and he'd just signed it away. But he had made a deal. He couldn't afford to back out now, Soon, they were heading to Cheval Blanc Hotel in Raymond's helicopter.

The hotel stood in a prime spot near Lake Vancouver, its rooftop restaurant famous for sweeping views of the glimmering skyline and tranquil forest.

The place catered strictly to VIPs; regular folks didn't stand a chance at the door.

Once inside, Alex, Lyra, and Raymond settled into a private suite, ordering the restaurant's signature specialties. Meanwhile, downstairs, a sleek limousine glided up to Cheval Blanc's entrance.

Florence stepped out, smoothing her designer dress.

"Charles," she announced, "you've both been so helpful to our family. Let me treat you. Sophia's on her way, but we'll head in first." 1

She and Jack took the elevator straight to the top floor, only to be halted by a uniformed waiter.

"Apologies," he said politely, "but you're not on our VIP list."

Jack's temper flared, his eyes burning with indignation. "Not allowed in? Do you have any idea who we are? The Lancasters! Surely you've heard the name."

The waiter remained composed, offering a polite bow. "I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot allow you to enter."

"Is this how you run a business?" Florence snapped. "You turn paying customers away? Ridiculous. You're looking down on the wrong people."

Their anger crackled in the air, frustration mounting at being shut out of the exclusive realm they thought they deserved.

Little did they know that just a few doors away, Alex and Lyra were already dining under the Cheval Blanc's glittering lights.

Jack grabbed the waiter by the collar, his voice low and threatening. "Listen, you're gonna regret not letting us in. Do you even know who we're with?"

The waiter's face paled with fear. "I-I'm sorry, sir. I'm just doing my job."

"We're with Charles Kingston! And you dare stop us at the entrance?" Jack sneered before shoving the waiter, causing him to stumble and fall.

A calm yet authoritative voice interrupted. "Is there a problem here?"

Jack turned, flashing a smirk.

"Nothing at all," he said smoothly.

"This idiot was just trying to stop you from entering. Ridiculous, right? Let's just

have his manager fire him on the spot."

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The waiter glanced at Charles Kingston, and a wave of fear washed over him.

When the powerful believe they can do as they please, the powerless have no choice but to endure.

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The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 169[1,329 words]

Jack's face contorted into an indignant scowl.

"Hey! Get me your manager-right now!" he snapped.

He punctuated his demand with a swift kick at the trembling young waiter sprawled on the floor.
"I'm done dealing with amateurs!"

The startled rookie flinched, eyes wide with fear.

Before he could stammer out a response, his supervisor swiftly intervened, maintaining a practiced, polite smile as he helped the shaken waiter to his feet.

"My apologies, sir," the supervisor began.

"Our manager is currently attending to three other important guests. May I ask what seems to be the problem? I'm sure we can work something out."

Jack sneered, looking the supervisor up and down like he was lower than dirt. "Oh? And who exactly do you think you are, butting in here?"

"I'm his supervisor," the man replied evenly, maintaining his composure.

"This young waiter is under my supervision. Allow me to offer you a ten percent discount on your entire bill to make up for the inconvenience."

Before Jack could respond, Florence-his mother-let out an exaggerated scoff.

"Ten percent? A measly ten percent? Do we look like our pride can be bought for a few cheap dollars off the bill?!" She shot the supervisor a contemptuous glare. "You really think so little of us?"

The supervisor exhaled, already sensing this was about more than just lunch.

These two were clearly out to feed their own oversized egos not just their stomachs.

"Ma'am, I truly apologize," he tried again, his voice calm.

"It's just that our establishment requires reservations. We're fully booked this time. Perhaps you could come back next time, and I'll personally arrange something more...generous."

Inwardly, the supervisor was already considering quietly blacklisting this family-he never wanted to serve them again if he could help it.

"No reservation?" Jack practically spat the words out. "Don't you realize who's standing right here with us? This is Mr. Charles Kingston! How dare you turn him away!"

"We regret the circumstances," the supervisor said as tactfully as possible. "But the tables are all accounted for. If there was an extra seat, we'd be happy to welcome Mr. Kingston to sample our cuisine."

He clamped down on what he really wanted to say:

We will not be your punching bags, and we will not fall victim to your ridiculous demands.

