

# Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“It’s also possible that they didn’t have time to retreat. Once the royal decree was issued, the military advanced on Graystone immediately. Zorro would have no choice but to fight back,” Sebastian analyzed, trying to understand the unfolding events.

“And now,” he added, “the only way to get accurate intel from Graystone is through Zeke. Xero can monitor the situation from the outside, but he can’t infiltrate the core.”

“I already tried messaging Zeke, Caitlin said, holding up her backup phone. “No response. I’m starting to worry—what if something’s already happened to him?”

“Give it a little more time,” Sebastian said gently. “There’s a war going on over there. He’s probably overwhelmed.”

“But if our plan ended up triggering internal conflict in S Country, it’s the innocent people who will suffer the most,” Caitlin said, her heart heavy. “This collaboration between me and Zeke might’ve been too aggressive.”

The biggest fear was that Zeke, too eager for revenge, had exposed himself. And Zorro wasn’t the kind to let that slide.

Sebastian seemed to have already made up his mind. He gripped Caitlin’s shoulders. “To be safe, I’m considering heading to S Country myself. Zeke might need support.”

“I don’t want you to go!” Caitlin wrapped her arms around him tightly. With Black Wolf Fortress trying every possible tactic to destroy Sebastian, leaving the country would make him vulnerable. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing him.

Feeling her cling to him like that, Sebastian gently patted her back. “Okay, okay. I won’t go. I’ll send someone else from our side to handle it. Xero can keep tabs on the situation for us.”

Caitlin nodded, finally easing up.

Just then, a staff member entered. “Mr. Vanderbilt, Madam–Ms. Ximena is here. Shall I bring her in?”

Caitlin exchanged a glance with Sebastian. “She must be here about Zeke.”

Sebastian nodded. “Have her brought to the sitting room.”

A short while later, they both descended the stairs and found Ximena waiting in the parlor.

“Ximena,” Caitlin greeted her warmly.

“I’m sorry for dropping by uninvited,” Ximena said politely, standing up.

“It’s alright. Please, have a seat.”

Once seated, Ximena got straight to the point. “I came to ask about Zeke. Why haven’t we heard anything? Did something go wrong with the plan? I saw international news that said Graystone is at war!”

She’d seen the headlines and couldn’t hold back her worry. Knowing her son was still in Graystone, possibly in danger, she didn’t dare reach out to him directly.

“I know. I’m waiting on news from him too.”

Right as Caitlin said this, her phone chimed. She took it out—and froze. “It’s a message from Zeke!”

She could hardly believe the timing.

“Read it!” Ximena urged.

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Caitlin opened the message and read aloud:

Graystone and the royal army are officially at war. Our plan has to be postponed. Wait for my next message. Stay safe and don't worry.\*\*

"He says he's okay. He's telling us to wait for his next message."

Ximena exhaled in relief. "Alright, as long as he's safe, I can rest easy."

Having received word of her son, Ximena prepared to leave. But before she walked out, she turned to Caitlin again. "I heard you're participating in the design expo tomorrow? Competing against Zora?"

"That's right. Miss Harris brought it on herself."

Ximena gave a wry smile. "Then I hope you teach my arrogant daughter a good lesson. I can't control her anymore."

"With your blessing, I won't go easy on her."

"Thank you," Ximena said with genuine appreciation. As she stepped out of Vanderbilt Manor, she paused again. "By the way Caitlin—would it be alright if I saw Patricia for a moment?"

“Of course. I’ll have someone take you.”

Caitlin called for Lucy and asked her to take Ximena to see her granddaughter.

After Ximena left, Caitlin reread Zeke’s message. Though it reassured her on the surface, something about it still left her

uneasy.

She couldn’t quite explain it, but the feeling lingered.

In S Country, the situation had fully escalated.

Graystone’s count, Zorro, publicly accused the royal family of provoking the war and claimed that Graystone was being unjustly oppressed. He rallied the citizens for support.

Many, unaware of the deeper political struggle, sided with their local leader. Petitions spread like wildfire, calling for the king to cease the assault. The people wanted peace.

Meanwhile, the royal family also issued public statements urging citizens not to resist and calling on the Graystone military to surrender.

But neither side made a move *to* retreat. The standoff continued at the border.

Inside Graystone, Zorro remained in full control. With Shadow Moon Pavilion and his private army behind him—and the support of countless citizens—he felt invincible.

He had no intention of surrendering. In fact, he was determined to force the royal family to retreat first. If not, he'd drag the conflict out as long as necessary.

In the castle's underground chamber, Zeke was shackled in chains, held prisoner and stripped of freedom.

He was racking his brain, trying to figure out how to escape and re-establish contact with Caitlin. But for now, every asset he

had was under Zorro's control.

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While he was still deep in thought, the heavy door creaked open.

A figure stepped in, backlit by the hallway behind him.

Zeke squinted and saw the uniform first—his own. His gaze moved upward as the man approached.

“Samir?” Zeke hissed, instantly furious.

He tried to lunge, but the chains restrained him.

Samir looked completely different now—polished, confident. He wore Zeke’s uniform like it was tailored for him.

“Vice Commander, what do you think?” Samir extended his arms theatrically. “Looks good on me, doesn’t it?”

Zeke’s expression twisted with rage. “You traitorous bastard.”

“I think this uniform suits me better than it ever suited you,” Samir said, almost gleeful. “Your room, your bed—I’ve been enjoying it all.”

Zeke spat at him. “You filthy dog. I was blind to ever treat you like a brother.”

Samir wiped the spit from his face with a handkerchief, expression unmoved. Then, without warning, he delivered a vicious punch to Zeke’s gut.

Zeke groaned, doubling over from the pain.

Grabbing Zeke by the collar, Samir leaned in with a sneer. “Brother? You’re not even qualified to say that anymore. You’re nothing but a prisoner.”

Zeke glared up at him, eyes burning with hatred.

Samir shoved him back, adjusted his collar, and smirked. “It’s about time I told you something. Wanna hear it?”

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Zeke stared Samir down, eyes burning, but said nothing. Samir turned his head, his voice low and icy.

“Zeke, listen carefully,” he said.

“The boss has known from the start that you’re not his biological son. He knew before you were even born.

I am his real son. His blood runs in my veins.

Well? Shocking enough for you?”

A twisted, triumphant smile spread across Samir’s face.

Zeke’s eyes widened in disbelief. Then he shook his head furiously. “That’s impossible! Who are you trying to fool?”

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“Why would I lie to you?” Samir scoffed. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for this day? I’ve lived my life in the shadows as the illegitimate son. Only after the boss completely gave up on you could I finally rise.”

Zeke’s eyes flickered. Now that Samir had said it out loud, he could no longer ignore the resemblance. Samir’s features bore a noticeable similarity to Zorro’s. As for himself—he had never looked like Zorro at all.

He even remembered joking in the past that Samir looked more like Zorro's son than he did. And now, the truth was hitting him like a freight train.

It all made sense. Everything.

'So... you're the child of my wet nurse, Daniela, and Zorro?' Zeke asked, horror creeping into his voice.

"That's right," Samir said with feigned regret. "We both grew up on my mother's milk. We were like brothers... shame we weren't."

"Why? Why this way?" Zeke asked again and again. "If you're his real son, why have you spent your life as my subordinate?"

It was the question that hurt the most.

Samir sneered. "Because of my mother's status. She was nothing but a servant. I was born beneath the family name. The boss kept me in Graystone, forbade my mother from ever revealing the truth, and made me serve at your side. I had to call you 'young master while knowing I was the real heir. The count's true son."

"Why would he do that?" Zeke demanded. He just couldn't understand why Zorro would raise a child he knew wasn't his and keep **his** real son hidden.

Samir's lips curled, "The boss had his reasons. He once told me my role was to keep an eye on you. If you ever turned **against** him, I was to stop you—by any means necessary.

"And the bigger reason? He wanted his real son to grow up safely, away from danger. You were just the decoy. The shield. His human scapegoat

Zeke let out a bitter, broken laugh. "A decoy..."

He'd already thought his life story was tragic enough. But now this?

Used from the beginning. Raised to be a pawn.

He had tried to outsmart the old fox—and instead, had walked right into his trap.

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Zeke clenched his fists.

"You're desperate to get in touch with Caitlin, right?" Samir suddenly said. "Well, I can help with that."

Zeke glared. “What the hell do you mean?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

Samir left the chamber. A short while later, he returned—and Zeke recoiled.

He was staring at his own face.

“You... you disguised yourself as me?” Zeke spat, appalled.

“Easy enough,” Samir said, smirking. “If I go to the US posing as you, Caitlin won’t suspect a thing. I know everything about your habits and how you talk.”

He showed Zeke his phone—Zeke’s phone—and tapped the screen.

“Look. I even texted her already, in your style. She responded right away. Told me to be careful.”

Zeke’s blood boiled.

“Samir, I swear to God, if you so much as touch her, I’ll haunt you to your grave!”

“Relax. I’m not stupid like you. I wouldn’t throw away everything for a woman. I’m going to help Father get the codex and bring his grand plan to life.

“You just stay here quietly. Once our mission’s done, you’ll be useless to us. That’s when your time’s up.”

Samir burst into maniacal laughter, then turned and walked out.

“Samir! You bastard! Get back here!” Zeke shouted.

But the heavy door slammed shut again, leaving him in darkness.

For the first time, Zeke realized how powerless he truly was.

Everything he’d fought for—all the progress, all the light he thought he was reaching for—was being dragged back into the **pit**

By them.

Was this his fate?

No. He refused to believe it

He had to find a way to escape.

In the US, the Piano Prince Federico had kept his promise to Caitlin.

Using **his** immense influence, he posted a video on the most widely used global social media platform, holding up a photo of Ashfall and appealing to viewers worldwide for help in finding his long-lost friend.

He even included the contact info of his studio, offering a generous cash reward to anyone who could provide accurate

leads.

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Thanks to Federico's fame, the video spread like wildfire. His international fan clubs joined in, sharing the message across

countless communities.

