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Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“Yes. Scentbane was her invention.”

“What? She created something so vicious?”

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Alicia’s eyes widened as a thought struck her. “Was it revenge? Because you expelled her back then? She must have held a grudge and made this poison just to make even you helpless against it.”

Aurelius let out another weary sigh. If this truly was Quarta’s doing, peace would be a luxury no one could expect again.

“No matter what, you must help Caitlin,” Alicia pressed.

“I will,” Aurelius promised with a nod.

At least convincing Aurelius to come with them had gone smoothly. They stayed the night at the Varga estate and prepared to depart at first light.

That evening they checked in with New York: James and Kelly had arrived safely and were settled. Caitlin no longer needed to worry. Everything was in order—except for Xero. His safety was uncertain. He was still in Graystone Castle, far too close to Zorro, and that was dangerous.

That same night, the great hall of Graystone Castle blazed with lights. The banquet glittered with wealth, nobles from across the land invited as guests.

Zora appeared in a wide princess gown, gleaming like a jewel, soaking up every glance. She was every bit the haughty heiress, basking in the adoration.

She extended her hand to Xero. “Xero, will you dance with me tonight?”

From the high seat, Zorro’s sharp eyes bore into him. Xero had no choice but to bow.

“Of course.”

They entered the dance floor together, spinning gracefully beneath chandeliers.

The nobles whispered. Xero's presence at Graystone, dancing with Zora, could only mean one thing: a potential alliance between the Preston and O'Malley families.

Zora made sure every eye was on her. She danced three times with Xero before entertaining other partners. She was the daughter of the Earl now, a precious jewel. Men vied for her attention, and she reveled in it.

By the end of the night, she was aglow with triumph. The nobles filed out, but Xero remained. He stepped onto the terrace, gazing toward the distant hills of Santa Aurelia, his thoughts with Sebastian and the others.

"So here you are, Xero."

Zora's voice drifted from behind. She approached, smiling.

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"Miss Preston." Xero greeted politely.

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"Tonight made me happy. Thank you for dancing with me."

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She studied him closely, realizing how striking he was—his looks no less than Sebastian’s, no less than her brother Zeke’s. With the O’Malley family’s wealth and influence, he was the perfect candidate for a political match. And, she thought, not a bad man to marry.

Her father’s plan was clear: cultivate their bond, then propose marriage to both the royal family and the O’Malleys. Neither would object.

“As long as you’re pleased,” Xero replied coolly, his tone distant.

“You don’t sound pleased yourself.”

“I am only worried for my aunt, the Queen. I don’t know if my men will reach Aurelius, or if he will agree to help.” He looked back into the night.

“She’ll be fine. She’ll recover. And if you still worry, once your men bring Aurelius back, I can accompany you to the palace myself.”

“That won’t be necessary. I wouldn’t trouble you, Miss Preston.”

“You don’t have to be formal. I only want to help. After all, I fell for you at first sight.”

She stepped closer, tilting her face up toward him, unashamed in her confession. Her meaning could not have been clearer.

It was the perfect moment, in her mind—romance poised to bloom.

But Xero stood stiff as stone. He did not move, did not bend.

“You really feel nothing for me?” Zora’s voice softened, her arm slipping around his neck. “Am I not beautiful?”

She leaned forward, ready to kiss him.

Xero finally pushed her back. “Stop. Miss Preston, you are the daughter of an earl. You should be poised and dignified. Don’t act like some streetwalker throwing herself at a man.”

“You... what did you just call me?”

Her face drained of color, rage flashing in her eyes.

“I only remind you,” Xero said evenly, “the night is cold. Take care not to catch a chill. Excuse me.”

“Stand where you are!”

Her shriek cracked across the terrace. “Do you forget whose domain this **is?**”

“I know. The Earl’s domain.”

“Then how dare you treat me this way?”

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Xero gave a faint smile and spread his hands. “I have treated you with courtesy, nothing more. If I had put my hands on you, that would have been improper—and surely even the Earl would not forgive such insolence.”

With that, he dipped his head and walked away.

Zora stood frozen, trembling with fury. Yet her father's words came back to her. To achieve greatness, she must endure. She must not waste herself on pride.

Fine. Let Xero sneer for now. When the O'Malley family was cornered, let's see how long he held himself so high.

Morning.

Caitlin and the others prepared to leave. Aurelius entrusted the Varga estate to his disciples and joined their

party.