Find someone else to feed your ego-we won't be your victims.

Florence pointed toward the dining room's half-empty section and snorted. "Look at that there are plenty of open tables! Are you blind?"

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"They're reserved, ma'am," the supervisor insisted, dropping his voice in a show of contrition. "I'm sorry, but they'll be occupied shortly."

Jack started whining to his mother again, "Mom, this is useless. Let's just go somewhere else."

She turned and glared at him. "We're already here, and I refuse to waltz out like a couple of fools."

"Allow me, Mrs. Lancaster," Charles interjected smoothly. He reached into his suit jacket, pulled out a sleek gold card, and offered it to the supervisor

"I believe this VIP card allows me to book a table on short notice up to five times a year, does it not?"

The supervisor's eyes widened. He'd handled all sorts of customers, but Gold VIP status was on a whole different level.

"Please, let me verify the card," he said, taking it gingerly from Charles's hand.

Jack watched with undisguised greed. "Man, that card makes life way too easy. How do I get one?"

Charles shrugged, smiling as if it was the simplest thing in the world. "It's not particularly complicated. You just have to deposit a million dollars into the restaurant's account and use it within three years or lose it all."

Jack let out a choked laugh. "A million bucks, just to eat here?"

"That's insane! We're well-off, but we're not throwing away that kind of money on fancy dinners!"

Moments later, the supervisor confirmed the card's validity.

He managed to contain his own shock long enough to nod at the rookie waiter.

They both realized in that moment-money could bulldoze every obstacle, apparently including courtesy.

If someone was willing to drop a million dollars, the staff had no choice but to roll out the red carpet, bowing to every whim with unwavering obedience.

Even if the customer's sole desire was to gorge their insatiable ego, the staff was expected to serve with a smile, their own dignity a mere afterthought.

Even if it meant becoming the sacrifice, they had to ensure the guest left satisfied-no matter the cost.

"Please, step right inside, honored guests," the supervisor said, voice bright and subservient in an instant.

Charles stepped back and graciously motioned toward Florence and Jack. "After you."

Jack tossed the supervisor a snide grin as he strutted past, chin held high. "Hmph! Hear that? Gold VIP! Next time, pay attention to who you're dealing with," he hissed, throwing in a condescending chuckle.

For added insult, he lightly tapped the waiter's cheek in a series of humiliating little slaps.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir," the young waiter said, barely concealing the disgust trembling in his voice.

Florence tossed her hair back haughtily. "Learn your place next time! Open your eyes and recognize someone of standing when you see them!" She strode in, chest puffed out as though she owned the place.

Both the supervisor and the rest of the staff could do nothing but bow politely and plaster on forced smiles.

Suddenly, as they made their way toward a private dining room, they nearly bumped into Alex, who was stepping out of one of the VIP suites.

Jack froze, his mood darkening in an instant.

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"Well, well... look who finally managed to get a job here. Busboy, is it?" Jack sneered, lounging back with smug satisfaction. "Good! Then you can serve us now."

Alex didn't flinch. He stood his ground, arms folded, his gaze locked onto Jack's with unwavering steadiness.

"Are you working here too?"

"Me? Work? Don't be ridiculous. I'm here as a guest, not staff. Unlike you." Jack

let out a contemptuous laugh.

"And I'm also here as a guest," Alex replied calmly.

"Hah! You?" Jack scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "You must be delusional if you think some nobody like you gets to dine next to us. My friend's a Gold VIP; that's something you'd never qualify for in your entire miserable life."

Florence, who was still riding the high of being treated like a queen, chimed in with a sneer, "This place is extremely exclusive. Basic membership alone costs a million dollars in deposit. Can you afford that, sweetheart?"

Alex simply offered a faint, disinterested shrug. "I don't have a million lying around, true. But I can handle my business here just fine."

"Oh, really?" Jack taunted with an oily grin. "Then get lost. People like you lower

the tone of the place. You're practically poisoning our atmosphere just by standing there."

Florence laughed, tossing him a look of sheer disdain. "You should see yourself in a mirror—clearly out of your league."

Jack turned to a passing waiter, snapping his fingers and pointing at Alex. "Oi! Come kick this guy out. He's ruining our appetite."

