

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 211[1,133 words]

Chapter 211

One hour ago, the Lancasters had pulled up to the curb so fast it felt like they'd practically skidded to a stop.

The sign above the storefront read "King of Herbal," its chipped paint glinting in the morning sun. Sophia, Jack, Florence, and Florence's youngest sister, Clara, climbed out of the car.

A warm breeze carried the scent of dried leaves and faint spices from the shop's open door.

Florence glanced at Clara, perplexed, "You said you wanted to buy a present. Why'd you bring us to this herbal place?"

Clara, dressed in a sleek blouse and heels far too tall for an errand run, leaned in conspiratorially.

"It's not just any herb shop, big sis," she whispered. "They've got something incredibly rare here-Verdantheart Root."

Florence's brow furrowed. "Verdantheart Root? And that's good for what, exactly?"

Clara's eyes lit up. "I work for Jericho Kane, remember? He's got a pharmaceutical empire, and this Verdantheart Root is the missing piece they've been hunting for years. If I snag it, I'll get promoted for sure."

Florence shot her sister a skeptical look. "Come on, you're just a junior buyer in that company, aren't you? Is it really that big of a deal?"

Clara snorted. "You have no idea how business works, sis. Jericho Kane's daughter, Melinda, is the CEO-she's hosting some big banquet soon. If I waltz in with the Verdantheart Root they've been trying to find forever, I'll be set. Guaranteed promotion."

She paused, pressing her lips together in a tight smile. "And it won't come cheap. It'll run at least a few million dollars."

Florence nearly choked. "A few million? You don't have that kind of money, Clara."

"That's why you and Sophia are here," Clara said flatly, crossing her arms over her chest as she raised her chin.

"Lend me the cash. As soon as I hand the herb over to Melinda Kane, they'll reimburse every cent. We'll even turn a profit. You can trust me."

Jack shot Clara a hard stare.

"Trust you?" he repeated under his breath.

Sophia exchanged a cautious look with Jack.

She remembered the countless times Clara had 'borrowed' money-and the family's car-and never offered so much as an apology when it went unreturned. 1 Clara's impatience flared.

"Well?" she demanded. "I'm waiting. You have millions, right? The Lancaster Group basically pours cash into Sophia's bank account daily. She's the president, after all."

Sophia took a slow breath, keeping her voice steady.

"Clara, the company's funds are tied up. We can't just drop a few million on a whim-especially not on something this risky."

1/3

Chapter 211

Clara let out a disbelieving laugh. "Risky? Please. People like me don't fail. I graduated top of my class, I'm talented, I'm smart... The moment I show Miss Kane I can deliver the goods, I'll be promoted on the spot. Think about it-my connections will grow, and you'll get your money back, plus interest. Easy."

Florence tried to temper the situation.

She could see the stubborn set of Clara's jaw and knew exactly where this was headed. "Clara, it's not that simple. High positions don't just fall out of the sky because you handed someone a root."

Clara flicked her gaze dismissively over Sophia and Jack before landing back on Florence.

"Enough. Stop acting like you're worried about me, because I know you're not." Her tone was icy. "Are you going to help me or not?"

Before Florence could answer, Jack stepped forward, frustration simmering.

"No. We're done. You never returned the car you borrowed. You've made promises before, and we're still waiting on those."

Clara's cheeks reddened with fury.

"So that's it? That's how you want to play it?" She turned on her heel and aimed a fierce glare at Florence.

"You're all terrible. The minute I need real help, you turn your backs. I'll make sure Mom and Dad hear how you've 'forgotten' your family. We'll see how well that goes over."

She whirled around and marched off, her heels clicking hard against the pavement.

Florence's heart lurched. "Clara! Wait-let's talk about this!" Casting an apologetic glance at Sophia and Jack, she

hurried after her sister.

"It's just a few million dollars, right? I'll figure something out. Don't be mad."

Jack inhaled sharply through his nose. "Mom, are you serious?"

Florence fixed him with a warning glare. "She's my sister. If I don't help her, who will?"

"You-!" Jack's voice caught in his throat as frustration knotted his brow.

He could already see how this would end: more empty promises, more money down the drain.

Sophia offered a resigned sigh.

"Let it go, Jack," she said, rubbing a hand across her forehead. "Mom's going to do whatever she wants with her own money. We can't stop her."

Immediately, Clara's face lit up like a neon sign.

"See? Big Sister Florence treats me best!" She threw Florence a dazzling smile, one she'd perfected after years of playing the role of the charming, helpless baby sister.

Florence, visibly softening, smiled right back. "Clara, who else would spoil you if not your own sister?"

She reached out and took Clara's hand, her tone brimming with a warmth that bordered on naïveté. "Let's go inside and get you that Verdantheart Root." Clara's grin widened; her routine had worked yet again.

2/3

Chapter 211

Jack felt a bitter taste in his mouth as he watched their mother fuss over Clara.

'Sophia," he muttered, trying to rein in his temper, "are we really just letting Mom give her another free pass? Again?"

Sophia sighed, arms folded tightly across her chest. "You know how Mom is," she said.

"This is how it's always been." There was a hint of exhaustion in her voice, the kind that comes from fighting the same battle far too many times.

Inside King of Herbal, the scent of dried leaves, pungent roots, and vaguely spicy powders wrapped around them like a cloak.

Clara strolled in as if she owned the place, chin held high.

"Hey!" she called out, snapping her fingers at a young shop assistant

"I'm here to buy something worth a million dollars. You're not the one I need. Where's your boss?"

The dismissive wave of her hand was casual but arrogant-like she couldn't be bothered to deal with anyone below the top.

The assistant's eyes flickered with a momentary hint of offense before she forced

a polite smile. "Certainly, miss. This way, please."

She led them through a narrow doorway into a private VIP area.

A thin, middle-aged man stood waiting inside, wearing a crisp vest and an

expression that barely registered surprise at Clara's directness.

"I hear you've got Verdantheart Root," Clara said, "And I hear it's fresh on the market."

The shop owner offered a small bow. "You've heard correctly, Miss. It arrived just yesterday."

A gleam sparked in Clara's eyes. "Good. Let's not drag this out. Name your price."

The man clasped his hands in front of him. "Verdantheart Root is exceedingly rare. We intended to auction it off to ensure we get a fair price."

Clara's lips pursed in annoyance. "Auctions are a waste of my time. Just sell it to me privately. You'll avoid the auction fees and hassle." 2

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 212[988 words]

Clara squared her shoulders, staring down the skinny shopkeeper with unwavering confidence.

"What's with that look?" Clara demanded. "Think I can't afford whatever it is I want? Just name your price."

The shopkeeper raised his hand, spreading five skinny fingers. "If you truly want it, I won't stop you. But it'll cost fifty grand."

"Fifty grand?" Florence eyebrows shot up. "Half a million dollars? You must be crazy. What do you think this stuff is-gold?"

Florence's mind spinning at the amount. She had guessed it would be high, but hearing the price out loud made her stomach drop.

"The price is fair at half a million," the shopkeeper said firmly. "Trust me, this is the best deal you'll get. Quality comes at a cost."

Florence tried a gentler approach. "Is there any way to lower it a little? That's... steep."

But her plea only seemed to irritate him. "You must be new here. Our store's called The King of Herbal for a reason. We don't do haggling. If you want to bargain, go haggle with the Grim Reaper when your time's up see if he cuts you a deal."

He exhaled sharply. "Take it or leave it."

"But-"

Florence was about to speak again when Clara cut her off.

"Enough! Sister Florence, don't make a scene. It's just half a million dollars. We're buying it." Clara rolled her eyes. "Haggling over such a precious item...have some pride."