As agreed, they should have gone back through Graystone Castle to retrieve Xero, but it was too dangerous- Zorro's trap waiting.

"Are we really just leaving him there?" Zeke asked.

Sebastian explained, "I've already notified Harvey. He'll see to Xero's release."

“Then we move fast,” Caitlin urged.

Their convoy rolled out of Santa Aurelia, passing Graystone’s checkpoint without incident.

Three kilometers on, they met Harvey’s column approaching. Both sides halted.

Sebastian greeted Harvey, who climbed from his vehicle. “Don’t worry about my brother,” Harvey said firmly. “I’ll go to Graystone with His Highness and negotiate.”

The Prince himself was there, Harvey’s uncle by marriage. He had come to support the O’Malleys.

“Thank you,” Sebastian said, and all of them bowed.

“No need for formality,” said Prince Ignacio as he stepped from the armored car. In his forties, tall and commanding, he carried himself with a sovereign’s air. His gaze swept the group, then came to rest on Aurelius.

“I have a request.”

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“Your Highness, please, go ahead.”

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Ignacio inclined his head. “My princess consort has been unwell for many days. The royal physicians cannot determine what it is. Though it seems like nothing serious, I would still ask Aurelius to move to the palace and examine her personally. For my wife’s sake.”

Ignacio’s tone was humble, courteous, almost deferential—impossible to refuse.

Aurelius turned his eyes toward Sebastian and Caitlin. Caitlin spoke first. “Aurelius, please *go* and look in on the Princess Consort. It won’t delay us long.”

Aurelius nodded. “Very well. If you ask it of me, I will not decline.”

With that settled, Ignacio gestured, and his trusted men led them toward the royal palace.

Graystone Castle.

On the high wall, Zora gazed down the road. By her reckoning, the convoy should already have arrived. As soon as they entered the castle, she intended to trade Xero for a hostage—whether

Caitlin or Sebastian, it didn't matter. One of them in her grip would be enough to satisfy her hatred.

But before long, news reached the castle: General Harvey and Prince Ignacio were on their way together to Graystone.

Zorro's brows furrowed. "Both of them?"

"Yes, my lord. They have already arrived at the checkpoint. Should we grant passage?"

"Of course! Let them through at once."

Relations between Graystone and the crown had only just been repaired. Zorro could not afford to give offense now.

The order was carried, and Zora, having overheard, entered the hall. "Father, the crown has sent men?"

"Yes. General Harvey, and Prince Ignacio."

"They must be coming for Xero," she said bitterly. "If they take him, how am I to trade for a hostage?"

“The trade is finished.” Zorro’s voice was flat. “Sebastian and Caitlin are not fools. They will have seen the trap. By now, they will have already passed Graystone and be far away.”

Zora’s teeth ground together. “Too easy for them.”

“Patience,” Zorro murmured, eyes narrowed. “Endure the small slights, or you ruin the greater plan.”

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The drawbridge fell. Harvey and Ignacio stood outside with their men. Zorro came with attendants to greet them, all smiles.

“Prince Ignacio, General Harvey—an honor. Please, come into the castle.”

Ignacio said nothing. Harvey’s expression was iron. “Earl Zorro, yesterday Prince Ignacio himself ordered my brother to Santa Aurelia to summon Aurelius. Why then is my brother detained here in Graystone?”

Zorro replied calmly, "Detained? Not at all. We held a banquet last night. My daughter invited Xero as a guest. He sent his companions on ahead to Santa Aurelia. Nothing improper."

"The banquet is over. He should be released."

"Xero is with my daughter in the gardens. They enjoy each other's company. Surely a little delay is no harm?"

Harvey's lip curled. "At the royal banquet, he rejected your daughter openly. Do you mean to force him into marriage?"

"Not at all."

"Then release him. Now. He will accompany me into the palace."

Ignacio's voice joined, quiet but sharp. "Earl, bring him out. There is no need to strain relations."

The warning was clear. Zorro had no choice. He gave the let out a long breath of relief, his brother safe.

der, and soon Xero appeared, unharmed. Harvey

“Earl, we’ll be taking him,” Harvey said, and with Ignacio’s convoy they departed in force.

Zorro stood at the gate, watching their retreat, fury burning beneath his calm mask. One day, when his designs were fulfilled, the crown would bow.

Ignacio’s palace.