"I'm sorry," the waiter answered, though clearly uneasy, "but he's also a guest..."

Jack's face twisted in fury. "Gold VIPs are talking to you! We say he doesn't belong here, and that should be enough. Now move it!"

Florence chimed in, lifting her chin in a show of power. "We can complain about this you know, and I will. Are you going to defy a Gold VIP over this nobody?" The waiter looked distinctly uncomfortable. "We...we have no policy to kick out other guests, ma'am."

Florence turned pink with rage. "Then make one now or get me the manager, now!"

"That's right," Jack echoed. "Let's see if your manager thinks some cheap freeloader deserves to stay over paying Gold VIPs!"

Just then, Sophia arrived, looking rattled at the sight of them all. "Mom, Jack, what on earth are you two doing? Alex? You're here, too? What's happening?"

Alex shrugged as if it were the most mundane thing in the world. "I'm just here for a meal. Didn't realize I needed anyone's permission."

, right?" Sophia frowned at the tension crackling in the air. "This restaurant is...

well, you know it's a bit p "Qh?" Alex raised an eyebrow, voice calm but laced with an edge. "You think I can't afford dinner here?"

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Sophia threw her hands up in exasperation. "Wait, Alex! That's not what I-"

She never got the chance to finish. Almost on cue, the supervisor bustled back into the fray.

In a place like this-where VIPS clawed for dominance by tearing down their rivals' dignity—those without status had few options.

When elephants fi

ght, it's the grass that suffers.

Lacking any real authority, the staff had no choice but to bring in their highest- ranking official.

After all, if one has no sword, one must learn to dance in the shadows of those who do.

That official arrived in the form of a sharply dressed general manager, whose very presence could hush a room. Clearing his throat, he stepped forward with an air of cold efficiency.

"I'm the general manager," he announced, his voice cutting through the tension. "How may I be of assistance?" Jack practically shoved a finger in Alex's face.

"Emally! Listen up-we've got ourselves a freeloading loser over here," he snarled. "I want him kicked out immediately. I refuse to eat in the same room as this nobody."

The General manager arched an eyebrow. "Sir, that's highly unlikely. Our security is quite strict. We don't just let random folks wander in."

Jack brandished his favorite line like a weapon. "Clearly, you have no idea who you're dealing with. We're Gold VIPs. He's not! If you value your job, you'll do what we say. That's an order."

Florence, eyes glinting with contempt, added, "He's making us lose our appetite. Throw him out-now."

Arms folded, the general manager released a slow, measured sigh. "And which guest, specifically, do you want removed?"

Jack pointed again, as though Alex were some foul rodent. That guy. Right there." The general manager's calm facade hardened once he got a good look at Alex.

A thin, almost mocking smile tugged at his lips. "I see. Gentlemen, I'm afraid you're making a serious mistake."

Jack slammed his fist on the nearby table, rattling the water glasses. "What mistake? He doesn't have a Gold VIP card, does he?"

The General Manager remained composed. "No, he doesn't

Jack's sneer deepened "Exactly. So stop wasting time and do your damn job."

"Sir," The general manager added. "It doesn't matter if you're Gold, Platinum, or the President himself. This man"-he inclined his head respectfully at Alex-"happens to be the owner of Cheval Blanc Restaurant."

An electric hush fell over the group as though someone had yanked the power cord on the entire dining room.

Jack's jaw dropped so low it might've hit the floor.

Florence looked like she'd swallowed a lemon whole.

Meanwhile, Charles, who'd been casually observing, suddenly tensed with surprise.

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Jack eventually found his voice, though it came out strangled. "What? Him? Owning this place?"

Florence's disbelief was even sharper. "Impossible! He's got no money—he's dirt poor! This must be some cruel joke."

The general manager's patience was wearing thin. "Believe me, folks, it's no joke. I'd strongly advise you to mind your tone."

He gave them a disgusted once-over. "I've rarely seen anyone so brazen as to pull these stunts in our restaurant."

Jack sputtered, unable to reconcile this twist. "He must've swiped somebody else's money or...or...scammed it off one of his so-called 'friends,' right, Mom?"

