

The Ex-Wife's Burning Elegance - Chapter 17[496 words]

Stella turned her head and spotted a rebellious-looking young man swaggering over with a group of his rowdy friends. She recognized him instantly - Jasper Wilkinson.

He was Haynes' friend and one of Rachel's most devoted admirers. From the first day Stella dated Haynes, Jasper made it clear that he didn't think much of her, constantly mocking and belittling her.

When Rachel returned, Jasper was the most enthusiastic go-between, ferrying messages between Rachel and Haynes. If Rachel had so much as a sniffle or a hair out of place, Jasper would be on the phone to Haynes, urging him to rush to her side. More than once, he'd suggested Stella step aside for Rachel.

Jasper sauntered to Stella, a mocking grin on his face. "Hey there, the housewife. Shouldn't you be at home learning to be the perfect homemaker and keeping your husband happy? What are you doing out here, showing your face in public? That's not how a good housewife behaves."

Stella was the sort of woman who could host a dinner party with grace and whip up a mean apple pie without breaking a sweat. She was so adept at it all. So, Jasper had nicknamed her "Housewife." From then on, anyone in Haynes' circle who saw Stella would greet her with that same derisive title.

Jasper's attitude and tone were grating, and Abby furrowed her brow in annoyance. Stella maintained composed, her expression turning icy.

Seeing this, Jasper didn't back down. Instead, he whistled, feigning surprise. "Oh, come on, the housewife. Don't tell me you can't take a little joke?"

His buddies interrupted, egging him on. "Yeah, Mrs. O'Brien, lighten up! Don't be so uptight. You'll embarrass Haynes!"

"Besides," one of them added, "Jasper's right. Aren't you just a housewife, looking after your husband and child?"

"You think you can compare to Rachel?" another sneered. "Rachel graduated from the prestigious Neo-Vespera University, in case you didn't know."

"Neo-Vespera University," Abby repeated, looking at Stella. "I've never heard of Rachel!"

Jasper snorted, casting a dismissive glance at Abby. "You've got a lot to learn. Try getting out more to broaden your horizons."

Abby raised an eyebrow. "Star, who is this guy? He's got a real superiority complex, doesn't he?"

Stella replied coldly, "One of Rachel's admirers. You can call him a simp."

"Oh, he's Rachel's simp!" Abby exclaimed, her anger dissipating. "No wonder he's so annoying. It makes sense now."

Jasper's face fell, but Stella smiled at him sweetly before he could retort. "Mr. Simp, you can take a joke, can't you?"

Having witnessed their earlier taunts, Abby jumped in. "No way. A grown man like you can't handle a little teasing? That's pretty weak. Don't you think so?"

Stella added smoothly, "Don't mind him, Abby. He's not worth our time."

Jasper's crew shifted uncomfortably, realizing they had a taste of their own medicine.

Abby laughed, "You're the simp, the big simp, always flattering but never getting anything. Come on, Star. Let's go have some fun."

And with that, they turned their backs on Jasper and his friends, leaving them to stew in embarrassment.

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Stella nodded and turned to leave.

Jasper stood there, gritting his teeth, watching her walk away with a face as sour as if he'd bitten into a bad lemon.

His friends exchanged awkward glances.

One of them chuckled nervously and said, "Those two women must be out of their minds, calling Jasper a simp? No way! Jasper's..."

His words faded into an awkward silence. The truth was, while those women might have been harsh, they had a point, didn't they? Jasper did come off as a bit of a simp.

Another friend quickly jumped in to save face, "Jasper is Rachel's knight in shining armor. That's more like it!"

Everyone else hastily agreed, "Yeah, yeah, a knight in shining armor!"

Just then, a gentle voice broke the awkward silence. "Jasper, why aren't you guys in the private room? What's going on here?"

Jasper turned to see a man and a woman approaching. The man was tall and handsome, exuding a refined aura. The woman was petite and lovely, delicate in her demeanor.

Upon seeing them, Jasper's eyes lit up. He hurried over, ready to spill the beans, embellishing the story as he went, accusing Stella of all sorts of mischief.

"Haynie, Rachel, guess who I saw? Stella! She's here and shamelessly said she was looking for some fun!"

"I mean, she must have too much time on her hands to be fooling around. She used to cook only one meal for Rachel, but she should be doing all three!"

"Haynie, you shouldn't tolerate such reckless behavior from a woman like that!" Rachel frowned slightly at his words.

"Looking for fun?" She turned to Haynes, furrowing her brow. "Haynie, it's pretty late. Ms. Cameron wouldn't have left Keen alone at home, right?"

Haynes' brow furrowed at the mention of Stella's name.

Rachel studied Haynes' expression, speaking softly, "Haynie, with Keen's health, is it okay for him to be home alone?"

Haynes pressed his lips tightly, his face clouded with a hint of frustration. "Keen is staying at the O'Brien Mansion today."

He had hoped to use Keen to show Stella the error of her ways. But she hadn't even bothered to come home.

Rachel paused, understanding dawning on her. "Haynie, Ms. Cameron has been at home taking care of everything. She hardly steps out. Maybe she just needed a break."

She lowered her head, feeling guilty, "It's my fault for not considering her feelings, having her make those meals for so long. She's exhausted, and it's fair she wants to stop."

Before she could finish, Jasper burst out angrily. "What? Stella's stopped making your meals? If she hadn't pushed you into the water, your health wouldn't have worsened!"

"And now she just doesn't care? How dare she!"

Rachel quickly grabbed Jasper's arm, trying to calm him. "Jasper, I've told you it wasn't Ms. Cameron's fault. I fell in by accident..."