The shopkeeper's tense demeanor vanished, replaced by an eager grin. "I like that spirit, Miss."

He disappeared behind the counter. "I'll fetch the Verdantheart Root right now."

Jack, standing near his mother, shook his head. He scoffed, Pride, huh? If you so proud, why don't you use your own money?"

Clara narrowed her eyes at him. "Florence, you should teach your son some manners. I'm offering you all a chance to profit, yet he acts ungrateful. No wonder he's always a failure."

The shopkeeper returned, hands wrapped around a large wooden box.

He set it on the counter with the care of someone handling a priceless artifact. "Here it is the Verdantheart Root. Feel free to inspect it. So, will you be paying with cash or card?"

"Not buying," Jack said flatly, his voice cutting through the tense air in the cramped shop. Clara's face darkened with anger.

"If you've got so much money, why don't you buy it yourself?" Jack added, his tone sharp.

Clara snapped, "Florence, control your son!"

"Fine, fine! Jack, enough!" Florence hissed, shooting him a warning glare as she fumbled for her wallet. With a sharp breath, she pulled out her credit card.

7/3

Chapter 212

"I'll pay by card," she declared firmly.

Clara smirked with smug satisfaction. "Go ahead, Sister Florence."

Just then, a shout from the doorway turned every head in the room.

"Wait!" a woman's voice rang out. "That Verdantheart Root belongs to us!"

All eyes fell on a couple stepping inside: Alex and Kelly.

Sophia, who'd been standing behind Clara, stiffened in surprise.

"Alex? What're you doing here?" She caught sight of Kelly clinging close to him, and a pang of jealousy tightened in her chest.

"He's already got Jasmine. Now Kelly too? Unbelievable," she thought, scowling

"Men are all the same."

Kelly spotted Sophia, and her polite smile vanished into an icy glare.

In her mind, Sophia was the greatest threat to Alex's affection—a woman she simply couldn't let linger too close.

Florence folded her arms, her disdainful gaze flicking to Alex and Kelly. "What luck. We bump into them again."

Jack sneered, mostly out of envy. "Alex, you can't be satisfied with one girl, can you? Jasmine's not enough, so you've moved on to Kelly? Some guys have all the luck..."

Clara, meanwhile, sized up the newcomers with thinly veiled annoyance.

"Was that your shouting outside?" she asked coolly.

Kelly stepped forward, chin high. "It was me. Boss," she addressed the shopkeeper pointedly, "we need that Verdantheart Root. Name your price."

"Ha!" Clara's laugh was sharp. "You think you can waltz in and claim it? Who do you think you are? I've already paid half a million for it."

Kelly stayed calm. "We're in urgent need. Would you be willing to do us a favor? We'll pay double whatever you paid."

"Double?" Clara snapped. "Do I look broke to you? I'm not about to beg for your change."

Kelly glanced at the shopkeeper. "Half a million, right? I'll give you a million dollars."

A murmur rippled among the other customers, and the shopkeeper's eyes lit up with dollar signs.

Clara bristled. "You're intentionally trying to start trouble, aren't you?"

Kelly turned her gaze on Clara. "This herb is worth a higher price. I'm just stating facts."

"Fine!" Clara snarled back. "Two million!"

Florence felt her heart plummet. Half a million was barely within reach.

Two million would ruin her. But Clara showed no hesitation.

Kelly's voice remained calm-too calm. "Four million."

2/3

Chapter 212

Clara's eyes gleamed. "Five million, and that's final. Boss, his root is already mine. First come, first served. If you dare sell it to someone else, I'll make sure this place goes under." She snatched the wooden box, practically Juggling it to her chest.

Despite the tension, the shopkeeper was obviously thrilled by the bidding war.

Yet he turned to Kelly with a shrug. "I'm sorry, Miss. She arrived first, and we closed the deal, Fate's on her side."

Clara smirked, triumphant. "Hear that? Money can't always buy what's already mine."

She sent Kelly a self-satisfied glare. Meanwhile, Florence, standing just behind Clara, was close to tears.

Five million would empty her account.

Kelly tried one last time, voice urgent. "I'll pay ten million for you. I'm serious-I need it."

Clara clutched the wooden box tighter, lifting her chin defiantly. "I don't care if you offer me a hundred million. You're not taking my Verdantheart Root."

Kelly's frustration broke through her practiced composure

"You-!" She bit back the insult before it left her lips.

Turning to Alex, she shook her head in frustration. "Alex, do you know of any other herb that works like the Verdantheart Root? We're already here-let's find an alternative. There's no point wasting time arguing with this woman."

"Ten million!" Jack shouted. "I'll sell it to you!"

Without hesitation, he snatched the Verdantheart Root from Clara's hands.

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 213[1,120 words]

Chapter 213

Clara stood there, frozen like a deer in headlights, absolutely blindsided by Jack's lightning-fast move.

Before she could even blink, he'd snatched the wooden box right out of her grip and shoved it into Kelly's hands.

"You slimy piece of trash!" Clara exploded, ripping the box back with a furious yank.

"Steal my shot at a promotion, will you? Sister Florence, would you control your idiot son before I wrap this box around his neck?"

Florence glowered at Jack, pinching his car so hard he yelped. "You little thief, when did you decide it was okay to rob your own aunt?"

Jack rolled his eyes, whining like a spoiled brat. "Mom, I was trying to turn a profit for us. Why blow money on something that won't ever pay us back?"

"Who said I won't pay it back?" Clara snapped, holding the Verdantheart Root's box to her chest like it was her baby. "I'll double the money and throw it in your face if I feel like it!"

Alex finally cleared his throat, attempting some sort of ceasefire.

"Miss, what exactly are you gonna use the Verdantheart Root for?" he asked, voice cautious.

"Not that it's any of your business."

Alex exhaled sharply, frustration evident. "Miss, we just need a few pieces for-" Clara raised her voice, making sure the entire room heard every syllable.

"Let me break it down for you all: The Verdantheart Root is not for sale. Not an inch, not a crumb, not a single spec of dust. You try to get it from me, I'll make sure you regret it."

Alex hadn't expected her to be this stubborn-this borderline spiteful. "Miss..." "Shut it! I said I don't like you, and that's all there is to it. Whether it ends up in the trash or rots in a corner, it's never gonna be yours, got it?"

Clara snatched the bank's card right out of Florance hand, slamming it onto the counter. "Finish the transaction, right now!"

The shop owner handled the payment, all too eager to secure the sweet five- million-dollar deal.

Florence looked like she might pass out, every bit of color draining from her face.

"Clara...five million is insane," she whispered, legs trembling. "That's my entire savings!"

"Sister Florence," Clara said with a wave of her hand, acting like a big shot. "It's just five million. Drop in the bucket. I'll pay you back double. Don't stress."

Florence's mouth fell open.

She did not buy that load of bull for one second. But maybe maybe Clara was different now.

Maybe she'd actually hold up her end of the bargain. Yeah, right.

Money exchanged, the credit slip finalized.

1/3

Chapter 213

Clara practically skipped over to Kelly and Alex, flaunting the wooden box like it was a diamond-studded trophy.

w, never seen something this precious, have you?" she teased, voice laced with mock sympathy.

"Let me do you a favor and show you a real masterpiece."

She flipped the latch, opening the box with an exaggerated flourish.

Everyone crowded around, eyes glued to the so-called "treasure." Inside lay the Verdantheart Root, palm-sized, looking about as majestic as a dried-up cactus on a hot day

Clara's grin collapsed in an instant.

The root was dark gray and wrinkled, barely clinging to any semblance of life.

A piece of it crumbled off the side, turning to dust like ancient papyrus.