If Ashfall was still alive somewhere, someone would eventually see it.

All Caitlin could do now was wait.

But while waiting, she had another battle to face—the National Design Expo, held in New York City.

Federico and Hayden had already promised they'd be in the audience to support her.

The competition gathered top designers from across the country. The venue? The largest exhibition center in New York.

To ensure fairness, the judges' panel hadn't been announced publicly yet, to prevent competitors from trying to bribe or influence them in advance.

On the day of the event, all the qualifying designers—those who had passed both online and in-person selection rounds—arrived with their final submissions.

Caitlin and Zora arrived almost at the same time.

Both women stepped out of their respective vehicles, catching each other's eye.

Tension filled the air like *static*.

“Caitlin, Zora said, her voice thick with challenge, “this is it—the final showdown. Don't forget our bet. Loser gets kicked out of the design world.”

Flanked by her team, Zora's smug expression practically demanded a fight.

Caitlin's aura was calm but powerful. “It's still too early to say who'll win,” she replied coolly. “We'll see.”

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The two women locked eyes in the thick tension of rivalry, neither willing to back down. They entered the venue through separate entrances.

Caitlin headed straight to her assigned dressing room. Inside, Molly was already directing the models' makeup and prep. The garments had arrived, and the models were starting to change.

"Thank you for everything, Molly," Caitlin said with heartfelt gratitude. None of her shows would be this flawless without Molly's unwavering support.

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"Thank me? Please. Helping you is helping myself," Molly replied, pulling Caitlin over. "Come check the makeup. Tell me if we need to adjust anything."

The two women got to work, deep in the flow of last-minute preparations.

Meanwhile, in Main Hall 7—the largest hall in the exhibition center—guests were pouring in. Reporters from every major fashion magazine were present, as were countless influencers and industry elites.

Sebastian and Caitlin's circle had also come out in full force: Nolan, Benjamin, Simon and Wendy, Hayden, Federico, and even Yates all showed up to support her.

With big names like Federico and Yates in the audience, the runway show's prestige jumped several levels.

The setup was grand. From the staging to the lighting, it was clear that this event was on an international scale.

The host soon took the stage and introduced the three celebrity judges—top designers from across the globe: Alessandro from Italy, Etienne from France, and Tobias from Germany.

The audience was stunned. Getting even one of them would've been impressive. Having all three on the panel made it clear just how serious the organizers were.

These three would judge today's runway presentations and determine the top three finalists.

The show officially began. The designers who had drawn early slots were already presenting their collections,

Notably, **Justin** from TIC had also advanced to the final round, earning his spot to compete alongside Caitlin.

Her slot was toward the end of the program, giving her plenty of time to finish prep work.

Elsewhere, Zura was giving final instructions to her models. Her runway time was a few slots ahead of Caitlin's

She didn't attempt to bribe or befriend the judges this time. The organizer had kept the jury lineup a secret, making it impossible to pull strings.

Now that the judges had been revealed, Zora realized she had no personal connections to any of them. Her only option was to beat Caitlin with pure skill—and she poured everything into her designs to do it

But to win, she had to know her opponent

After spotting Jillian, Zora said, “Didn’t you say you’re around Caitlin a lot because of your brother? Go find out what style she’s showing today. Better yet, film it and send it to me.”

Jillian immediately shook her head. “Sorry, Zora. I’m not doing that. If my brother finds out, he’ll break my legs. You should just focus on the competition. By the way, I came to tell you something”

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“What?”

“I’ve decided to quit. I sent my resignation to your inbox. Tomorrow will be my last day at XEG”

Jillian had come to deliver this in person.

“What? You’re quitting? Why?” Zora asked, stunned. “I’ve given you a great position—lead designer the moment you returned from abroad. Not everyone gets that. I’ve treated you well, haven’t I?”

Jillian almost laughed. Treated her well?

Zora had only made her chief designer so she could push blame if things went wrong.

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Worse, Jillian had submitted her own designs to the competition under XEG, only to find out Zora had never turned in her application. She had been told she didn’t make the cut—when the truth was, Zora hadn’t even given her a chance.

That was all Jillian needed to see.

“Thanks for the opportunity, but maybe I’m just not cut out for this field. My parents are against it, too. I’m really sorry. You focus on the competition. Good luck.”

Jillian chose not to burn bridges. She took the loss gracefully and walked away, finally free.

Zora watched her leave, fuming.

It had to be Caitlin.

She must've bribed Jillian somehow and pulled her over to the other side.

That manipulative witch. Why does she always have to play dirty?

Meanwhile, Jillian felt lighter than she had in months. She found her brother near the stage—right as she ran into Hayden again.

“Mr. Klein, you're here to watch the competition too?”

They had already exchanged contacts last time and gotten along pretty well.

“Of course. Want to sit with me?”

There happened to be an empty seat beside him, and he motioned for her to join.

“Sure”

Jillian accepted his offer and sat down beside him. Their eyes met for a brief second. Flustered, she quickly turned away.

Though neither of them said anything, a strange chemistry began to build in the space between them.

Hayden couldn't stop glancing at her. There was something about her presence that pulled him in.

Leaning slightly closer, he asked, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Jillian was caught off guard. She turned her head and nearly bumped into his lips. She blushed and replied quickly, "No, I

don't. But... I did like someone once."

She was honest. No point hiding it.

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"Who?" Hayden asked.

She gave a little laugh. “Sebastian, of course. But he’s with Caitlin now. I wish them the best.”

Hayden appreciated her honesty and simply smiled. Something between them shifted again—closer this time.

A few rows ahead, Simon and Wendy were also seated. Wendy wasn’t happy. For some reason, she’d been placed next to Benjamin.

She looked at her brother and whispered, “Hey, can we switch seats? I want to sit by you.”

“Sure.”

Simon didn’t care where he sat. Wendy got up to switch, but before she could move, a strong hand yanked her back into her

seat.

Startled, she turned to find Benjamin’s hand on her waist.

“What the hell are you doing?” she snapped. “I’m switching with my brother.”

Benjamin said nothing. He just let go and allowed the switch.

But the moment she settled into her new seat, she realized—he'd taken Simon's place. He was now sitting right between them.

“What the hell? I said I don't want to sit next to you. Can't you take a hint?” Wendy snapped.

“But I *do* want to sit next to you,” Benjamin said, casually throwing an arm around her waist. She'd slimmed down a lot lately, and it made it easier for him to wrap his arm around her.

Wendy shoved his hand off, her face flushed with fury. “Keep your hands to yourself!”

Benjamin leaned in close and murmured against her ear, “So what, I can only use my *mouth* now?”

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“Get lost!”

Wendy was beyond words at this point. She shot her brother a desperate look. “Simon! Do something! He’s driving me crazy!”

Simon turned to Benjamin. “Why are you still bothering my sister? Didn’t you say she wasn’t your type? That even if someone gave her to you, you wouldn’t take her?”

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Benjamin immediately regretted ever saying that. He threw his arm around Simon and leaned his head against his shoulder like a clingy child.

“Bro, don’t be so mean! Yeah, I said she wasn’t my type... but what I meant to say was—she’s my sweet tooth! My cotton candy! I can’t go a day without her!”

Simon: “..

Wendy: “...”

Both siblings were thoroughly grossed out by Benjamin’s over-the-top behavior.

“Cotton candy? Are you saying you want to eat my sister?” Simon asked, frowning deeper.

Benjamin's metaphors were spiraling into chaos. Wendy was so fed up she reached out and grabbed him by the neck, practically ready to strangle him on the spot.

She must have used too much force, because Benjamin rolled his eyes dramatically and slumped onto her shoulder.

"Hey! Are you okay?"

Wendy shook him, a little panicked. "Simon, is he actually hurt?"

Simon saw through Benjamin's act immediately. "Relax. I can wake him up with a good punch to the face."

Just hearing that, Benjamin instantly came back to life. "Pudding, I'm fine!"

"You liar! You jerk!"

Wendy tried to hit him again, but Benjamin caught her hand. The two of them were like classic bickering lovers—annoying, but oddly in sync.

"All right, the show's starting. Cut it out," Simon reminded them.

Only then did they calm down, although Benjamin still refused to let go of Wendy's hand. She couldn't shake him off, so she gave up and let it be.

Onstage, the runway show was well underway. Backstage, all the designers were busy with last-minute preparations.

Sebastian and James Zinnia were in the dressing room with Caitlin. She was nearly done, working on the final touches of her presentation.

They could see the other designers' showcases on the screen. Each collection had its own flair, and the creativity on display was refreshing.

Zora's show was coming up soon. Backstage, Ximena had arrived to help her daughter.

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Looking at the XEG models, Ximena asked, "Zora, isn't your design a bit too heavy? It's really different from XEG's usual aesthetic."

"Mom, that's the whole point. Everyone knows XFG's cryptic style, so I had to flip expectations for this competition. Just wait and see—I'm going to blow everyone away."

Zora was full of confidence Ximena didn't push the topic Any further

Each show had a slot of about twenty minutes.

Then came TIG's designer, Justin, who walked out with his collection.

His theme was "The Four Seasons, using color palettes and flowing visuals to evoke the passage of time. His designs were polished, artistic, and emotionally evocative. The judges were clearly impressed, and the audience responded with thunderous applause

After the show, Justin returned backstage, eyes misty with emotion, and ran up to Caitlin.

"Caitlin' I did it Thank you, thank you so much for giving me this chance!"

After his designs were stolen months ago. Justin had fallen into a dark place. Caitlin had pulled him out of it, helped him refocus, and even encouraged him to compete. She'd helped him choose the concept and regain his confidence.

"There's no need to thank me. Your success is your own. You worked hard for this. I believe in you, Justin-keep going."

Caitlin didn't just guide talent-she inspired it. That kind of quiet leadership was what made people rally behind her.

will. Caitlin! I promise!”