The group was ushered through gilded halls into a reception chamber, seated with tea while word was sent inside. Before long, the chamberlain returned and announced Aurelius was to enter the Princess Consort’s

quarters.

Aurelius rose. Alicia tugged Caitlin to follow, while Sebastian and the others remained behind.

The moment they entered the inner chamber, a faint fragrance drifted in the air.

Alicia sniffed, curious. “What incense is this? It’s so fragrant.”

“Ambergris,” Caitlin murmured. Her sense of scent was sharp as ever.

“Yes, but... there’s something different about it,” Alicia said quietly.

They followed the trail to the ornate bed. Reclining against silk cushions lay Nevaeh, the Princess Consort-

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Xero's aunt. Her noble face was pale, her body frail, her breath weak.

"Your Grace, Aurelius is here," the chamberlain announced.

Nevaeh turned her head, voice soft. "Aurelius. Please, sit."

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The old man lowered himself onto a stool. "Your Grace, tell me every symptom. Leave nothing unsaid."

She sighed. "Each day I feel heavy, drowsy. I cannot eat. What I do eat, I vomit. My body is weak, numb, without strength..."

Aurelius listened, then beckoned Alicia to hand him his instruments. He examined carefully, and as he worked, a grim certainty formed. Her condition bore the marks of poisoning.

He performed a toxin test. The result chilled him.

He asked at once, "Your Grace, what incense burns here?"

"Ambergris," she answered faintly.

Aurelius went to the brazier. Alicia and Caitlin joined him.

"Master, is the incense tainted?" Alicia whispered.

His brow furrowed deep. "Yes. It is the incense. The Princess Consort has been poisoned."

"What poison?"

"Scentbane."

The name froze the women. Caitlin and Alicia exchanged a look, both startled. The same poison as James.

Aurelius tested the ashes, and the truth was undeniable—the incense carried toxins.

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Aurelius answered gravely, “From my examination just now, I’ve identified the cause. She is not ill—**she has** been poisoned.”

“Poisoned? Who would dare poison my wife?” Ignacio’s face darkened with fury.

“Look here at this incense. This ambergris has been burning regularly in the Princess Consort’s chamber. But this particular batch was laced with toxin. Prolonged exposure leads to poisoning. The symptoms are subtle, difficult to diagnose. If it continues, her appetite will vanish, her body will waste away, and in the end she will

die.”

Ignacio drew a sharp breath. “Guards! Remove all of it at once. Destroy every trace. Never let this incense burn here again.”

Servants hurried to obey.

Once the room was cleared, Aurelius continued, “Your Highness should think carefully about the source of this incense.”

Ignacio frowned. “It was a gift from my father. Surely it cannot be him.”

“I do not suggest His Majesty is involved. But I urge you—beware those closest to you. The threat may lie within the palace walls.”

Caitlin spoke gently, “It’s possible someone deliberately tampered with the king’s gift. Once discovered, suspicion would fall on the king. If you, in anger, accused him, father and son would be set against each other. That is precisely what the poisoner may have intended.”

Alicia nodded. “Exactly. Someone may be trying to exploit Your Highness’s devotion to the Princess Consort in order to turn you against the throne.”

Ignacio absorbed their words, breathing hard, then slowly steadied. “Very well. Whoever is behind this, I will find them. For now, Aurelius, please—save my wife.”

“Of course.”

Fortunately Nevaeh's poisoning was not yet advanced. Aurelius administered detoxification treatment and a pill of his own making. Soon her color improved, her breath steadied, and strength returned to her eyes.

Ignacio exhaled in relief. He thanked Aurelius profusely, even offered him lavish reward, but the old healer declined.

The matter of uncovering the poisoner Ignacio would pursue himself. For now, the group was dismissed.

At last they returned safely to their base. No time was wasted. Xero arranged a private jet, and by the early hours of the morning they landed on U.S. soil. Tyler had cars waiting.

It was too late in the night to go directly to James. Zeke escorted Aurelius to his estate for rest, while Caitlin

and Sebastian returned to Vanderbilt Manor,

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The following morning, Faith arrived at the manor with the children. When they spotted Caitlin coming down the stairs, they squealed with joy.

“Mommy’s home!”

“Mommy!”

They barreled into her arms. Caitlin sat on the steps, holding them close.

“When did you come back? We didn’t even know,” little Patricia asked, tilting her face up.