Florence latched on to that theory. "I wouldn't put it past him! He's always freeloading off women. He must've conned one for the cash to buy this fancy spot."

Alex rolled his eyes. "That'

none of your concern. What you do need to understand is that I have the power to tell you to leave. Not the other way around."

Florence and Jack flushed with anger. Sure, they were momentarily humbled, but it only made them lash out more.

They turned accusing eyes on him, still desperate to assert some shred of superiority.

The general manager cleared his throat. "Mr. Alex, would you like us to remove these disruptive guests?"

Alex shook his head with a cool smile. "No, that's all right. Since they're paying customers-and apparently VIPS -let's give them our best hospitality. Send a bottle of our best wine, on the house."

"Right away, sir," the general manager replied courteously

Florence let out a caustic laugh. "Look at him, acting so high and mighty. Typical free-loader behavior-trying to win us over with cheap wine."

Jack sneered. "No thanks, 'boss.' We're not beggars, we don't need your pity. And don't for a second think owning a restaurant makes you our equal." He swung an arm toward Charles. "In fact, my friend here is more accomplished than you'll ever be."

Charles quietly cleared his throat.

His gaze flicked to Alex, coldly dismissive. "I have no interest in your complimentary handouts," he drawled.

"What's a million or two to me? I'd rather pay my own tab than be in your debt."

Florence seized the moment to rub it in. "Hear that, Alex? Owning this place doesn't mean squat next to Charles. Born into a truly noble family. You? You're an orphan, scraping by on shady deals. Don't you dare think you're anywhere near our level."

Jack-hiked up his chin. "Yeah, once you compare your so-called net worth to Charles's fortune, you don't even rate as a footnote. Count your blessings we still let you breathe the same air."

Charles gave a suave shrug, playing up his role. "Florence, no need to go too far. I was just lucky enough to be born in a good family." Despite his humble words, his smirk oozed arrogance.

"Hear that? That's class," Florence said sweetly. Then she shot Alex a glare. "Meanwhile, all you've got is this... restaurant."

Alex, weary of their theatrics, simply replied, "Feel free to enjoy your meal. Or leave if you can't stand it here. I have better things to do than babysit you." With that, he turned on his heel to leave.

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"Hold up!" Sophia rushed after him. "Alex, is this really your place? Where'd you get the money?"

He didn't break stride. "I'm broke, remember? It was a gift Satisfied?"

"A gift? Let me guess-Jasmine again?" Sophia pressed, her brow creasing. "You're going to pawn off your soul to that woman?"

"It's none of your concern," Alex replied curtly. "But I'd say you've got bigger fish to

fry. You clearly adore. Charles-go focus on making him happy, maybe seal the

deal." He brushed past her and disappeared.

Sophia clicked her tongue in frustration.

She couldn't understand why he was acting so petty, and it dug at her pride

Of course, her mother and brother were probably fueling the drama, but still-did Alex really have to be so... difficult?

Back in one of the private suites, Alex settled into a plush chair, looking somewhat deflated.

Lyra poured him a fresh glass of wine. A teasing smile curled her lips.

"I saw you out there, Alex," she murmured, swirling her glass. "You and Sophia looked about ready to bite each other's heads off."

Alex shrugged. "We always clash. She's not exactly gentle with words, and I'm not great at holding back." Lyra's eyes sparkled mischievously. "Don't stare at me like that—I'm not about to play peacemaker. This little feud of yours does give me the upper hand, you know. While you two tear each other down, I get to make my move."

He shot her a sideways glance. "Oh yeah? And what move might that be?"

Lyra leaned in, her voice dropping to a playful purr. "Don't play dumb. I'm perfectly happy to compete with my so-called best friend for you. From where I'm standing, you're fair game."

Alex rubbed his forehead. "That's not the point. I'm worried Charles might harm Sophia somehow. He doesn't exactly seem like Mr. Wonderful, and she's your friend. I don't want to see her get hurt."

Lyra smirked, taking a slow sip of wine. "Is that so? You caring for her well-being? That's almost sweet."

Then she set her glass down and arched a brow.

"But don't think for a second that changes anything between us. If you still harbor

feelings for her, I won't mind a little competition. I've already set my eyes on you- and I never back down from something I want."