Justin had made up his mind. From now on, he would dedicate himself fully to TIG’s future

Finally, it was time for XLG’s presentation. As the name was called, Zora gave the signal for the models to begin.

Sure enough the moment XEG’s models stepped onto the runway, they turned heads.

Zawas designs were opulent and elegant, regal yet poised. The tall hairdos, jeweled neckpieces, and intricate gold embroidery on every piece spoke of royal luxury

The photographers couldn’t stop snapping pictures. All eyes were on her models. Zora wood backstage, glowing with

Sararlarwel fans collection was so impressive that no one **afterward** would be able to top her.

Sipurtunately her confidence turned out to be premature

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Zara panicked backstage Tho was posthing she said she w

How did us hapjen

She was furious Amene tried to calm her down

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“Mishaps happen. It’s normal during a show. It wasn’t even a big deal. Don’t worry.”

“Mom, how can I not worry? This is my showdown with Caitlin. I can’t lose to her!”

Seeing her daughter’s stubbornness, Ximena chose to say no more. It was better to wait and see how the results turned out.

Once the runway presentation ended, the models returned to the dressing room. Zora stormed in, targeting the model who’d stumbled.

“What the hell was that? Do you know how badly you just messed up my show?”

“I’m sorry, Ximena. I didn’t mean to. But the design of the dress made it—”

Before the model could finish, Zora slapped her across the face.

Smack!

The model’s head snapped to the side. Zora snapped. “Don’t blame my design! Everyone else managed just fine. You’re the only one who messed up! Be honest—did Caitlin pay you off to sabotage me?”

“I didn’t...”

Zora raised her hand to slap again, but this time, a large hand caught her wrist just in time.

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Zora's hand froze mid-air. She turned her head and was stunned to see who had grabbed her wrist—it was none other than

Thomas.

Her expression shifted quickly as she pulled her hand back and forced a smile. “Mr. Quick! I didn't know you'd be coming!”

Thomas held a bouquet of flowers in one hand, his voice cool and even. “If I didn't come, how else would I witness such a lovely scene? Quite the temper, Miss Harris.”

“Heh... no, no, it's just a misunderstanding. I was just trying to give the models some direction. They didn't follow instructions and made mistakes during the show...”

Zora hurried to explain, trying to salvage her image. She then looked at the flowers in his hand with feigned delight. “Oh- are those for me?”

She reached out for them, but Thomas didn't hand them over. “They're not. Sorry. I'm here to watch the show.”

With that, Thomas turned and left without giving her a chance to stop him.

“Mr. Quick... Mr. Quick...”

Zora called after him, but he didn't look back.

Watching him walk off in another direction, Zora knew exactly where he was headed—Caitlin.

She was about to explode.

Why? Why did every man always end up going to Caitlin?

Still seething, she turned around only to see Connor approaching with a bouquet of his own.

“Zora, these are for you!”

Receiving Connor's flowers gave her a sliver of satisfaction and saved her some face.

Ximena, watching from nearby, frowned. As soon as Connor left the room, she pulled Zora aside.

“Zora. Come here.”

Once they were alone, Ximena questioned her sharply. “What exactly is going on between you and the young master of the Jackson family?”

“We’re just friends,” Zora answered, a little too quickly.

“Friends? Friends who give you roses and wrap their arms around you?” Ximena pressed.

“Mom, seriously? Don’t I have the right to date whoever I want?”

Zora was clearly annoyed, feeling like her mother was micromanaging her life again.

“You’ve changed, Zora. You used to look down on guys like Connor—shallow, spoiled rich kids. You had ambition, ideals, education, class. Now look at you. Getting involved with someone like him? Where is your self-respect?”

Ximena’s voice was filled with disappointment. She knew her daughter once had feelings for Sebastian. Even if she couldn’t have him, she should’ve aimed higher, not fallen so far.

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Connor was a party boy, the last kind of man she wanted her daughter with.

At the mention of “self-respect,” Zora’s anger flared. Her mother sounded exactly like Caitlin—and that drove her up the wall.

“I don’t want to hear it, Mom. I’m an adult. I know what I’m doing.”

She tried to brush off the conversation, but just then, her stomach twisted, and she let out a dry retch.

“Urgh...”

She clutched her mouth, trying to hold it back.

“What’s going on? Are you sick?” Ximena asked, concerned.

“It’s nothing. Just some stomach issues. I’ve got other things to take care of.”

Zora tried to leave, but Ximena grabbed her arm, her tone suddenly serious.

“Tell me the truth. Are you pregnant?”

“Mom, no! Why would you think that?”

“Don’t lie to me. I’ve had children—I know exactly what that reaction means. Now tell me, or we’re going straight to the hospital for a test!”

Zora had no choice. She sighed and admitted, “Fine. Yes, I’m pregnant.”

“Whose child is it? Is it Connor’s?”

Zora didn’t answer.

**In** truth, the baby was Abel’s. But Abel had become utterly useless—not to mention facing criminal charges and likely headed for prison. There was no way she could link herself to him now.

Yes. It’s Connor’s.”

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Connor would be the perfect scapegoat. In a few weeks, once they’d been dating over a month, she’d break the news to him.

That little bastard! I'm going to find him right now!"

'Mom' Don't!"

Ximena turned to storm off, but Zora clung to her arm.

"Mom, I'm serious about Connor. Don't go to him like this. He already said he'll take responsibility. If you make a scene, and this gets out—I swear I'll die of shame!"

Seeing her daughter like this, Ximena let out a long, exhausted sigh. Only a mother could understand the mixture of love, helplessness, and anger she felt

In the end, she said nothing more, only telling Zora to think carefully about her next steps. Zora promised that with time, she'd handle it all.

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Meanwhile, Caitlin was preparing for her show. Thomas arrived just as she was giving the final pep talk to her models

“Don’t overthink it Just walk like you always do. Show your confidence After the show, dinner’s on met

“Thank you, Caitlin!”

“Thanks, Caitlin“

Everyone was in good spirits, their nerves eased by her leadership

“All right, Molly will take you all to the prep area.”

With Caitlin’s nod, the models followed Molly out

As Caitlin, Sebastian, and James were about to head toward the stage, they ran into Thomas at the door.

“Hey, Thomas!”

“Caitlin! I came to see your show.”

He handed her the bouquet. Caitlin smiled and accepted it.

Thank you! These are beautiful.”

As she moved to set them aside, she noticed a Pagani car key tucked into the bouquet.

Thomas what’s this?”

A replacement for the car you lost. I hope you like it. It’ll be delivered to your place later.”

This is too much...”

Caitlin knew exactly how much a Pagani cost—and the key alone told her it was a limited edition.

“**It’s just** a car. If you don’t accept it, I’ll be offended.”

For Thomas, it really wasn’t a big deal.

“Thank you really Then I’ll gladly accept. Why don’t you and Sebastian go watch the show together? It’s about to **start**,”

“Sounds good”

Thomas and Sebastian left for the venue while Caitlin headed backstage with James and Zinnia.

Finally, it was Caidin’s turn to take the stage.

The lights dimmed and shifted into cool blue hues. The screen lit up with images of snow-capped mountains

A haunting, ethereal melody began playing, and a voice echoed as if calling from the peaks—soft, distant, and soul-stirring.

Through gentle mist and cascading lights, models clad in pale, minimalist outfits began stepping onto the runway.

They moved like spirits of the mountains, guardians descending from the highlands with quiet grace.

Compared to the bright colors and bold statements of previous collections—and Zora’s heavy, ornate style—Caitlin’s collection was a revelation in simplicity.

9:48 pm S

It was a return to purity, a reminder of beauty in restraint

Zora, seated in the front row, was stunned.

Her initial shock was quickly followed by a deep sense of dread.

She **hadn't** expected Caitlin to go in the complete opposite direction of her own approach.

Zora had chosen grandeur and extravagance; Caitlin had stripped everything down to elegance and serenity.

In terms of design alone, Caitlin was clearly a step ahead.

What now?

How could Zora possibly turn the tables?

How could she win against this?

# Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

The more Zora watched, the more anxious she became.

Caitlin's collection featured a seamless blend of whites and blues. What truly caught the eye was the uniqueness of each design—delicate embroidery in silver thread added just enough detail without overwhelming the minimalist elegance.

In a desperate move to sabotage Caitlin's chances of winning, Zora poured water from her bottle onto the runway as a model passed nearby, using the misty atmosphere as cover. A wet runway would become dangerously slick, increasing the risk of a model slipping.

But once again, her plan failed.

Every model passed over that section with perfect poise—no slips, no faltering steps.

Zora clenched her fists in frustration. Not a single stumble?

She had counted on a disaster, yet the models only seemed more graceful.

What Zora didn't know was that Caitlin had already anticipated every possible mishap. The heels her models wore had custom-designed non-slip soles. Even on icy surfaces, they could walk with ease.

Zora's scheme, confident as it had been, was doomed from the start.

As the show continued, the lighting gradually shifted along with the music—from cool tones to warm ones, as if divine light had descended upon the stage. The entire runway felt bathed in serenity, giving the audience a sense of peace and transcendence.

When the models completed their second walk and exited the stage, the host's voice pulled the spectators back from the snowy dreamscape.

For a moment, the entire audience had felt transported, as if they had followed the sound of sacred music through frozen mountains and found clarity in holy light.

Thunderous applause erupted.

The judges nodded in agreement—this was imaginative, refreshing, and brilliantly executed.

Backstage, the models returned. Caitlin was there to greet them with gratitude and praise.

“Thank you all for your performance. You were amazing—truly the future stars of this industry.”

The models beamed at her words.

“You can go rest now, We’ll wait for the results together. No matter the outcome tonight, dinner’s on me.”

“Thank you, Caitlin!”

Thanks, boss!”

They left for the lounge, and Caitlin stayed behind to await the results.

The final designers were still presenting their collections. But after such a stunning display from Caitlin and her team, the bar had been set incredibly high.

The challenge now was to impress an audience and judges whose expectations had already been exceeded.