“Last night. You were all asleep. I didn’t wake you,” Caitlin said, stroking her cheek. “Have you seen Grandma yet?”

“Faith said today she’ll take us. We haven’t gone yet,” Arthur chimed in.

“Mommy, why do we have two grandmas?” Patricia asked innocently.

“One is your grandma from Daddy’s side, and the other is my mother—also your grandma,” Caitlin explained.

Patricia blinked, then nodded solemnly. Caitlin laughed and pulled them up. “After I finish some things today, I’ll take you to meet her.”

“Yay!”

Later that morning Caitlin and Sebastian went to Zeke’s estate to collect everyone.

Inside, they found Ximena and Aurelius chatting over tea. Ximena greeted them warmly. “Caitlin, Mr. Vanderbilt, welcome.”

Then she teased with a smile, “Well, my son didn’t return alone this time, did he? He brought back a beautiful girl. Did you see?”

“I saw. Alicia. She seems lovely,” Ximena said, clearly pleased. She was delighted her son had found someone, and already approved.

Just then Zeke and Alicia descended the stairs together.

Alicia spotted Caitlin and waved excitedly. “Caitlin-ah!”

She missed a step, slipped, and tumbled forward—only to be caught firmly in Zeke’s arms. For a moment they froze in a perfect tableau on the spiral staircase, her waist cradled, their eyes locked. A scene straight from a romance drama.

“Honestly, are you two feeding us dog food on purpose?” Caitlin teased, laughing. **The** others **chuckled** too.

“It was an accident! Totally an accident!” Alicia stammered, crimson-cheeked as she wriggled free. **Zeke only** smiled, unable to hide his amusement.

There was no time to linger. Zeke, Alicia, and Aurelius joined them, and together they drove straight to **the** hospital.

Quincy was standing guard outside James’s ward. When he saw them, he stood at once. “Mr. Vanderbilt. Madam. You’ve returned.”

“Thank you, Quincy,” Caitlin said softly.

“It’s my duty.”

She glanced at her brother inside, his face ashen, lips purpled, and her heart clenched.

“Aurelius, please,” she begged. “Please help him.”

The old healer said nothing, only entered the ward and bent over James. After a long, thorough examination and toxin analysis, his face grew grave.

“It is indeed Scentbane.”

Alicia assisted, asking quickly, “Master, how much can you purge?”

“I cannot promise. Only my utmost effort.”

He began at once. The method was brutal but necessary: piercing James’s fingertips with needles, drawing out dark, poisoned blood.

Everyone watched in silence, Caitlin gripping her hands tight, praying over and over.

The procedure lasted more than an hour. At last Aurelius swayed with exhaustion.

“Master, sit here and rest,” Alicia urged, guiding him to a sofa. Then she turned to the others. “Caitlin, the poison has been purged—partially. Master estimates only eighty percent could be drawn out. The rest is too deeply lodged. Your brother’s life is safe, but he may never wake.”

A heavy hush fell.

Caitlin’s eyes filled. She stepped to the bedside. In the basin at her feet lay black, viscous blood, drained from James. His face was less purple, the tension eased—but his lips remained pale, his body unresponsive.

Alive, but locked in silence. A vegetative state.

Caitlin stroked his hand, tears spilling.

“Aurelius,” she whispered, “you know Scentbane. Tell me—how can it be cured completely?”

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“With my current ability, I can only purge about eighty percent of the poison. If you want it completely removed, you’ll need to gather a set of very rare ingredients,” Aurelius said.

“What kind of ingredients?”

Aurelius pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it over. “Here. If you can gather every herb listed here, there may be a chance to cure your brother completely.”

Caitlin took the handwritten list. Names like Moonshade Herb, Silverthorn Root, Ashen Moss, Bloodvine Petals, Starfall Lotus, Frostleaf Fern, Ironbark Resin, Eclipse Orchid, and Celestine Powder filled the page. They were rare, but at least conceivable to obtain. Yet the final name stood out—utterly unfamiliar.

“Aurelius, these others we can try to find, but this last one, ‘Vitalis Crystal’... what is it?”

Sebastian leaned in for a look, but he too had never heard of it.

Even Alicia frowned. “Master, what exactly is Vitalis Crystal?”

Aurelius drew in a long breath and spoke slowly.

“Vitalis Crystal, also called the Shard of Life, is the most critical element in this formula. Only with it as the guiding catalyst can the poison be removed completely. Without it, the other herbs will do little good.”