"What the hell?" Clara's stomach lurched.

"Boss, are you sure this is the Verdantheart Root? Because it looks like a piece of moldy garlic someone forgot in the fridge for a decade."

The shop owner-Mr. Walter-didn't miss a beat. "Of course it is!" he declared with

a confidence that bordered on arrogance. "Got it from the king of Mysteri Land himself Swear on my life it's genuine."

Clara cocked an eyebrow, her lips pulled tight in frustration. "Then why does it look dead as roadkill?"

Florence snapped out of her shock. "You gotta be kidding me! You scammed us? We're not idiots. This can't be real Verdantheart Root!"

Mr. Walter put up his hands, playing innocent. "Hey, hey, calm down, folks. It's definitely the real deal. The king said it'd been passed down for generations. Maybe it's just..uh...not as pretty as you expected."

Sophia, who'd been quietly assessing the root, spoke up, her tone as sharp as a scalpel.

"It is a Verdantheart Root, sure. But it's obviously been dead for decades. It's just dried-out junk now. How dare you sell it for such a high price?"

Florence's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Dead for decades? Holy crap..... This is worthless!"

"That's right!" Clara hissed, snapping her gaze back to the shop owner. "You conned us, you bastard! Five million for this hunk of garbage? Refund. Now."

Mr. Walter merely shrugged, folding his arms in disinterest "The terms were clear, ladies and gentlemen-no refunds on purchased items. You wanted them; I didn't force you."

Clara's fury exploded. She grabbed him by the collar, her voice like nails on a chalkboard.

"How about I make this real simple? Give me my money back, or I'll show you how we handle scammers in court."

That's when Mr. Walter snapped his fingers.

Within seconds, the floor rumbled with heavy footsteps.

His staff appeared, each one with the posture of someone who wouldn't hesitate to bust heads,

"Listen up," Mr. Walter said, his tone eerily calm. "If these lovely people decide to get violent, kindly show them

out. Hard."

2/3

Chapter 213

"Bunch of idiots," one of the staff sneered, weapon in hand "Starting drama over something they didn't bother to inspect first."

Yeah, they have no clue who they're messing with," another scoffed. "What a joke."

Florence tried to keep the adrenaline from making her knees buckle.

"You think I'm scared because you've got a bunch of hired muscle?" she spat, chin tilted defiantly.

"You jerk. Refund me, or I'll file a lawsuit for fraud!"

Mr. Walter's expression remained infuriatingly calm. "Go ahead," he said with a smirk, daring them to try.

"No one forced you to buy it. My conscience is spotless. In fact, I still have the CCTV footage-I'd be more than happy to bring it to court or even upload it to social media if you'd like."

Florence's fists clenched at her sides, trembling with rage. But she didn't move, too intimidated by the mountain of security closing in.

"You lying sack of crap," Clara snarled, her eyes shooting daggers. "If it's so real, why is it dried up like a month-old pancake? Why didn't you bother mentioning that it was pretty much useless?"

Mr. Walter raised an eyebrow. "I gave you the chance to inspect it before you handed over the payment, darling That's standard procedure. You were too busy running your mouth and throwing money around to notice. Don't blame me."

Clara could practically feel her blood pressure skyrocket.

She glanced back at Florence, her anger mingling with guilt They'd been robbed blind, and it was all on her. "The fish sees the bait, not the hook; the man sees the profit, not the danger.' 1

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 214[1,040 words]

Chapter 214

Kelly threw back her head, laughing so hard it practically echoed in the room. "Five million for a piece of rotten "root? That's the best joke I've heard all year," she sneered, her eyes flashing with glee.

She had zero sympathy for Clara-she'd been waiting for the perfect moment to see her crash and burn.

Clara's glare could've sliced through steel. "Shut your mouth. Before I shut it for you."

"Ooh, scary," Kelly drawled, raising a brow.

"Try it, sweetheart. See if you can get within two steps of me without breaking a bone. Yours, obviously."

Clara's cheeks turned a furious red, and she looked ready to fling the withered root at Kelly's face.

Florence, sensing things could only get uglier, jumped in.

She flashed a desperate smile at Kelly, like a drowning woman begging for a hand. "Miss Kelly Kington, we're from the Lancaster group-your partner in a few deals, remember?"

"Didn't you say you wanted the Verdantheart Root? We'll sell it to you for just ten million. A bargain, right?"

Florence shoved the boxed root toward Kelly, her face hopeful-almost pleading.

Kelly scoffed like Florence had just handed her trash from the gutter. "Ten million for worthless garbage you bought for five? I'm rich, but I'm not stupid." Her derision hit them like a slap in the face.

Jack, never one to keep his mouth shut, stomped forward.

"I tried selling it to Kelly before for ten million, and she was all for it until your 'smart' sister here threw a tantrum! We could've made a killing!"

"Jack, shut it," Clara snapped, but he just puffed out his chest as if he'd done everyone a favor.

Florence, sweating bullets, hustled back to Kelly.

Her voice shook with desperation. "Alright, fine, if ten million is too high, let's settle

on five million. I know your Kingston family has money to spare-you won't regret

it. And the root did come from some foreign king's land, right? That's gotta be worth something."

"Ten million is too high? That's hilarious. You honestly think I'm short on cash? Please-I'm so 'poor' that all I have is money."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "Yet, a withered weed from some no-name kingdom? Wow, what an investment. Hard pass."

Florence's face paled. She dropped her gaze, swallowing her pride. "Two million, then. Two million to take it off my hands. Please."

Kelly's lip curled in disgust. "Do I look like I'm running a charity? That thing isn't even worth a penny. You'd have to pay me to haul it away."

Florence's voice cracked, tears brimming as she glanced around at the crowd.

"How about half a million? Half a million dollars-please, someone!" She could almost taste her own humiliation, but she had no choice.

Better to salvage something than eat a total loss.

1/3

Chapter 214

Kelly snorted, crossing her arms. "This must be a new world record for pathetic." Just when Florence looked ready to collapse, someone spoke from behind Kelly.

"I'll take it for half a million," Alex said, stepping forward.

Kelly shot him a disbelieving look. "What? Are you sure?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "We might be able to save a portion of it. Research, you know. Even if it's dried up, it could have some samples worth studying."

Florence, not about to question her good luck, shoved the wooden box into Kelly's hands and wiped the sweat off her brow.

"No take-backs! I'm transferring ownership right now!"

Kelly shook her head in disbelief but sighed. "Alright, I'll wire the money. Give me your details."

In the blink of an eye, Florence rattled off her account info, and the funds were sent.

The official receipt popped up on her phone, showing half a million dollars.

Relief washed over her features-though it was a bitter victory.

Kelly peered at the sad, crumpled root in her hand. "I really hope there's something usable in this nasty husk,"

she muttered.

Alex gently took it from her, ignoring the curious stares all around.

He knelt, prying open the brittle exterior.

For a moment, he rummaged inside, and the crowd watched in tense silence, half expecting dust to pour out.

Then he stood up, cradling more than a dozen tiny emerald green beans in his palm.

They gleamed under the overhead lights, as if lit from within.

One of them even showed a slight crack, a seedling beginning to sprout.

"Wait, what the hell are those?" Kelly asked, forehead creasing.

Mr. Walter, the shop's owner, froze in place. His jaw fell open. "No way... Are those what I think they are? Emerald Verdantheart Root seeds?!"

That single sentence slammed the brakes on every conversation in the shop. People craned their necks for a better look, eyes widening in shock. "Emerald Verdantheart Root?" someone whispered, half in awe, half in disbelief. Walter nodded, excitement buzzing in his voice.