**1/3**

9:48 pm 5

And as expected, several of the final designers struggled to meet the moment. Some had merit, but none came close to surpassing what had already been shown.

One designer even ran into trouble—one of their models slipped and nearly fell at the exact spot where Zora had spilled her water earlier. The incident cost the team valuable points.

Thankfully, staff quickly cleaned up the area, minimizing further issues.

At last, all designs had been presented.

The competition came to a close, and the judges began tallying scores.

When the calculations were done, the results appeared on the big screen:

First Place: VERA Design

Second Place: TIG Design

Third Place: NEG Design

The crowd broke into applause.

The results were clear, and no one had any objections.

Wendy, thrilled for her friend, clapped joyfully. “Yes! Caitlin took first! She’s the best!”

Their friends cheered as well. Thomas added, “Caitlin is simply outstanding.”

“My wife is amazing, of course,” Sebastian grinned proudly.

“Congratulations, Mr. Vanderbilt,” Thomas said, shaking his hand. Others joined in offering their congratulations as Sebastian basked in the moment, glowing with pride.

Justin, who had entered on behalf of TIG, had taken second place. Despite the earlier setback with his Majestic Elegance collection, today he had redeemed himself through sheer skill.

**Backstage**, when the host announced his win, Justin leapt up in excitement.

Wade and the others rushed to hug him, offering congratulations.

“Thank you! Thank you so much. But really, I owe it all to Caitlin.”

**Justin** ran over to her and handed her the bouquet he had received.

“Caitlin, I finally did it. Thank you for everything.”

“I heard. You were incredible, Justin,” Caitlin said with a warm smile as she accepted the flowers.

“I’ll always be a student next to you. Thank you for your guidance. And please, if I ever get arrogant or lose motivation again, don’t hesitate to bring me back to reality

“Don’t be so **formal**. Once the event wraps up, come to the dinner party with everyone else. I’ll have someone send you the

details.”

“Thank you, Caitlin!”

9:48 pm £

“Woohoo!”

Excitement filled the air.

But not everyone shared in the celebration.

Zora, who had taken third place, was far from happy.

She stared at the results in disbelief.

Caitlin took first, TIG second... It felt like a setup.

To her, this entire competition was a joke.

Going up against Caitlin meant Caitlin would do whatever it took to win. The results were proof enough.

She refused to accept it.

Instead of reflecting on her own shortcomings as a designer, Zora chose to believe Caitlin had somehow rigged the

outcome.

The host soon called the top three designers and their teams back on stage for the final recognition.

Caitlin led her team of models out first, followed by Justin with his group, and lastly Zora and her team.

The three teams stood side by side, Caitlin in the center.

Standing next to her, Zora didn't offer a word of congratulations. Instead, she smiled coldly and said, "You really went all out for this win, huh?"

Caitlin replied coolly, "It's only natural to give your best in a competition. What exactly are you trying to imply, Miss Harris?"

Caitlin, as always, radiated quiet power.

## **Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her**

"If you hadn't tampered with the results, how could I possibly be in third place?"

Zora finally voiced her dissatisfaction. Caitlin gave her a faint smile and responded, “Do you think every judge scores like you do—based on favoritism? Today’s judging was purely about the design. The audience isn’t blind, and neither are the judges.”

Her words weren’t polite, and the implication was clear: just because Zora had manipulated the scores at the piano competition didn’t mean everyone else did too.

‘Oh, right. You say it was about design. But what about that second–place designer? In what world does his work deserve to outrank mine? My designs are clearly superior in every aspect. Unless you bribed the judges, how else would you and that guy land first and second?’

Zora wasn’t giving up.

Onstage, to the audience, the two looked like old friends chatting casually. No one could hear the sharp tension in their

voices.

Before Caitlin could respond, Sebastian and the others came up on stage with flowers.

He handed Caitlin a huge bouquet and pulled her into a hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Caitlin, I’m so proud of you.”

Justin's girlfriend also ran up with flowers, hugging him tightly.

Zora watched as the top two winners received affection and praise. The public display of Sebastian's support for Caitlin made her feel sick. He was doing it on purpose—just to humiliate her.

Just then, Ximena came onstage as well, presenting her daughter with a bouquet and pulling her into a hug. "Zora, you were amazing. I'm so proud of you."

Zora's expression softened slightly. At least she didn't feel quite so humiliated anymore.

Once everyone had left the stage, Caitlin finally answered Zora's earlier accusation. "You asked why Justin and I placed. The truth is, it wasn't up to me. Why don't we hear what the judges have to say?"

Caitlin turned toward the judges' panel. It was time for the official feedback.

Each of the three judges began offering comments on the winning designs.

Alessandro, the eccentric Italian master designer, spoke about Caitlin's work with dramatic flair.

“I absolutely adore VERA’s designs. They always bring something fresh to the eye. There’s so much to learn from her. Today’s presentation left me speechless. I honestly don’t have the words. Incredible. Flawless.”

The other judges nodded in agreement. Caitlin took the mic and thanked them warmly.

Next up was Étienne, the French design icon, who reviewed Justin’s collection.

“The ‘Seasons of Time’ concept was delightful. It was bold, creative, and innovative. I saw courage in the vision, and the execution matched it. A very clever theme.”

“Thank you, sir,” Justin said with a bow.

Finally, Tobias, the acclaimed German designer, gave his thoughts on Zora’s work.

9:48 pm

“What struck me most was the level of craftsmanship. The detail was rich, and the effort clearly immense. When I first saw the designs, I felt like I had stepped into a museum. It was unique and culturally intriguing.

“That said, the tailoring and choice of materials could use refinement. I understand the desire to showcase deep cultural elements, but too many overlapping motifs made the visual presentation feel heavy. A bit of simplification might help.”

Tobias gave honest, constructive feedback, pointing out where improvements could be made.

But Zora wasn't having it. She took his remarks as a personal attack.

“Mr. Tobias, I disagree. My designs integrate these cultural elements intentionally, and they are perfectly balanced. You're just looking for excuses to dismiss me! I studied under the renowned designer Mr. Siegburg—my work deserved to be the highlight and the winner today!”

She raised the mic and challenged him head-on.

The audience was stunned. Zora had just called out a judge in front of everyone?

Not only was the competition over and the results finalized—now she was openly questioning their legitimacy?

Murmurs spread throughout the crowd. Cameras clicked rapidly as reporters caught every word.

Ximena, watching helplessly, was mortified. She shouted from the side of the stage, “Zora! That's enough! Don't do this!”

Zora ignored her.

Tobias looked taken aback but remained composed. He stood and addressed the crowd.

“I’m Tobias. First, thank you to the US organizers for inviting us to serve as judges. I want to clarify that the three of us arrived yesterday and had no contact with any of the designers before today. Our scoring was based solely on professional design standards.

“We selected the top three based on merit. I assure everyone here that our decision was fair and impartial. As for Miss Harris’ objections, if my comments offended you, I’m willing to withdraw them.”

He set down the mic, his expression visibly cold.

The atmosphere turned tense.

The host came out to try and defuse the situation, but Zora wasn’t finished.

Caitlin, watching Zora spiral, realized that she was simply terrified of losing to her. Calmly, she proposed, “Miss Harris, if you doubt the judges’ fairness, I have an idea. Why don’t we do a live audience vote? Let the people decide whose work they preferred. Whoever gets more votes wins. Sound fair?”

A fair, open solution. But Zora rejected it immediately.

“Don’t give me that fake democracy crap! Look at this crowd—half of them are your friends! You’ve packed the place with your fan club. What’s the point of voting?”

Caitlin had offered her an easy way out, but Zora refused to take it. At this point, it was clear she couldn’t be reasoned with.

“If that won’t satisfy you either,” Caitlin said coldly, “then what exactly do you want?”

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## **Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her**

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“What else can I do? The moment we made that bet, you must’ve already started pulling strings, right? Using your identity as Kayla—don’t tell me you don’t know the judges today? Are you seriously claiming you didn’t grease any wheels?”

Zora’s petty accusations finally crossed the line, and even Justin couldn’t stay quiet anymore.

He and Caitlin had poured their hearts into this competition. It was exhausting enough to prepare, and now someone was accusing them of cheating?

Many in the audience started to feel Zora was being unreasonable.

Wendy and Molly exchanged looks—what was wrong with this woman? She lost. Fair and square. Why couldn't she just admit it?

Sebastian had heard enough. Zora's constant attacks on Caitlin were clearly coming from a place of bitterness. He whispered to Tyler to bring someone in—someone who would end this nonsense once and for all.

On stage, Caitlin stood her ground. "Please don't project your own tactics onto others. I, just like you, had no idea who the judges would be until today. And the final score wasn't based on who I am—it was based on the work itself."

She looked Zora directly in the eye.

'You know exactly where your design fell short. Throwing together a pile of so-called cultural symbols isn't design. Real design is more than a visual spectacle. It's the continuation of aesthetic legacy. Did your work achieve that?'

The host had no idea how to steer the conversation back on track. The verbal sparring between Caitlin and Zora had turned his award show into something far more dramatic. The media loved it—cameras clicked nonstop.

Zora sneered. “Don’t lecture me about aesthetics and design. I \*know\* exactly what those mean!”

‘Of course you do. After all, your mentor is the internationally renowned designer, Mr. Siegburg, correct?’ Caitlin smiled coolly. “If he were here right now, would his opinion be worth hearing?”

‘Of course it would!’ Zora snapped. “But he wasn’t even invited to this competition.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a stir rippled through the crowd.

Someone gasped. “That’s Master Siegburg!”

“Oh my god—it’s really him!”

The crowd buzzed with excitement as a long-haired man with a silver ponytail walked onto the stage, flanked by assistants. He stepped up from the side and headed straight for them.

“Professor?” Zora’s voice trembled. She looked stunned.

She hurried toward him and hugged him tightly. “What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were coming to the US!”

Siegburg gave her a warm smile. “It’s been a while, Zora.”

“I was invited to serve as one of the guest judges for today’s competition. Unfortunately, I fell ill after landing and couldn’t attend the formal judging.