"Rachel, you're too nice. That woman is the cause of all this, and you're still standing up for her?" Jasper said, turning to Haynes in frustration. "Haynie, seriously, are you really going to let her get away with this and hurt Rachel?"

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Haynes felt a flicker of irritation rising and said curtly, "Enough."

Jasper opened his mouth to protest, but Rachel stepped in, giving him a quick shake of her head. "Let it go, Jasper. It's Foreman's birthday today. Let's head inside."

Noticing Haynes' displeased expression, Jasper wisely decided to hold his tongue.

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Inside the private room, Abby had initially planned to hire a few male entertainers, but Stella was against it, leaving Abby no choice but to drop the idea with disappointment.

"The guys here are top-notch, real eye candy! Those six-packs, the feel of them... wow! You'd have to touch them to believe it, simply irresistible."

Stella replied, "I'm gearing up for a divorce with Haynes. I need to be cautious now. I don't want to give them any ammo. I can't afford any slip-ups."

Abby nodded thoughtfully. "You're right. There's no need to hand them any weapons."

Unable to sit still and lacking male company, Abby sang and danced to the music. A moment later, Stella's phone buzzed. She glanced at the caller ID and saw it was Antoney.

With a quick gesture to Abby, Stella slipped out to take the call.

Antoney was calling to discuss his plan to start a new studio. His contract with the agency was about to expire, and with Stella contemplating a comeback, he thought it would be the perfect time to launch his venture. Stella agreed without hesitation.

After hanging up, Stella headed to the restroom. While leaving, she saw Rachel touching up her makeup at the sink.

Stella glanced at her before turning away to wash her hands.

As she was about to leave, Rachel called out to her. "Ms. Cameron."

Stella turned around, "Yes?"

Rachel smiled softly and reached into her bag. "Take a look, Ms. Cameron. Do you recognize this?"

In Rachel's hand was a simple but old-fashioned cross.

Stella's breath caught for a moment, her brow furrowing slightly.

Rachel smiled. "I heard from Keen that you prayed for a whole day and night at the church with this cross when Keen was ill."

Stella's expression was cold. "What's your point, Ms. Pearce?"

Rachel dangled the cross. "Keen told me his fever broke after you gave him this cross. So, he gifted it to me, hoping it would bring me good health, too."

When Keen was three, a severe fever had left him critically ill.

The doctors tried everything-medications, cold compresses-but nothing worked. They had even advised the family to prepare for the worst, bringing Keen home for what they thought would be his final moments.

Haynes' sister had suggested a euthanasia injection to spare Keen more suffering.

But Stella refused to give up, willing to try anything.

With the doctors at a loss, she turned to faith. Whether by coincidence or miracle,

the day she returned with the cross, Keen's fever began to break. From that point on, his health steadily improved.

When Keen was still attached to her, he once said, "This is the cross Mom got for me. I'll wear it every day and keep it safe."

Stella had never imagined this cross would be in Rachel's hands one day.

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Rachel casually brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear, revealing a delicate emerald bracelet on her wrist. The bracelet shimmered with a gentle glow, its serene green somehow strikingly bold.

Stella's eyes widened in disbelief. That bracelet was the O'Brien family heirloom, traditionally passed down to the daughters-in-law. But Deanna O'Brien, Haynes' mother,

had never liked Stella. Even after Stella had Keen, Deanna remained indifferent, barely acknowledging her presence.

Deanna always preferred women from prestigious backgrounds and wasn't fond of Rachel either. She had played a part in breaking up Haynes and Rachel back then. Ironically, Haynes had married Stella, whom they all looked down upon. The entire O'Brien family treated her like an outsider. Even the staff at the O'Brien Mansion mocked her, believing she had schemed to marry into the O'Brien family.

For the first few years of their marriage, Deanna couldn't stand the sight of Stella and barred her from setting foot in the mansion during holidays. But as Keen grew up, his resemblance to Haynes became undeniable, and his sharp wit eventually softened Deanna's stance. She even handed the heirloom bracelet to Keen, instructing him to give it to his future wife one day.

Keen clutched the heirloom like a dragon guarding its hoard. "Grandma says this stays locked up tight 'til I pick a wife," came his miniature patriarch's decree. "No bracelet, no wife!" His grave recitation of Deanna's dogma had sparked laughter.

But the situation felt like a cruel joke to Stella. The bracelet seemed to leech warmth from the room, its ancestral whispers hissing cruel truths: You were never one of us.

Noticing Stella's gaze, Rachel smirked with challenge and triumph in her eyes. "Keen gave this bracelet to me," she boasted, "He said it's for the O'Brien family daughter-in-law. He didn't give it up even when his mom asked for it."

Stella remained silent, watching Rachel's performance unfold. Rachel continued, her voice dripping with satisfaction. "He wants me to be his mom, the O'Brien daughter-in-law."

"Oh, by the way, Ms. Cameron, did you know a family event this weekend that requires both parents to attend?"

Family event? The mention jogged Stella's memory. A few days ago, Haynes came home early for dinner. While in the kitchen, she overheard Keen talking to Haynes about an "event" and "Rachel." When she returned to the dining room, Keen stopped talking, not wanting her to know. At the time, Stella's aversion to Rachel had reached a peak. She couldn't stand hearing her name spoiling their rare family time, so she didn't press the matter.

Rachel's voice snapped Stella back to the present. "Keen mentioned all his classmates' moms are either socialites or celebrities, and it's embarrassing for him to say his mom is a housewife."

With a sly smile, Rachel leaned closer and whispered, "Do you know what Keen tells people about you? He says you're his nanny, so you always bring him lunch and pick him up from school."