"Yes! The rarest strain of the Verdantheart Root," Mr. Walter breathed, eyes shining with awe. "A normal Verdantheart is already invaluable, but an emerald variant? That's practically legend-worthy a hundred times more. And these aren't just remnants; they're seeds, the promise of new life. An astounding find, truly."

A ripple of astonishment swept through the crowd. Some gasped; others looked suddenly sick with envy.

"Hundreds of times more valuable?" Kelly repeated, her voice almost squeaking. "You're serious? How much are

2/3

Chapter 214

these seeds even worth?"

Mr. Walter's gaze shone with excitement as he pointed toward the glowing seeds. "I've only ever read about these in ancient tomes," he said, voice trembling with

awe.

"But if you brought these to auction, the bids would easily skyrocket past a hundred million dollars-maybe even higher. People everywhere have been dying to grow the rarest strain of the Verdantheart Root."

A stunned hush washed over the room. People stared, jaws slack, at those tiny green seeds that were suddenly more valuable than all their fortunes combined.

Florence looked like someone had just punched her in the gut. "H-hundred million...?" she stammered, voice cracking.

Mr. Walter nodded grimly. "At least. There's just no telling how high the bids could climb."

Clara felt her knees go weak.

She grabbed the counter to steady herself, her face ghost-white.

The notion that the "trash" root she'd just offloaded for half a million might actually be a king's ransom made her stomach twist.

No one spoke. The magnitude of what just happened spread through the crowd like wildfire, leaving everyone rattled.

Especially Clara and Florence.

They'd held a fortune in their hands, only to hand it over on a silver platter-and with that last horrifying realization, it was all they could do not to scream.

2

Chapter 215

Chapter 215

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 215[936 words]

"Alex, you lucky bastard! You took a gamble on half a million bucks, and it's paying out like a goddamn gold mine. I can't believe these are actual

Verdantheart seeds!"

Even Kelly, who'd seen her fair share of wild riches, couldn't hide her awe.

"I've never even laid eyes on something rumored to be worth hundreds of millions. But thanks to these fools letting it go, here we are"

She shot an incredulous glance at Clara and Florence-her tone cold enough to freeze blood.

"Seriously, though, you two deserve a medal for Most Oblivious Sellers of the Year. I almost feel bad you let it slip- away so cheap...almost."

Her words landed like a series of sharp jabs, making Clara and Florence look even more devastated.

They had basically thrown away a treasure that could've netted them a fortune beyond their wildest dreams.

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From the sidelines, the crowd buzzed with fascination, envy, and raw disbelief.

"Did I hear that right? Seeds of the Verdantheart Root?"

"I'd kill for even a single bean of that stuff!"

"Man, if I knew that garbage husk had these inside, I wouldn't have sold it in a million years," the shop owner groaned, cursing his own blind luck.

Jack, practically trembling with rage, spat through clenched teeth, "Those seeds should've been ours!"

But Florence, eyes wild, suddenly lunged forward.

"This is mine! I want it back!" She reached for the precious seeds, only to be blocked by Kelly's iron grip.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Kelly hissed, fixing Florence with a scathing glare.

"It's my root," Florence snapped, desperation dripping from every word. "I'm returning your half million—take it! Just give me back that treasure."

"You've gotta be kidding," Kelly said, eyebrows shooting up. "The deal's done, lady. Grow up."

As if on cue, Clara stormed in behind her sister. "Quit playing. Hand it over. Right. Now."

The crowd watched, stunned at the brazen demand.

"Wow," someone whispered. "The nerve on these two."

Kelly folded her arms, refusing to budge. "You sold it of your own free will. You can't just holler 'time-out' because you realized you screwed up."

Florence's face flushed red as she lost the last shred of composure.

"I'm telling you to give it back! You scammed us! I swear to God, I'll come at you with everything I've got."

Alex, holding the seeds protectively, met her threats with a quiet coldness. "Scammed you? That unny coming from the same people who tried to unload worthless trash on us in the first place. Now that I've found a hidden

1/3

Chapter 215

treasure, you want to renege?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance."

"You knew all along there were seeds in there!" Clara screamed, voice quivering with fury.

"You set us up-played innocent so you could rob us blind

A short laugh escaped Alex. "Your logic is impressive. Let me spell it out: I took a shot in the dark for half a million, fully prepared to lose every cent. You were the ones determined to offload this 'rotting waste.' So don't stand there blaming me for your own ignorance."

Murmurs from the crowd turned hostile toward Clara and Florence.

"Yeah, they're being ridiculous."

"Trying to backtrack after the money changed hands...shameless."

Someone else snorted, "If they follow that logic, doesn't the root technically belong to the shop owner? He had it first, right?"

Florence's face twisted in rage. "Shut up, all of you!" she shrieked, hands clenched so tight her knuckles turned white.

"Ladies, please, don't hold back! We're recording-give us more of that ungrateful drama. The audience eats this stuff up!"

"Oh, this is gold! Upload it, and watch it go viral in no time!?"

"You-your whole pack is ganging up on us, aren't you? You filthy bunch of lowlives!" Florence snarled, practically foaming at the mouth as she raised a fist.

"I'll knock the lot of you flat if you don't back off!"

Kelly merely scoffed, crossing her arms. "Go ahead and try. But given how your precious 'Lancaster' name is going down the drain right now, maybe the word 'scammer' would suit you better. And don't be shocked if Kingston decides you're not worth partnering with anymore."

Sophia, who had been observing finally spoke. "Enough already, Mother. You lost. Take the blow with some dignity-or any dignity at all, if there's any left. This meltdown is humiliating for everyone."

Stung by Sophia's rebuke, Florence's rage momentarily flickered into shock. "Sophia, you-!"

"Don't look at me like that," Sophia snarled, eyes flashing. If you keep causing a scene, the Kingston group might cut ties with Lancaster altogether. Do you realize how bad that'd be for our family?"

Jack suddenly lunged forward, trying to yank the Verdantheart Root right out of Alex's hands.

But Alex shifted at the last second, causing Jack to clutch at empty air and topple face-first onto the floor in front of everyone.

A ripple of scornful laughter spread through the crowd, their voices dripping with mockery:

"Can you believe this family? They're all stumbling over themselves for a quick buck!"

"Must be some special upbringing-blinded by greed and no shame at all!"

Sophia sighed, "Mom, we won't win this. Let's just go before we make it worse."

Chapter 215

Seething with rage, Florence finally backed off, but not before fixing Alex with a poisonous glare. "Don't think you've seen the last of me. You'll regret this." Clara, stoking the flames as usual, hurled one more string of insults over her shoulder.

"Go ahead, cling to that fancy root. Let's see if you even live long enough to use it! You're a snake, stealing people's money and lives-you're cursed, and fate will chew you up for it. Don't you dare forget my words."

With that, she spun around and stormed out, fury rolling off her like a gathering storm.

Kelly stuck out her tongue dramatically. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out, losers."

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 216[1,060 words]

Chapter 216

The night had been anything but kind to Jasmine.

By dawn, her eyes were shadowed with fatigue, and every page she turned in her endless stack of documents felt heavier than the last.

She hadn't slept a wink. Just as she considered closing her eyes for a second, a firm rap on the door snapped her back to reality.

"Miss," the butler called from the hall, his tone measured but urgent. "Master Charles insists on meeting with you."

Without looking up from the paperwork, Jasmine sighed. Insists, does he? Well, he can stay outside until he collapses, for all I care."

The butler cleared his throat gently. "He's here on official business, Miss-claims he's representing some of the stock folders. He also said he won't leave until you agree to see him."

Jasmine's lips curled in a wry smile. "Typical Charles. Gets a shred of power and thinks he can barge anywhere."