“However, I watched everything from the guest lounge backstage. And I have to say, I fully agree with the decisions made by the panel today.

9:48 pm £

“Don’t obsess over the rankings, child. You’ve always been my most outstanding student.”

His tone was gentle, like that of a father speaking to a beloved daughter. He didn’t want her to lose herself just because of a single loss.

To him, Zora had already done well. One competition didn’t define her worth.

That was the final blow. Zora’s walls crumbled.

“Professor...” she choked out, tears spilling down her face.

She had her reasons for fighting so hard for the win—reasons she could never admit out loud. But now that her mentor had spoken, confirming the results, there was no path left for her to overturn them.

Caitlin’s voice came again, sharp and unapologetic.

“Miss Harris. Your mentor has just affirmed that the judging was fair. Do you still have something to say?”

Zora clenched her jaw. “Fine. You win. Professor, let’s go.”

Wiping her tears, she turned to leave with Siegburg—but Caitlin called out.

“Hold on, Miss Harris!”

Everyone turned to look.

“You seem to be forgetting something—our bet.”

Caitlin wasn't about to let this slide. Rules were rules. Consequences had to be owned.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zora said, feigning confusion. "I don't remember any bet."

"Oh? Well, let me remind you."

Caitlin pulled out her phone and played a recording for the entire venue to hear.

It was Zora's voice, brimming with confidence, challenging Caitlin to face her in the competition—and vowing that whoever lost would permanently leave the design industry.

The crowd erupted in shocked gasps. No one had expected *\*this\** twist.

So that's why Zora had been so desperate to win.

She wasn't just losing a title—she was about to lose her entire career.

"You all heard it," Caitlin said firmly. "If you're bold enough to make a bet, then be bold enough to honor it."

Zora didn't speak. She just glared at Caitlin with seething rage.

Down below, Ximena didn't stop her daughter this time. Deep down, she knew this was necessary. Zora's ego had grown unchecked for too long. Maybe a blow like this was what she needed to finally mature.

"Own your loss!"

Someone in the crowd shouted it. Others joined in.

9:48 pm S

"Own your loss!"

"Honor the bet!"

The chants grew louder, echoing through the exhibition hall.

Cornered, Zora had nowhere to run. Caitlin didn't waver. She raised the mic once more and delivered the final blow.

“Miss Harris, as per our agreement, you lost. Starting today, you are officially out of the design world.”

Her voice rang out like a gavel.

A chant began again-“Out of the design world! Out of the design world!”

At that moment, Zora felt the full weight of her defeat. She had been humiliated by Caitlin before, but never like this. Never in front of so many people.

And this time, it was final.

“Caitlin, you’re ruthless!”

Zora spat the words through clenched teeth.

“Thank you for the compliment.”

Caitlin replied with a calm, icy poise.

“And even though you’re now banned from continuing as a designer, the third–place trophy still belongs to you.”

“I don’t want your pity!”

Zora snapped.

She turned and stormed off the stage, too humiliated to stay a moment longer.

But she had no idea... the worst wasn’t over yet.

Caitlin wasn’t done.

She was about to teach Zora how to be a better human being.

3/3

## **Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her**

“Ah-!”

As Zora stepped down from the stage, her foot slipped and she tumbled forward hard.

The fall was sudden and completely ungraceful. Her dress tore at the hem, leaving her sprawled awkwardly on the floor- utterly humiliated.

Lying on the cold ground, she could feel every single person's eyes fixed on her. This was the kind of moment people had nightmares about—a total public meltdown.

She wanted to disappear into the floor.

Thankfully, the pregnancy was still in its early stages, so she didn't suffer any serious injury. But Zora, too embarrassed to open her eyes and face the world, simply pretended to pass out.

“Zora!”

Ximena rushed over in a panic, kneeling to help her up.

“Something happened! Miss Harris just collapsed!”

“That fall looked nasty!”

“Is she unconscious?”

The entire venue erupted into a wave of gasps and murmurs. Camera shutters clicked madly as reporters fought for the shot.

Ximena cradled her daughter’s face, lightly slapping her cheek. “Zora! Zora! Are you okay?”

Siegburg hurried over as well. “How is she?”

With all eyes on them—and reporters circling like vultures—there was no way Zora could “wake up” now.

“Quick! Someone help!”

Ximena called over assistants to carry Zora out discreetly.

The commotion passed quickly. The host stepped in to regain control of the scene and moved the event forward.

“The Expo Fashion Design Competition was judged with complete fairness and transparency. The results will remain as announced. Now, we invite the event organizers to present the awards!”

The organizers came onstage to award Caitlin and Justin their first and second place trophies. As for Zora's third place trophy, it would be delivered to her privately.

With that, the competition officially came to a close. Guests began to leave the venue.

Caitlin led her team of models backstage and thanked each one personally. "Thank you all for your hard work. This trophy belongs to all of you too."

The models beamed at her warmth and humility. Molly clapped her hands and called out, "Okay ladies, let's get changed and remove the makeup! Caitlin's taking us out for a feast!"

9:48 pm &

"Yes, ma'am!"

Everyone laughed and scattered to get ready. Justin stopped by to check in with Caitlin before heading out to coordinate things.

Once everything was settled, Caitlin had Molly take the entire team to the hotel restaurant she had reserved.

Sebastian arrived backstage to pick her up. He pulled her into a tight hug and kissed her cheek.

“My wife is the best of the best.”

“Thank you. Let’s go.”

Trophy in hand, Caitlin left the venue with Sebastian.

GT

That night, Caitlin went all out—she booked the entire Shangri-La restaurant. Every staff member who contributed to the competition, whether onstage or behind the scenes, was invited to enjoy a lavish seafood buffet.

Close friends gathered in a private room. Glasses clinked in a celebratory toast to Caitlin. Though she had promised Sebastian not to drink, she lifted her soda and toasted along with the group.

Laughter filled the room as the conversation turned, inevitably, to the drama of the day.

“Zora really humiliated herself,” Molly said between bites. “What was she thinking, trying to challenge Caitlin?”

“She’s too arrogant. And Caitlin put her in her place so fast it gave me whiplash,” Wendy added.

“She’s already gone viral online. People are asking if she forgot to take her meds this morning,” someone snorted.

Everyone kept chatting, laughing over the day’s chaos. Caitlin, however, remained quiet. She had no interest in kicking Zora while she was down.

Yes, Zora had been thoroughly humiliated. Yes, Caitlin had given her a harsh lesson.

But knowing Zora’s stubbornness, Caitlin doubted today would be enough to make her truly reflect or change.

If anything, Zora would probably blame everything on her.

And she was right.

Zora had been taken home by her mother and was now curled up on the couch, crying like a child.

Ximena sat beside her, rubbing her back gently. “That’s enough, Zora. You’ve learned your lesson today. From now on, think more carefully before you act. Don’t challenge Caitlin again. Let it go.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! Are you even my mom? Whose side are you on? I got publicly humiliated by Caitlin and all you want to do is lecture me!”

Zora turned on her mother, furious that she wasn’t taking her side.

“I am” on your side!” Ximena sighed. “Everything I do is for you. You’re my daughter. I want you to be okay.”

“Just stop! I’ve already lost everything. I’ve been kicked out of the design world. What do I do now? How do I even face people?”

“You don’t have to be a designer. You can run the company. Focus on management. Leave it all behind.”

9:48 pm

“How can I leave it all behind? This is all Caitlin’s fault. She ruined me!”

Ximena’s face grew serious. “Don’t blame Caitlin. In fact, we owe her. If we’re going to survive what’s coming, it’ll be because of her. Don’t you get that?”

“I don’t get it. Why should we rely on her?”

Ximena sighed deeply. She had no choice but to explain everything.

She told Zora the truth—about Shadow Moon Pavilion, and Zora’s real father.

When Zora heard it, she froze.

“You’re saying... my father is Zorro? The leader of Shadow Moon Pavilion?”

Ximena nodded solemnly.

“But he doesn’t know you’re his daughter. And if he sends assassins to the US, we’re finished. The only way to survive this is to ally with Caitlin. Do you understand now?”

Zora didn’t respond.

She sat in silence, her mind spinning.

If Caitlin was planning to fight Shadow Moon Pavilion... and Zorro, its leader, was her biological father...

Then why should she side with Caitlin at all?

Why not go directly to her father?

Her mother had clearly been brainwashed by Caitlin. She couldn't be trusted anymore.

Zora wouldn't say any of this out loud, of course. Instead, she played along.

"I understand, Mom. So... where is Shadow Moon Pavilion based? What does Zorro look like? Do you have a picture?"

Ximena didn't hesitate. She fetched a photo and handed it to Zora.

Zora stared at the image, her eyes narrowing.

This man—her father—was a powerful Earl. A man of influence and authority.

With him behind her, what did she have to fear?

Why should she tremble in front of Caitlin?

No. She was going to find her father.

She was going to secure the most powerful backing she could get.

And then—only then—she would return.

And crush Caitlin beneath her feet.

But Zora's schemes never had the chance to unfold.

1:48 pm £

Reality was already preparing to strike her down.

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## Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Ever since the conclusion of the Grand Design Expo, clips of Zora challenging the judges' authority began circulating online. No matter which segment it was, Zora came off as irrational—despite winning third place, she still questioned the judges' decisions.

The internet erupted in backlash.

\[Does she really think her designs are the best? Arrogant much?]

15

\[It's her again! She rigged the results as a judge during the piano competition. Now that she's a contestant, she suspects everyone else of cheating? Pathetic.]

\[Clearly can't handle losing. She made a bet to quit the design world if she lost, and now she's just throwing a tantrum.]

\[With that attitude, I'd never wear anything from her brand. Disgusting.]

\[The first-place "Divine Light" collection was a thousand times better than her heavy mess of a lineup!]

As netizens piled on the criticism, a new bombshell dropped: a blurry yet unmistakable video surfaced, showing Zora in an intimate situation with Connor in a public restroom.

\#ZoraCaughtIn Restroom Scandal

\#SocialiteInSteamy BathroomScene

The hashtags shot up trending lists. Paired with the previous design scandal, Zora's public image plummeted.

[She's seriously disgusting. *More* skeletons in her closet than a cemetery.]

[She acts classy but turns out to be sleazy trash.]

Socialite? More like desperate floozy.]

With the rumors spiraling out of control, Zora went into hiding. Meanwhile, her mother Ximena took over company affairs. Upon learning of the scandal, Ximena nearly lost it.

How could the daughter she raised end up this trashy?

Speechless with fury, Ximena finally composed herself and took action.

“Don’t let Zora know about this yet,” she ordered her assistant. “Get the PR team on this immediately. Also, find out who leaked that video–I want them prosecuted.”

“Yes, ma’am

No matter how bad things got, Zora was still her daughter. As a mother, Ximena had a duty to protect her no matter the cost

While Zora’s name burned through online gossip threads, the celebratory dinner at Shangri La was in full swing. After a lavish feast, the team began to disperse

Caitlin and Sebastian said their goodbyes and got into their car. As they settled in, Caitlin checked her phone

“We’ve got news from Graystone,” she told Sebastian.

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If he dares show up. F'll make sure he doesn't walk away," Sebastian said coldly. He would puntert Callin at any cost

A Cantin leaned on his shoulder, scrolling

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What?

The restour video Zora and Commo

She handed Sebastian the phone Though the esplicit parts were bhired, then fases were clearly visible

When did this happen?" he asked

That night at the gallery saw them by accident

Sebastian anorted She brought this on herself Let her reap what she sowed

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But she hadn't taken more than a few steps when a voice called out behind her.

"Miss Harris!"

Zora turned and saw Yasmin marching toward her.

"Yasmin?"

With red-rimmed eyes and trembling lips, Yasmin stomped forward, raised her hand—and slapped Zora across the face.

Smack!

Zora's bodyguards immediately surged forward, but she held up a hand to stop them.

Clutching her stinging cheek, Zora stared at Yasmin in disbelief. "What the hell, Yasmin? Why did you hit me?!"

Yasmin broke into tears, face twisted with fury. “You’re asking me why? Why don’t you tell me why you stole my boyfriend?!”

Zora’s heart jumped. She hadn’t expected this confrontation—but she kept calm. “You must be mistaken. I never stole anyone.”

“Still pretending?” Yasmin’s voice cracked. “On Reese’s birthday, yes—he got drunk and did something awful. I was furious. I broke up with him for a bit. But I never wanted it to be over. We were supposed to work things out.

“But *you*—how quickly *you* moved in. Seducing him while we were apart!”

Zora’s expression faltered. Yasmin continued, her voice rising, “I asked Connor! He told me everything! That night you drugged his drink—then lured him to a gallery! You knew exactly what you were doing!”

“I never—”

“Save it! The video’s online! The one of you and him hooking up in the restroom! And you’re still playing innocent?!”

Zora’s eyes widened in horror. “What... what video?”

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## **Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her**

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“Wait... Yasmin? You’re dating Connor too?”

“So what’s going on here—was he dating both of you?”

5.33%A

Excitement buzzed through the crowd. Two women, fighting over one man—this scandal just got juicier.

“Connor’s been chasing me for months,” Yasmin stated confidently. “We’ve been dating for a while. As of now, we’re still very much together.”

She wasn’t about to let Zora paint her as the other woman. No way.

With Yasmin’s bold admission, the reporters turned back to Zora.

“So Miss Harris, are you saying you knowingly interfered in Connor and Yasmin’s relationship?”

“Why would you agree to be the third party?”

“Don’t you think it’s unethical to come between a couple?”

Zora couldn’t answer. Embarrassed and enraged, she turned and fled into the XEG building, her bodyguards holding the reporters at bay.

Once in her office, she slammed the door behind her and immediately dialed Caitlin's number.

It rang once before connecting.

"Hello?"

"Caitlin! You bitch!" Zora seethed, her voice laced with venom.

Caitlin was still at TIG, just finishing a meeting. She sounded calm, almost bored.

"Miss Harris? What now?"

"You know damn well what! You leaked those disgusting scandals about me! You're trying to ruin me completely. Don't think I can't see what you're doing—you're ruthless!"

Caitlin sighed, already guessing why Zora was throwing a tantrum. Her tone was cool as ice.

"Miss Harris, you're overreacting. If you used your brain for once and checked the security footage from Lisson Gallery, you'd know exactly what happened—rather than barking like a mad dog, flinging accusations."

Zora's rage spiked. "Did you just compare me to a dog?!"

"Did I lie?" Caitlin replied bluntly. "If you thought before acting, maybe you wouldn't be in this mess. Anyway, I have work to do."

She hung up.

Zora screamed and hurled her phone across the office, fuming.

No matter how she looked at it, she was convinced Caitlin had orchestrated this. Who else hated her this much?

As for checking the gallery security footage? That was clearly a distraction tactic. She wasn't falling for it

17:54 Fri, 22 Aug

Meanwhile, outside the XEG building the media turned their attention to Yasmin

33%A

Yasmin didn't waste the opportunity. She pulled out her phone and showed them a series of photos—her and Connor together, confirming their romantic relationship.

The evidence spoke for itself. The narrative quickly shifted.

Zora had indeed come between Yasmin and Connor.

The interviews were quickly published online. The moment they dropped, it was as if another bucket of filth had been dumped all over Zora's already tarnished reputation.

The once-unreachable heiress had now become a public disgrace. Netizens didn't hold back.

Especially in the fashion world—no one was going to support a designer known for wrecking someone else's relationship.

Calls to boycott Zora's brand spread like wildfire.

XEG stores took a massive hit. The company's stock price nosedived. The scandal was catastrophic.

Ximena tried everything to put out the fires. Just as she'd managed to suppress the previous rumors, now this one exploded. She was running out of options.

Out of desperation, she decided to seek help from Caitlin.

At the TIG headquarters, Caitlin welcomed Ximena into the executive office and offered her a seat.

Ximena opened with an apology. “Caitlin, I’m so sorry. My daughter’s reckless behavior has caused you so much trouble.”

“You don’t need to apologize for your daughter, Ximena. Honestly, what happened didn’t affect me much. Please don’t blame yourself.”

“Thank you for being gracious,” Ximena sighed, her expression weary. “I’m out of options. If things keep going like this, I’ll lose everything. I don’t know what to do.”

Caitlin could see how distressed she was. The stress was clearly taking a toll on her.

If it weren’t for Ximena’s past kindness to Patricia, Caitlin wouldn’t even be entertaining this conversation.

“This mess was caused by your daughter,” Caitlin said frankly. “She should be the one facing the public and making amends.”

“Suppressing the news won’t work forever. What she needs to do is hold a press conference—publicly apologize and clarify everything. Pair that with some charity work to shift public attention.”

Ximena absorbed the advice carefully. “You’re right. I’ll convince her to do it.”

As if remembering something, she asked, “By the way, has Zeke been in touch with you? What’s happening with him?”

“He might arrive in the US tomorrow or the day after,” Caitlin answered. “He’ll be bringing Pierrick. The plan is to conduct the hostage exchange”

Ximena’s expression tightened “**That** sounds dangerous... Are you really going to give them the codex?”

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## Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Chapter 523

33%

“The codex is just a decoy. Our plan ran into some unexpected changes. Now our only option is to rescue the hostages and make sure Zeke stays safe.”

“Alright. Can I go with you to the site? I don’t want anything to happen to my son.”

“We’ll see. I’ll arrange everything in advance. Just wait for my message.”

“Thank you, Caitlin. Once I get my son back, I’ll send you a gift.”

As Ximena stood to leave, she said this with genuine gratitude. Caitlin smiled and shook her head lightly.

“No need for that, Ximena.”

15

Once Ximena had left, Caitlin returned to her desk and started planning the details of the hostage exchange scheduled for the next couple of days. Not long after, a message came through on her phone.

[Caitlin, Pierrick and I are heading out now. We'll see you soon. I kind of miss you. How are things on your end?]

Reading Zeke's message, Caitlin paused at the words "kind of miss you." It surprised her.

Zeke was always a reserved person. Aside from the one time he confessed his feelings face to face—after some emotional upheaval—he'd never been so direct in writing. Why would he say something like that now?

Something didn't feel right. She thought for a moment, then carefully crafted a reply.

[Contact me again after you land. Stay safe.]

At Graystone Castle, Samir looked at Caitlin's reply with a smirk. His eyes glinted with satisfaction, as if everything was unfolding exactly as he planned.

Before departure, he had gone to see Zorro.

"Leader."

He still called Zorro that, as always. Zorro motioned him to come closer.

When Samir approached, Zorro grasped his shoulder and looked him up and down.

“Samir. You’ve endured a lot over the years. Once this is over, I’ll announce to the world that you’re my biological son. From now on, you can call me Father.”

“Yes, Father. I will not fail you.”

“Good. Is everything ready?”

“All set. We’re ready to leave.”

Zorro nodded Samir hesitated, then asked, “father, once I leave, what about Graystone/I’m worried something might happen”

“Don’t worry The royal troops will pull back within three days, tops.”

Zorro was confident. The people of Graystone were now marching to the capital, demanding peace in cities across the region,

Fred wiped his forehead for the first time in days.

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“I then Veep me updated then the woman is Cutting don’t fall for her tricks. And remember, the coder must be verified in

Premark from pepar tally and is to had tas com unfished fasiness with Caitlin and Sebastian. Last time, Sebastian had shot ard ingered tam tas time, he planned to return the fava

The Curry departed Zora perstinally say them off lust thinking about the codex possibly falling into his hands was enough to

With Samm as this far, ferrick Ferking tum, and Shadow Moon Pavilion forces joining the mission, Zorro was sure Caitlin and

in the York, the buzz around Zora’s scandals still dominated puldie gossip

Taking Caitlin’s advice, Zimena launched emergency Pit efforts. She announced a press conference and prepared a public apology

She asked Zora to appear and apologize in person, but Zora flat out refused.

in Zara, a poddie apology would be like nailing herself to a pillar of shame. And knowing it had been Caitlin's idea made her even

She saw it as Caitlin manipulating her mother again, pushing her toward complete ruin

Frustrated by her daughter's defiance, Kimena sighed "Time. If you won't apologize publicly, then I'm sending you to a mountain region for a shanty campaign. Pack up and leave today. I'll handle things here."