She finally set her documents aside. "Fine. Let him in. If he causes trouble, I'm sure you'll handle it."

The butler inclined his head. "I'm at your service, Miss."

>>

Not three seconds later, Charles stormed in with a smug grin plastered across his face. He scanned the room like he owned it, barely acknowledging the butler's presence.

"Jasmine," he drawled, his voice laced with forced civility. "Long night, I see?"

Jasmine rubbed her temples, refusing to give him the satisfaction of eye contact. "Cut the nonsense, Charles. You've got exactly two minutes before I throw you out."

With a loud bang, he slammed a wooden box onto her desk, causing loose papers to flutter. From inside the box, a single white pill gleamed ominously.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" he demanded, jabbing a finger at the pill as though it were a loaded weapon.

Jasmine leaned back in her chair. "Let me guess. You want me to pretend I'm impressed?"

He scoffed, crossing his arms. "So you really can't recognize the SkinDew Essence? The Kanes have managed to manufacture it. They're about to flood the market. And I bought this one straight from them."

"Oh?" Jasmine arched an eyebrow. "So they got it out the door sooner than we expected. Let me guess-you're here to gloat?"

"Gloat? Are you deaf, or just plain reckless?" Charles snapped.

"This is a crisis for Kingston Pharmaceuticals. The Kanes' product is skyrocketing

in price-eight hundred dollars a bottle. They're practically printing money. Meanwhile, we're stuck with nothing to rival it. Investors are furious."

She lifted her shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. "And you're telling me all this because...?"

His face reddened with frustration. "Because we either need our own SkinDew Essence ASAP or collaborate with Jericho Kane!"

have to

1/3

Chapter 216

At that, Jasmine finally raised her eyes, her gaze as cold as an arctic wind.

"Collaborate with the man who tried to kill me? The same shake who's been stealing my research? Wow, Your nerve is almost impressive."

Charles slammed his fist down again, rattling the pill box. You'd rather see the company collapse than play nice for one deal? You have no idea the storm that's coming! Investors are up in arms, and they blame you for not delivering."

"Oh, spare me the hero act," Jasmine said, voice dripping with disdain.

"I'm not signing any contracts with the Kanes, and you know it. If the board wants to blame someone, maybe they should look at who's been funneling inside information to Jericho in the first place."

His smug smirk faltered. "You watch yourself. If you don't pull off a miracle in the next few days, I'll make sure everyone knows the so-called Kingston heir can't handle her responsibilities."

That made Jasmine's eyes flash with something dangerously close to fury.

She rose from her chair, leaning forward until Charles was forced to back up a step.

"Try me. The second you open your mouth to tarnish my name, I will drag you into court so fast you won't remember what hit you."

For a moment, Charles froze. He'd never seen Jasmine's fury up close like this- nor had he expected her to threaten legal hell so decisively.

Realizing he was out of his league, he sneered, snatched up the wooden box, and spun on his heel.

"Fine," he spat, throwing a venomous glance over his shoulder. "But don't say I didn't warn you. You've got days before everything crumbles, and I'll be right there to watch you fall."

When he slammed the door behind him, the butler exhaled, finally stepping forward. Jasmine merely waved him

off.

"It's fine," she muttered. "I've had worse."

Alex hunched over a long steel counter in a covert facility hidden beneath the streets of Vancouver.

This was Kingsley's secret base, where he usually concocted specialized pills for Kingswell.

But tonight, his focus was on the Seed of Verdantheart Root-a small, unassuming thing he'd salvaged from the rotten husk of its adult form.

He was so immersed in his task that when a presence stirred behind him, he jumped.

"Master..." Alex's voice trembled. He straightened, turning to face the old man who had somehow appeared without warning. The master's eyes seemed to shimmer with an ancient clarity.

"Master, how long have you been here? I didn't sense you come in."

The old master glided forward, gently placing a hand on the edge of the table. "That's not important," he replied, his tone calm yet brimming with unspoken power.

"How are you, Alex? Have you found what you truly seek?"

2/3

Chapter 216

Alex swallowed hard, his chest tightening with old fears.

"I'm... not sure," he confessed, dropping his gaze to the glass beakers on the table. "My family's enemies are too "powerful. I can't face them the way I am now. I need more strength."

The master nodded, absorbing every flicker of doubt and frustration in Alex's voice. "Is that all you wish to pursue? Just power for the sake of vengeance?"

Conflicted, Alex closed his eyes. "I'll do whatever you say, Master. Just guide me." A grave stillness filled the lab.

Then the old master spoke with a gentle insistence. "You are the chosen one, Alex. Before you were born into this world, you made a vow. You promised the True Source that you would help destroy the Archon-the dark creature enslaving all of humanity."

A storm of emotions flashed across Alex's face: shock, longing, a flicker of memory he couldn't quite grasp. "I've ... I've heard rumors of an Archon," he murmured. "But I never believed-"

"Believe it," the master interrupted, his voice resonating with quiet thunder. "You're chained by illusions in this world. Break free, Alex. Remember who you really are.

You must awaken."

Chapter 217

Chapter 217

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 217[1,127 words]

Chapter 217

Alex blinked in confusion.

"I'm sorry-what did you say, Master?"

The old man smirked.

"You heard me, boy. This so-called 'world' is a grand fake but. A cheap illusion. Have you ever bothered to question why you're alive? What's the purpose of life? Where do you go after death-and do you really believe you'll live again once you're dead?"

A chill seized Alex's spine. "Master, are you talking about reincarnation? We die, then return... but with a new life, right?"

The old man's laughter rasped through the room like a rusted nail scraping metal.

"Don't flatter yourself, kid. Who says you get a fresh start each time? What if, after you keel over, you snap right back to day one in the same tired script? Over and over. Like some glitchy video loop that never stops replaying because you're too blind and clueless to notice."

Alex swallowed hard. "That's... horrifying."

"Horrifying?" The master's lip curled, contempt dripping off every syllable.

"What's really scary is that you're alive right now and know absolutely nothing about what that means. You stumble around in a daze, clueless, day after day. Do you even realize how pitiful that is?"

Alex clenched his fists but said nothing.

"Get it through your thick skull, Alex." The master shifted, then swung the staff

with surprising force, smacking the top of Alex's head.

"Find your way out before you waste another eternity."

A flash of pain shot through Alex's skull-and then, darkness.

When he finally opened his eyes, the stark fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, and he realized he was hunched over a steel table in a modern research lab.

Papers were scattered everywhere, leftover food containers stacked in precarious towers.

He straightened, breath stuttering. The memory of the old man's scoffing voice and the crack of that blunt staff still echoed in his ears.

He touched his head, half-expecting a bruise.

"Was that... a dream?" he wondered aloud, teeth clenched. But it had felt far too real. Far too vicious to be a mere fantasy.

He cast a quick glance around the lab, the computer screens blinking like a silent chorus.

"All right," Alex muttered, rubbing the lingering ache on his scalp. "I don't know what you were trying to show me, old man, but I'm listening."

But he had work to do—a mountain of it. There was no time to dwell on dreams about reincarnation or looping lives.

Chapter 217

One Week Later

Jasmine nearly flung her phone when it buzzed for the eighth time that morning.

She snatched it up to see Kelly's name blinking. "Kelly, this better be good," she snapped, the toll of sleepless nights making her voice razor-sharp.

"Oh, it's better than good." Kelly's excitement crackled through the line, ignoring Jasmine's grouchiness.

"Guess what, Jas? Alex pulled it off—he actually synthesized the Emerald Elixir!" "You're kidding." Jasmine struggled to keep her voice steady.

"It's real. I've got it in front of me," Kelly said breathlessly "We even tested a sample. You won't believe the results."

A flicker of hope sparked in Jasmine's chest. "On my way. Don't you dare go anywhere."

Less than an hour later, she was racing through the pristine corridors of Hilton Pharmacy's cutting-edge laboratory.

Kelly met her with a grin wide enough to split her face. She held up a small glass container, heart pounding like she'd discovered buried treasure.

"Look," she breathed, uncorking it. Inside lay a single emerald-green pill that shimmered like a jewel.

"Ready for a test drive?" Kelly teased, offering it.

Jasmine swallowed hard. "I... sure."

She tossed the pill into her mouth, half-expecting a bitter aftertaste. But the taste

was surprisingly refreshing, like the crisp snap of peppermint.

The effect was instantaneous. A soothing tingle flooded her limbs, chasing off the exhaustion that had plagued her for days.

Her cheeks felt warm and subtly tighter, as if her very cells had gotten an upgrade.

She raced to a small mirror on a steel countertop.

The face gazing back was...hers, but improved-bright-eyed, vibrant, as if she'd just had a top-tier spa treatment.

The dark circles under her eyes? Gone. Her skin practically glowed.

"This is insane," Jasmine whispered, fingertips brushing her cheek in wonder. "If this is how a single dose works, I can't imagine the impact on the market."

Kelly rocked on her heels, eyes practically dancing. "All thanks to that rare Verdantheart Root Alex cultivated.

Half a million dollars on that root, but it's paying off big time. We can keep producing this for decades, Jaz!"

Jasmine bit her lip, a grin slowly curving. "He did it. That genius actually did it." All her worries-about Jericho Kane, about the pressure from corporate, about looming deadlines-briefly vanished. Hope replaced the fear, shining so brightly it almost hurt.

She exhaled, regaining a steely resolve. "We need to keep this under wraps until the right moment.

Chapter 217

Kelly's brow furrowed. "Why hide it? Jericho's about to announce SkinDew Essence next week-if we launch our product now, we'd kill their momentum."

"A dark edge crept into Jasmine's smile.

"Exactly. We wait until his press conference. Let him gloat. Then we blindside him with the Emerald Elixir. Public humiliation. That arrogant jerk's riding too high. Time to knock him off the pedestal."

Kelly nodded, her grin morphing into a matching smirk. "This is going to be epic."

That Same Afternoon - At the Lancaster Estate

Jack Lancaster burst into the living room, brandishing a sleek invitation embossed with gold filigree. "Sophia! Tell me you're taking me to Miss Kane's birthday party tonight. I know Charles's flying you in on his private jet. That's the rumored plan, right?"

Sophia let out an annoyed sigh, her manicured nails tapping the invitation that had just arrived. "It's true. He offered a plus-one, but-"

Clara sauntered in, lips curled in a condescending smirk. "I'm the one going," she finished.

Jack whirled around, glaring daggers at her. "You? Seriously?" His tone was laced with contempt. "You can't even pronounce half the brands these people wear. You're going to embarrass us."

Clara folded her arms, eyes narrowing with smug superiority. "At least I won't show up reeking of desperation. The only thing you're good at is slobbering over potential rich girlfriends."

Jack's cheeks burned red. "Maybe I'm ambitious. Ever think of that? And maybe Miss Kane would actually appreciate someone real instead of a two-faced snake in a designer dress."

Sophia pinched the bridge of her nose, exasperated. "Both of you-enough. I can only bring one, and Mom already said yes to Clara."

"Really?" Jack's voice cracked, his bitterness palpable. "I'm your own brother, and you're seriously dragging along a stuck-up, second-rate-"

Clara's eyes flared with anger. "Watch your mouth, you ugly little toad. If you want to go so badly, how about you stow away in the luggage compartment?"

Jack clenched his fists. "Oh, you think you're hot stuff, huh? Truth is, you're just as useless as a knockoff handbag. At least I have blood ties to this family. You're nothing more than a plus-one hanger-on."

"Oh, yeah?" Clara snapped. "Better a plus-one than a plus-zero. Stay home and sulk, loser." 1

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 218[1,181 words]

Chapter 218

Jack felt the blood rushing to his head, ready to let loose a storm of expletives.

His shoulders were tense, fists clenched by his sides, when Florence stepped between him and the inevitable

disaster.

"Jack, enough!" she said, her voice cutting through his fury

"Clara's your aunt. You're going to show her a bit of respect. She came all the way from Vermont, and this birthday bash could help her make some connections. Let her head out with Charles and Sophia."

Jack's glare shifted from Florence to Clara. "Oh, I heard it loud and clear, Mom. Helping dear old Auntie Clara rub shoulders with Miss Kane-great plan. Let me know when can book my slot to kiss her ring."

Clara raised her chin and smirked. "See that? I'll be on the fast track to the high life once I befriend Miss Kane. Maybe I'll toss a few crumbs your way too!"

That was the match on Jack's fuse.

He slammed his open palm down on the edge of an antique vase, rattling it violently. "Do us all a favor, Clara, and don't make promises you can't keep," he growled.

"Jack, watch your tone," Florence snapped.

"My tone was fine before your precious sister showed up," he spat, then stomped off, slamming the door so hard the walls vibrated.

Ever since Clara's arrival, the spotlight had swung from him to her.

Meanwhile, Charles had arranged a limousine to pick up Sophia and Clara.

Outside, the car was sleek and polished under the porch lights.

A private hangar awaited them, where a gleaming jet stood ready to whisk them away.

They sank into the limo's leather seats, the city lights spinning past tinted windows.

Charles cleared his throat. "Sophia, right, I almost forgot." He reached into his blazer and pulled out an ornate jewelry box. "I thought you might like this for the party tonight."

Clara's eyes glittered with curiosity.

Sophia opened the box to reveal a delicate diamond necklace-somehow both understated and dazzling.

"Oh... it's lovely," Sophia said softly, though her discomfort was obvious. "But I already have something from my grandfather. I don't want to impose-this is too expensive. I can't accept."

Charles tried to maintain a casual smile. "Don't worry about it. I just thought-"

"It's stunning!" Clara's squeal cut him off. She snatched the box in a flash, practically shoving it under Charles's nose. "I've never laid eyes on something so exquisite. You said it cost what, a fortune?"

He shrugged, clearly embarrassed by the attention. "A little over a million dollars."

"A million?" Clara echoed, her voice rising a few octaves. She gazed at Sophia with a mix of jealous and awe. "Why would you turn down something so precious? Charles, put it on me just so I can see how it looks!"

1/3

Chapter 218

Without waiting for his response, she held out the necklace. Her eyes shone with expectation.

Charles's movements were hesitant.

He pressed his lips together, trying not to offend either woman. But Clara's eagerness left no room for refusal.

He leaned forward and clasped it around her neck.

She batted her lashes. "Well, Charles, how does it look?"

He shifted uncomfortably, hands settling in his lap. "It looks... it's nice on you, Clara, but-

"Of course it's nice," Clara interrupted, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"I'm just borrowing it, after all. Right, Sophia?" She flashed an overly sweet smile. "Don't worry Charles. Sophia can take it back from me after the party if she wants. Isn't that right, Sophia?"

Sophia's jaw tightened. She wasn't worried about the necklace itself-she hated how Clara could twist a simple offer into something cringingly grand.

"Aunt Clara, you should give it back now," she said, voice low. "It belongs to Charles."

Clara rolled her eyes. "Relax, dear niece. It's just for one night. Don't be so small-minded."

Sophia tried again, forcing calm. "It's not about being petty. I just-"

Clara waved a hand dismissively. "We're all family. And Charles here is so generous. Why would I waste a chance to wear something so magnificent?"