Let me guess that's Canbus idea too! Zora asked, eyes narrowed.

"Is so what? She's right we don't act fidgety and shun the narrative, public opinion will destroy you. Can't you see that's doing this *by your own hand*!"

Zimera used to be proud of her obedient daughter. But now, all she saw was a girl whose nature was no different. Boon Aurex

hero tumber knew fever to reel her daughter back from the edge

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Ximena lost her temper and slapped her hard across the face.

“You hit me?” Zora stared in disbelief.

“Don’t you think you deserve it? I’ve done everything for you! You want to live your life in disgrace? Fine. From now on, I won’t lift a finger to help!”

Ximena’s eyes welled with tears. Realizing she might’ve pushed too far, Zora dialed down her attitude. She needed her mother if she wanted to survive this.

“Sorry, Mom. Please don’t be mad. I’ll go. I’ll do the charity event.”

And just like that, Zora departed for the mountains. The charity work was just a cover—what she really needed was to lay low while the scandal cooled down.

With Zora gone, Ximena hosted the press conference alone.

She apologized publicly on her daughter’s behalf regarding the fashion competition scandal, stating she would ensure her daughter was properly disciplined moving forward.

As for the rumor about Zora and Connor, Ximena called it pure fabrication and announced legal action against those spreading it.

Behind the scenes, she personally visited the Xenos estate, offering gifts and an apology to Yasmin's mother, Leah, who finally agreed to help clarify things.

After Yasmin and Connor reconciled, both of them gave statements to the press, confirming that the rumors were untrue and that nothing inappropriate had occurred between Connor and Zora. Yasmin even explained it had all been a misunderstanding.

With that, Zora's scandals finally began to fade.

As the storm died down, a new milestone arrived for Sebastian and Caitlin.

Today marked one of the most important days of their lives—the day they had chosen, down to the hour, to officially remarry

## **Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her**

### **Chapter 524**

On the way to the registry office, Caitlin glanced at the time on her phone.

“We could’ve waited a few more days. There’s no need to rush.”

Zeke was currently en route to the US, and the hostage exchange was about to take place. Caitlin wanted to focus on the bigger picture, but someone clearly had other plans.

“We already agreed on today. Why change it now?”

I’ve timed everything perfectly—they won’t arrive that quickly. We’ve got enough time to take care of this.

Besides, everything’s already arranged. Just go with it, okay?”

Sebastian had been dreaming about this day. No matter what happened—rain, fire, or a tsunami—nothing was stopping him from marrying Caitlin again.

When Caitlin didn’t respond right away, Sebastian got nervous.

“Wait... you’re not backing out; are you? You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

Caitlin burst into laughter at the sight of his panicked face.

“Of course not. Fine, today we’ll do it your way.”

“Great. But to make sure nothing interrupts us, I’m confiscating your phone.”

He took her phone and powered it off so she wouldn’t be distracted by calls. With her full agreement, he felt completely at ease, holding her hand as the car pulled up to the registry office.

They all stepped out of the car.

Today was the day Caitlin and Sebastian would remarry. Even James was there to witness the moment firsthand.

Sebastian shielded Caitlin as she stepped out, but she quickly noticed something unusual; a sign at the door that said the office was closed for the day.

“It’s closed?” she asked.

“For everyone else, yeah. But not for me.”

Sebastian led her forward. Tyler had already coordinated with the staff inside. A door opened from within, and someone came out

to let them in.

Technically, the office was closed to the public today. But for them, it was reserved. Only one couple would be attended to, and everything was prepared exclusively for them.

As they walked in, it became clear just how much thought Sebastian had put into the details. The aisle was lined with red carpet, balloons, and fresh flowers. On either side stood cartoon cutouts of Caitlin and Sebastian, smiling sweetly

Inside, the staff were all standing in neat rows, ready to welcome them. The entire atmosphere felt celebratory and warm.

“This feels more like a wedding than a registry visit, Caitlin said with a laugh

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“Well, we are getting married, aren't we?”

Sebastian held her hand tightly as the manager stepped forward to greet them.

“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt. Please come inside.”

They were led to a photo station to take their official marriage certificate photo.

Last time, the photo had been digitally edited, with each of them photographed separately. Today was different—they were standing side by side, in person, for something far more meaningful.

The photographer adjusted his lens.

“A little closer, Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt... That’s it... perfect...”

33%

He captured the moment of their bright smiles and sweet intimacy. It would be a beautiful photo on their marriage certificate.

While Caitlin and Sebastian were joyfully completing their paperwork at the registry, back in Graystone Castle, far away in S country, the heavy door to Zeke’s prison cell creaked open.

Zeke heard it and looked up.

Zorro walked in. Zeke struggled to sit up, but the chains bound him tightly, causing him to stumble and fall back to the floor.

Zorro stopped in front of him, staring down at him with cold detachment.

This was the weapon he had personally molded and raised—and yet, because he wasn't of Zorro's blood, he could never be fully

controlled.

“Any last words?”

Zorro crouched down to face him.

Zeke met his gaze but said nothing.

15

“Zeke, despite everything, I raised you. It's not like I never cared. If you agree to work with me, follow my orders, I'll let you go.

You can manage the dark web again, use your talents, and we can make more money than ever. You'll get your life back. What do you say?”

Zeke didn't take the bait. He had no intention of serving someone he could no longer stomach calling father,

"You've got Samir now—your real son. Why do you still need me?"

Zeke's blunt refusal made Zorro's face darken.

"I gave you a chance You're the one throwing it away. Don't blame me when i stop playing nice."

Zorro stood up, flicked his sleeve, and stormed out of the chamber As he left, he gave strict orders to the guards to keep a close Watch

in the hallway, he ran into Alicia Gongates, who was bringing Zeke's meal She greeted hun politely

My Preston"

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Zorro studied her for a second.

3

“Alicia? Why are you the one delivering food?”

Alicia was a special case. She wasn't a member of Shadow Moon Pavilion—she was a highly paid doctor Zorro had brought in, the daughter of an old friend. In his eyes, she was like a mischievous child, but he respected her skills.

Alicia smiled innocently.

“The usual guy's sick today. He asked me to do it for him.”

Zorro gave her a long, probing look. She gave a sheepish grin.

“Okay, okay! You got me. I just came to see the show. I want to see what happens to Zeke. He had it coming! I have to see him crash and burn. Hmph!”

Zorro knew there had been friction between Alicia and Zeke. He scanned her face one last time, saw nothing suspicious, and nodded.

“Fine. Take a look. But afterward, you're needed at the central wing.”

“Got it! I’ll head over right after.”

Alicia continued toward the cell with the tray in hand. When she reached the guards, they blocked her path.

“No one is allowed inside without the leader’s permission. Leave the food and go.”

Alicia tilted her head, her beautiful face smiling sweetly.

“What if I don’t want to go?”

“Alicia, are you really going to disobey the leader’s orders?”

“That’s right!”

Still smiling, she held the tray in one hand while swiftly jabbing a silver needle into one guard’s neck with the other. The man froze. paralyzed. As the second guard went to shout, Alicia’s two accomplices jumped in and quickly subdued him.

She signaled to her team, and they found the key on the guard’s belt, unlocked the cell door, and dragged both guards inside.

Once the door shut behind them, the lights flicked on, illuminating the once-dark space.

Zeke, still chained, heard the commotion. When the room lit up and he saw Alicia, his eyes widened.

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## Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“It’s you...”

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Alicia set the tray down and walked over to him, lowering her voice. “Don’t say anything. We’re getting you out of here.”

“Getting me out? Weren’t you the one who said you wouldn’t care if I died?”

Zeke was stunned. He’d known Alicia for a long time, but after he made it clear that his heart belonged to Caitlin, things between them had gone downhill. They’d fought, stopped speaking for ages. The last time they spoke was when he got shot—she was the one who removed the bullet and cared for him.

But before his wounds had healed, he insisted on leaving Shadow Moon Pavilion to go find Caitlin. Alicia had cursed him out, swearing she’d never care what happened to him again.

“I did say that,” Alicia snapped. “But you’re not dead, are you? Must be my rotten luck and a moment of poor judgment. Ugh. Guess I’ve got nothing better to do than save your sorry ass!”

Her mouth was harsh, but her actions were anything but. Underneath the attitude, she clearly still cared. It was always that way with her—sharp tongue, soft heart. No matter how much she insulted him, she never truly gave up on him. Too bad Zeke had never

noticed.

“Samir and the others have already left for the US. If you want to stop him, you need to act now. Follow my instructions and I’ll get

you out.”

She quickly filled him in on what was happening outside.

“Thank you...”

Zeke was genuinely moved. Her loyalty hit him hard, and for once, he didn’t know what to say.

“Save it!” Alicia huffed. “You’ve owed me so many thanks by now you could stack them into a mountain. Not that it matters- you’ve never done anything meaningful anyway. Hmph, hypocrite.”

She gave him a side-eye while unlocking the heavy chains around his wrists and ankles. When she saw the bruises and welts on his skin, her face tightened with something between anger and pain.

Her team was already at work. The two unconscious guards had been injected with strong sedatives and were completely out cold.

They stripped one of the guards of his uniform and gave it to Zeke to wear. The plan was simple—swap places.

Alicia used her expert disguise skills to transform Zeke’s face to look like her assistant. Meanwhile, one of the sedated guards was made to look exactly like Zeke and left shackled in his place.

“No time to waste Let’s move!”

She dumped the untouched food and led the group out of the chamber.