Her eyes shifted to Charles, brazenly flickering with flirtation. "Surely you wouldn't leave a woman necklace- less, especially on a big night. And later, you can help me take it off, I'd be very... appreciative."

Sophia felt a surge of protective anger clamp her heart. She knew Clara's game: promise to return something later," only to magically forget.

But more than that, she resented how Clara stepped all over people's boundaries as if it were her birthright.

"Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret."

So, she opted for silence.

Charles glanced at Sophia, his gaze apologetic, then returned to Clara with a polite nod.

It was clear he wanted no argument.

They boarded Charles's jet, a pristine white aircraft that rose above the city lights.

Clara immediately scooted closer to Charles, filling the flight with her laughter, coy touches, and endless attempts at flirting.

She was practically clinging to him like an ivy, eager for his wealth and status to rub off on her.

Sophia tried to look out the window and ignore the nauseating display.

No wonder Jack's furious, she thought. Clara's a walking gold mine of trouble.

After two hours in the air, they landed in Vermont.

By the time they arrived at Kane's Hotel, it was late evening, the grand foyer illuminated by chandelier light. A

Chapter 218

black limousine pulled up to the entrance, where cameras flashed from all angles.

Charles stepped out first-tall, suave, an air of celebrity around him.

Sophia followed in a sleek black dress, her hair tumbling in soft waves. She wore only a simple heirloom bracelet, letting her natural poise speak for itself.

Then came Clara, done up like a jeweled Christmas tree, hair in a carefully styled chignon to spotlight the million-dollar necklace.

She stepped onto the red carpet with a smirk, expecting the world to gasp in awe.

"Charles, marry me!" someone screamed from the crowd.

"Wow, check out that lady in the black dress-she's gorgeous," another voice called.

"Isn't that the famous Sophia? She's stunning in person!"

Clara waited for her barrage of compliments, but the photographers kept yelling for Sophia.

The crowd angled around Clara, begging for Sophia and Charles to pose together. One journalist even asked Clara to move aside so he could get a better shot of Sophia.

The sting was immediate, a slap of reality across Clara's vanity.

Her cheeks flamed. She had spent hours perfecting every detail, from her glittering hairpins to her designer heels, yet no one seemed to care.

The million-dollar necklace sparkled, but next to Sophia's effortless grace, Clara looked like she was trying too hard-and failing miserably.

She forced a tight smile and tossed her head, swearing under her breath. These idiots have no taste, she thought angrily.

Sophia's just some secondhand wife-how is she overshadowing me? Charles offered his arm to Sophia, guiding her through the throng of well-wishers.

Clara trailed behind, practically trembling with rage. She'd imagined arriving arm-in-arm with Charles, stealing the limelight, taking proud ownership of that diamond necklace.

But in reality, she was just the inconvenient third wheel.

Sophia glanced back only once, catching the resentment on Clara's face. Their

eyes met in a moment of silent tension, and Clara's lips drew into a tight sneer. She held her head high, refusing to break her gaze. I'll come out on top. Just watch, her expression promised.

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 219[1,067 words]

Chapter 219

Chapter 219

Charles stepped into the hotel lobby when Clara suddenly cling to his arm with a dramatic gasp.

She nearly toppled over, pretending to lose her balance.

"Ouch-I'm feeling a bit faint," she murmured, batting her eyelashes. "My blood pressure just dropped out of nowhere. Can you help me? I promise it'll only be a few minutes."

Charles steadied her, concern tightening his features. "Are you okay?"

"It usually never happens," Clara replied, leaning in closer

"Just give me a minute or two to rest." She pressed herself against him as if she couldn't stand on her own, making sure everyone in the room could see how intimately she was hanging on.

Sophia, standing a step away, rolled her eyes.

Clara saw that and pounced on the opportunity.

"Sophia, you said you needed to meet someone important about those connections you were making? Don't let me keep you," she cooed.

Sophia shrugged. "Sure, I'll be upstairs in the banquet hall. Without further ado, she exited.

Clara didn't even watch her go; she was far too busy tightening her grip on Charles's arm, relishing the attention from onlookers who had started crowding around him.

He was from the Kingston family-big money, bigger status.

Clara, with a triumphant smirk, basked in the whispers.

She was putting on a show: leaning her head against Charles's shoulder, tossing her hair, flashing sweet, doe-eyed smiles.

A few men ventured forward to chat her up, but she cut each one down with practiced flirt-and-dismiss. She knew the game: play hard to get and watch them chase.

Suddenly, an excited group of women fluttered in.

"Wow, that necklace is stunning!" one gasped.

"Where did you buy it?" another joined in.

"I've never seen anything so perfect," someone else chimed in.

Clara's face lit up. Nothing drew a crowd quite like jewelry. She pretended to protest, but practically sparkled with pride.

"This necklace? Oh, Charles gave it to me. It's custom-made-there's literally no other one in the world. As for the price... it's really not that big of a deal. A million or two, tops.'

Her feigned modesty only made the crowd buzz louder. 1

"A million or two, and you call that cheap?"

"Charles must think you're pretty special if he's dropping that kind of cash," a woman sniffed, clearly envious.

1/3

Chapter 219

"It's not even about the price how romantic for it to be one of a kind!"

Clara beamed from all the gushing.

She loved that surge of envy and admiration.

She was so preoccupied with playing the queen bee that she barely noticed the sudden commotion at the entrance.

A hush swept through the lobby like someone truly important had arrived. Heads turned. Bella Kane strode in, surrounded by an entourage that parted the crowd for her like she was a superstar on the red carpet.

People clamored to greet her. This was Jericho Kane's daughter-the Bella Kane.

Everyone flocked her way, and even the gathering around Charles and Clara dispersed.

Charles looked tempted to go over but stopped himself, glancing at the chaos. "Not worth fighting through that mob," he muttered.

Clara, on the other hand, felt a pang of envy.

Bella Kane was the star of the day, overshadowing her big moment.

Clara couldn't help but notice that Bella was glowering at the way she was latched onto Charles.

Bella stalked across the lobby and planted herself before them.

"Charles, I've been looking for you. Didn't think I'd find you pinned under someone else's claws." Her voice was

ice.

Charles offered a polite nod. "Just got here, actually."

Bella's gaze dropped to Clara's hands still clinging to Charles's arm. "And who might this be?" she asked, her

tone curt.

Clara released Charles and stepped forward, all false politeness.

"I'm Clara Steel, Miss Kane. It's an honor to finally meet you." She extended a hand in greeting.

Bella didn't take it. Her cold stare remained pinned on Clara. "Do you mind giving me a word with our mutual friend here-woman to woman?"

Charles caught the tension and quickly excused himself. "Sure. I... I'll go find someone I know."

Without missing a beat, Bella pivoted on her heel.

"Follow me." She didn't wait to see if Clara obeyed. She strode to a smaller private room, and Clara scrambled after her, heart pounding yet brimming with excitement.

A private audience with Bella Kane-something others could only fantasize about.

Clara was convinced this was her chance to forge a genuine bond. If she played her cards right, perhaps Bella would come to see her as a kindred spirit-maybe a sister.

And from there, her rise to the top would be unstoppable.

Bella spun around, eyes dark with contempt. "Those jewels are real nice. Where'd you snag them?"

Chapter 219

Clara, trying to keep her composure, flashed the most gracious smile she could manage.

Charles gave them to me. Special order, so you won't find another set like it anywhere. But if they catch your eye, "Miss Kane, I'd be happy to give it to you." "Give it to me?" Bella's voice dropped, dangerously quiet. What am I, a beggar?" Clara blanched. "No, of course not. I just- I only meant that"

The blow came out of nowhere. Bella snatched a decorative candlestick from a side table and cracked Clara across

the face.

The sound was sharp, echoing off the walls. Clara staggered back, hand flying to her cheek.

"Miss Kane-w-why?" Clara managed to stutter, tears of shock pricking her eyes.

Bella's fury radiated off her in waves. "What's your relationship with Charles? I'm not stupid. Nobody tosses around million-dollar gifts for 'just a friend.' Spill it, or so help me, you'll regret breathing by sunrise."

Her lip curled in disgust. "And don't pretend you don't know he's my fiancé."

Clara's heart nearly stopped.

She hadn't realized Bella had a claim that solid-or that Bella would be so... violent. "Miss Kane, there must be a misunderstanding. There's nothing between Charles and me-honestly!"

Without warning, Bella raised the candlestick again and slammed it into Clara's temple.

Clara collapsed to her knees, dizzy with pain. Her ears rang, and her voice trembled. "Stop, please!"

Bella sneered. "You expect me to believe Charles hands out million-dollar necklaces to random groupies? You think I'm clueless? He's mine, and so's his money. You're a nobody who sold yourself to him, you pathetic whore." She dared a glance up at the woman glaring down at her-the woman who, if the rumors were true, practically owned half the city through her father's empire. 'Beware of the flower that blooms too bright-for it drinks blood beneath the roots.'

In that moment, Clara realized she was just a cheap sparkle in a bigger world of ruthless power, and Bella Kane wouldn't hesitate to crush her like an insect.

199

3/3

The Almighty Dominance - kidnapped 220[1,052 words]

Chapter 220

Clara's fingers trembled as she realized she couldn't keep up the charade any longer.

She shot a desperate look at Bella Kane, who glowered down at her from the top of the marble staircase like a queen about to sentence a dead prisoner.

"Miss Kane!" Clara pleaded, voice shaking.

"Y-you have to believe me... I swear, it's not what it looks like. This necklace isn't mine. It's Sophia's-my niece -Charles gave it to her, and I just borrowed it for tonight. That's all!"

Bella's gaze narrowed, eyes cold as steel.

"Sophia Lancaster, you said?" she hissed through gritted teeth.

"Is that the woman who waltzed in here with Charles? The one shameless enough to show off in front of me?"

Clara nodded vigorously, sweat staining the collar of her dress. "Yes, that's her. She and Charles... they came together, and I only tagged along."

"I... I confess I was envious of the necklace, so I took it for myself tonight. But this whole mess—it isn't my doing, Miss Kane. Honest to God. Please... just spare me."

Bella's lips curled back in a sneer.

"That conniving bitch," she spat. "I knew she was scheming. She seduced my fiancé, and now she dares show her face at my banquet? She must be begging for a showdown."

Clara shifted on her feet, every muscle in her body clenching.

She hated how the pounding in her skull wouldn't stop, how the sting on her cheek was a constant reminder of Bella's temper.

"Miss Kane," she begged, "Could you could you let me go now?"

Bella's voice dropped lower, each syllable like a blade cutting through the tension.

"That depends. Tell me exactly how I can get back at Sophia. Because if I don't show that sly fox her place, I'm not Bella Kane. And if you don't help me, you'll be the one drowning in regret."

Clara swallowed her fear, her throat raw. She conjured up a plan with trembling audacity.

"I-I have an idea," Clara said, voice shaking. "What if you give me your bracelet?"

Bella's hand shot out, slapping her hard across the face. "You filthy snake. Asking for my bracelet?"

Clara winced, cheek burning, but forced a smile.

"Not for me. I'll plant it in Sophia's handbag. Make it look like she's the thief. Then... you can do whatever you want to her."

Bella's dark eyes lit with dangerous delight.

"Well, aren't you devious." She yanked a golden, diamond-studded bracelet off her wrist and tossed it into Clara's hands. "Fine. Plant it. Then give me a signal when you're done."

Clara fought the bile in her throat, forcing a simpering smile. "Thank you, Miss Kane. I won't disappoint you."

Chapter 220

Bella smiled back, all sharp edges. "See that you don't."

Back in the swanky banquet hall, Sophia Lancaster stood next to Charles, exchanging polite greetings with the upper-crust guests.

The hush of crystal chandeliers and murmured conversation was soon broken by

Clara stumbling in, panting and with a reddened cheek.

Sophia frowned at the sight. "Clara, what happened? Your face is all-"

"I, uh-fell," Clara answered awkwardly, hurrying to change the subject. She forced a shaky laugh and eyed Sophia's handbag.

"Sophia, can I borrow your makeup for a sec?"

Sophia arched an eyebrow. "Didn't you bring your own?"

Clara's eyes darted anxiously. "Please, just let me use yours. I need to fix this smudge before anyone sees."

With a sigh, Sophia reached into her bag-but Clara snatched it from her before she could respond.

"I'll just grab it myself," Clara said with a strained laugh.

Sophia stiffened, clearly annoyed, but chose to let it go with a subtle eye roll.

A moment later, Clara shoved the bag back at her, mascara in hand. "Thanks, dear," she said sweetly, as if the word alone could smooth over the whole thing.

Then she practically sprinted off to the restrooms, nodding at Bella on the way. The signal was given.

Not two minutes later, Bella Kane made a theatrical entrance from the far side of the banquet hall.

Like a queen addressing her court, she raised her hand, and the chatter died down immediately.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Bella said loudly, her lips a perfect scarlet slash.

"I have an important announcement. This evening was supposed to be a celebration, but something dreadful has happened."

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

Bella pressed a dramatic hand to her chest.

"I seem to have... lost my precious diamond bracelet-the one my grandfather gave me. It's priceless in sentiment and worth a fortune besides. I'm heartbroken to think it's missing in here."

"If anyone has found it, I would be immensely grateful if you returned it. I will give you reward."

A tense murmur spread across the banquet hall.

People shuffled, glancing around to see if anyone would step forward.

When no one did, Bella's eyes flashed with feigned sorrow and well-practiced malice.

"I truly hope someone has just picked it up by mistake," she continued, voice pitched high with faux 'eetness.

2/3

Chapter 220

"But if it's been deliberately taken... well, I'm sure none of us wants a thief to walk free."

Anger and sympathy erupted among the guests:

"We'll help you, Miss Kane! We won't let a criminal go unpunished!"

"A stolen bracelet? That's horrible. Who'd have the nerve to do that here?"

"We'll find whoever did this!"

Bella held up a hand again, silencing them. "Someone whispered to me that a guest here slipped it into her purse

someone who thought no one was watching."

Her gaze, cold and triumphant, landed on Sophia. "And that person..... is none other than Miss Sophia Lancaster."

A shocked hush fell over the hall, then hushed speculation Broke out in ripples.

"Wait, isn't that the president of Lancaster Group?"

"That can't be right-why would she steal anything?"

"You never know with these powerful types. Maybe there's more to her than meets the eye!"

Sophia's heart hammered, but she masked her panic with an icy calm. "Miss Kane, this has to be a misunderstanding. I haven't taken anything of yours."

Charles stepped forward, trying to diffuse the tension. "Bella, don't be ridiculous. Sophia doesn't need to steal from anyone, least of all you. Just forget this nonsense."

Bella let out a sharp laugh. "Ridiculous, am I? Charles, open your eyes. That woman is playing you for a fool! She's nothing but a greedy little snake who-" "Stop," Charles cut her off, glancing apologetically at Sophia. "Bella, I know you're upset, but humiliating my guest-"

"My guest?" Bella snarled, turning her glare on him.

"I am your fiancée, Charles. Not that thieving tramp. She won't leave this room until her bag is searched, and we'll see what sort of 'misunderstanding' it is then."