Her **two** assistants stayed behind to guard the door while Zeke followed Alicia away from his prison

Thanks to her disguise work, they avoided all the checkpoints and made it back to Alicia’s quarters without raising suspicion

There Alicia parked a bag and handed Zeke a selection of its and **papers**

314

3

3.33%

“I’ll be leaving the castle soon. You’re coming with me. I’ll get you across the border.”

“Okay.”

Zeke’s gratitude for her ran deeper with every moment. He’d always thought of her as a sharp-tongued, high-maintenance brat. But today, he saw something else—fierce loyalty, fearlessness, and heart.

According to her plan, it wasn’t long before Zeke was in Alicia’s personal vehicle.

As both the castle’s physician and a military doctor for Graystone’s army, Alicia had unrestricted access between the castle and military zones. Her clearance made her one of the few people who could come and go freely.

But as they approached the gate, a new obstacle appeared.

“Per the leader’s orders, all departing personnel must verify their fingerprints,” a gate guard informed them, blocking the exit.

Alicia’s face froze. Her mind raced. She’d changed Zeke’s face, but not his fingerprints. That detail had slipped her mind completely.

Zeke heard it too. His expression darkened. This was a problem.

If they couldn’t pass this check, everything would fall apart.

Alicia rolled down the window and lashed out, her voice sharp and furious.

“You damn idiots—do you even know who I am? Do you think my time grows on trees? I’m headed to the front lines to save lives! It’s an emergency! Move. Now.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Gonzales. These are the leader’s orders. We can’t make any exceptions.”

“Oh, really?” she sneered. “Then how about I call the boss himself?”

She dialed Zorro, and when he answered, she instantly changed tones—now whiny, pitiful, almost tearful.

“Mr. Preston! What’s going on? I need to get to the military clinic ASAP, but your people are stopping me. They’re demanding a fingerprint scan—what do they think I am, a criminal? This is wasting time! They’re already calling for me!”

Zorro chuckled at her dramatics.

“Alicia, you’re exempt. The scan doesn’t apply to you. Just let them know I said so. You have full clearance.”

“Perfect!”

She hung up and turned back to the guards, smug as ever,

“Did you all go deal just now? Or maybe your brains are defective? The boss said I’m exempt My vehicle gets a free pass. Now lower that bridge now! If I miss my window to reach the clinic, I swear I’ll have you all executed!”

Known for her ruthless attitude, Alicia had even Zorro wrapped around her finger. The guards didn’t dare argue

“Lower the bridge!”

With that, the drawbridge came down, and Alicia’s car drove out of Graystone Castle without incident

They had made it

716

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As the castle shrank in the distance behind them, Zeke finally let out a long, silent breath.

“Thank you, Alicia...”

It was all he could manage.

Alicia frowned and rolled her eyes,

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“God, stop it with the thank-yous already! They’re basically worthless coming from you. I told you—I don’t want words. I want something real.”

“Then what do you want?”

Zeke was serious now. After everything she’d done, if there was anything he could give her in return, he would.

Alicia turned to him with a sly grin. Without warning, she grabbed him by the collar and pulled him toward her.

Their faces were inches apart. Before he could react, she leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

“There. Consider that kiss your repayment.”

Then she pushed him away.

Zeke stumbled, hitting the car door behind him, stunned. His eyes were wide.

He'd never imagined Alicia would do something like that. That kiss... he couldn't describe how it made him feel.

Arms folded, Alicia turned and gave him a sideways glance.

“What’s that look for? It’s just a kiss. You’re not gonna die from it. Sure, I’ve got a sharp tongue, but I promise my lips aren’t poisonous.

Besides, it’s not like you ended up with Trinity, right? I’m not exactly stealing anyone.”

She grinned, mischievous and bright, disarming as ever.

Zeke shook his head with a soft laugh. “Fine. If it makes you happy.”

“Oh? That was easy. What if I said I want to be even happier? If a kiss is your way of thanking me, then maybe you should spend the rest of your life doing just that.”

She teased him lightly, and Zeke didn't respond—just smiled.

The tension between them had finally broken. Something had shifted.

Their band had changed.

Alicia drove him to the edge of Graystone's borders, where she'd arranged for someone to pick him up

"This is as **far** as I can take you from here on, you're on your own"

As they stood beside the car, feks hesitated

"What they find out what you did! **What** if you're punished for helping me?"

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## Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

"Are you worried about me?"

Alicia leaned against the car window, tilting her head playfully as she asked.

“I... I just think it’s too dangerous for you to stay behind. Why don’t you come with me instead?”

33%

Zeke wasn’t heartless—quite the opposite. He valued loyalty and emotion. Alicia had risked her life to get him out, and it wouldn’t be long before Zorro discovered the deception. When that happened, Alicia would be the first person to suffer the consequences.

Why was it so hard to just admit he cared?

Alicia wanted nothing more than to crack open his head and see what was going on inside.

She smiled sweetly and teased, “What’s this? Are you asking me to run away with you?”

Zeke froze, flustered by her directness.

“If you agree to marry me, I’ll go with you right now. What do you say? Will you take me?”

Faced with such an upfront question from a girl, Zeke was completely at a loss for words.

A flicker of disappointment crossed Alicia’s eyes, but she kept the smile on her face.

“Never mind. Just get going. I have to head to the military base too. If I take too long, Mr. Preston’s going to get suspicious.”

She waved brightly as she stepped back. “Goodbye, Zeke. If we both make it through this alive, you better come back and marry me. I’ll *be* waiting!”

With that, she told the driver *to go*.

Only once her car had disappeared did Zeke finally turn away and climb into the vehicle waiting to take him to the airport.

Looking down at the forged ID, plane ticket, and burner phone Alicia had prepared for him, Zeke let out a long sigh. He couldn’t quite explain it, but something inside him felt different now—like a tiny thread of attachment had formed without him even realizing

But he didn’t have time to dwell on it.

Right now, what mattered most was what was happening in the US. Had Samir arrived already?

On the way to the airport, Zeke used the phone Alicia had given him to call Caitlin

But her phone was off.

He tried to recall Sebastian's number, but came up blank. All his contacts had been stored on his old device, and in his memory, the *only* number he truly knew by heart was Caitlin's

Left with no better option Zeke sent her a message and hoped she would turn her phone back on soon

He had to get to the US as fast as possible and expose what Vamir was planning

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4.33%\_

At Vanderbilt Manor, the old estate of the Vanderbilt Family, Caitlin was in the kitchen, preparing a special lunch to celebrate their marriage registration and also to send Hayden off—he was returning to Departure City in V Country that afternoon.

Though the meal was meant as a farewell for Hayden, Federico had, unsurprisingly, invited himself to the table.

Ever since he took Howard on as a student, Federico had been shamelessly living at the Carriage House, eating and sleeping under the same roof as the Vanderbilt family without the slightest hint of restraint.

While Sebastian and Hayden were chatting in the living room, Federico came to the kitchen to help bring out the dishes.

“You made all this? Wow, I hit the jackpot today!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be watching your diet?” Caitlin said knowingly.

Federico was notoriously disciplined about his figure, especially with his performances. He never overate and always kept fit.

But ever since moving into the Vanderbilt estate, all that discipline flew out the window whenever Caitlin cooked. His six-pack was rapidly vanishing.

“I’ll hit the gym after! It’s not every day I get to eat your cooking—I have to enjoy it while I can.”

Caitlin laughed, shaking her head. Then, as if remembering something, she asked, “By the way, I noticed you weren’t teaching Howard yesterday. You were showing his aunt something on the piano, right? You and Hazel...?”

“No! Nothing like that! She just happened to walk by and asked me a few piano questions. I explained some things, that’s all—free of charge.”

Federico spoke with such an innocent expression that Caitlin decided not to press him further.

Once the food was ready, she told him, “Alright, time to eat. Go let the others know.”

“On it!”

Soon, Sebastian and Hayden made their way to the dining room. Molly also showed up since she had the day off, and surprisingly. Vincent and Hazel joined in *too*, abandoning the main dining room of the estate.

Sebastian raised a brow at the unexpected guests. “Why aren’t you eating in the main hall? What are you all doing here?”

“I smelled food!” Molly declared cheerfully. “You’ve no idea how good Caitlin’s cooking smells—it was calling to me. I followed the scent without even realizing it!”

Vincent gave a sheepish smile. “Same here.”

“There might not be enough food for all of you. We only planned for Hayden and Federico.”

“No worries, Molly waved it off “I already told the kitchen to send up extra dishes. We won’t tire Caitlin out”

She hurried off to fetch the food, while Vingent lifted a bottle of red wine “Sebastian, I’m not here just to mooch I brought some excellent wine”

Hazel held up a bottle of juice “And this is for Caitlin–non alcoholic, of course

Hazel no longer held any grudges against Caitlin Over time, her attitude had softened She had grown to respect Catim, even accepting her as her sidder in law Her other reason for being here, though unspoken, has more to do with Feders—a bittle secret

214

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she hadn’t told anyone yet.

As everyone settled around the table, the kitchen staff brought out a few more dishes, turning the lunch into a full-blown banquet.

Hayden looked around the lively group and smiled. “The more the merrier. I like this—it feels like family.”

Just as they were about *to* start eating, Molly looked around and asked, “Where are the kids? My nephew and niece—where did they go?”

“I sent all four of them to eat with Beatrice,” Caitlin replied.

She didn’t want the kids to be left out or isolated, and figured their company would cheer up the older members of the family.

Molly sighed with admiration. “Caitlin, you really are the thoughtful one.”

They had all been so caught up in their own plans, *no* one had even thought about how the elders might feel. Caitlin had considered everything.

Meanwhile, back in the estate’s main dining room, the table was set, but only a few people remained.

Beatrice, Raymond and his wife, and Jasper sat around in near silence.

Beatrice looked at the mostly empty seats and sighed. “Where did everyone go? Where’s Molly? And Yosef and Hazel? Why aren’t they here for lunch?”