Caitlin whispered the name to herself, her brows knitting tight.

“Shard of Life... I’ve heard that somewhere before. I just can’t remember where, or who said it.”

Her chest tightened with frustration, memory dangling just out of reach.

Alicia pressed, “Then where do we even find something like that?”

Aurelius fell silent for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his tone was grave.

“I’ve only ever seen mention of it in ancient texts. To obtain it... one must seek the lost land.”

At once, images flickered in Caitlin’s mind. She recalled that night in the hotel back in A-country, her mother’s voice echoing. Her mother had spoken of the codex’s map, pointing to an ancient and hidden kingdom—Atlantis. She had said it was there the Shard of Life lay buried. A relic of immense power, able to give sight to the blind, health to the sick, and long life to the old.

Could the Shard of Life Aurelius spoke of be the very same her mother had once described?

“I know it! I remember now! I finally understand!”

She blurted the words out three times, her face bright with realization.

Sebastian quickly asked, “What do you know?”

“I remember what my mother told me. Back then I thought it was just a wild story and brushed it **aside**. **But** now... the Shard of Life she spoke of must be the same one Aurelius just mentioned.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. “You’re saying she knows where it is?”

Caitlin nodded.

“That’s incredible!” Zeke stepped forward. “Then tell us where. We’ll go find it right away.”

But Caitlin shook her head. “It’s not that simple. This will take planning, maybe even caution. We can’t just rush in.”

She held back from revealing the connection between the Yun’s Aromatic Codex and the Shard of Life. The fewer who knew, the better—spreading it could only bring more trouble. She’d need to talk privately with Sebastian, make a careful plan before moving forward.

Her words lit a spark of hope, but also painted a picture of countless new obstacles ahead.

Sebastian saw in her eyes that she had something she couldn’t say. He didn’t press her.

For now, James could be transferred home. There was no need to keep him in the hospital. Sebastian arranged for him to be moved back to DanCa Estate.

Since Aurelius had rarely traveled to the US, Zeke and Alicia decided to treat him well and keep him as their guest for a few more days. Caitlin too invited him to Vanderbilt Manor another day as an honored guest. The old man, unable to refuse such warmth, agreed.

With Aurelius in Zeke and Alicia’s care, and James settled at DanCa Estate, Caitlin and Sebastian turned their attention to visiting Molly and Wendy’s mother, Rebecca.

In the hospital, Molly had woken a couple of days earlier. Her injuries had been severe, but thanks to timely surgery, her recovery now only required rest.

Her parents and family visited often, but the one who stayed with her the most was Simon. His face was haggard, his beard unkempt. Molly's heart ached just looking at him.

"You're working surgeries all day, and still coming here at night. Look at you, you're running yourself into the ground," she scolded gently, raising a hand to touch his face.

Simon caught her hand and pressed it against his cheek, his voice low and earnest. "I don't care. As long as you're all right, I can rest easy."

That was the scene Caitlin and Sebastian walked into—a tender moment between the two.

"Oh dear, did we just walk in at the wrong time?" Caitlin teased, stepping in with a bouquet of flowers.

"Simon, Molly," Sebastian greeted warmly as he followed her in. "How are you two holding up?"

"When did you get back?" Molly asked, delighted. After waking, she had heard her brother and sister-in-law had gone abroad to find Aurelius. Seeing them now filled her with relief.

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“Last night,” Caitlin said. “We didn’t want to wake anyone.”

Simon rose to his feet. “So you found him?”

“We did,” Caitlin nodded.

“Then James will be all right?”

“He’s much better, but we still have a ways to go,” Caitlin admitted, then added, “By the way, how are things with your family? Has your mother been discharged?”

“She has. And the police have closed the case. They confirmed it was an accident. My actions were deemed self-defense. They won’t be pressing charges.”

At the mention of his family, Simon’s expression dimmed.

Caitlin comforted him softly, “It’s over now. What matters is she wasn’t hurt too deeply. The rest will heal with time.”

Simon nodded. “Actually, about what we discussed before—sending my mother abroad for treatment—I reached out to a friend. He agreed readily, and Wendy and I have already talked it over.”

“Have you set a date?”

“Yes. Next Wednesday. Wendy will go with her and stay with her overseas for a few years.”

“You mean Wendy’s really decided to leave the country?”

“She insisted. She wants to be with my mom. And honestly, I’d worry about leaving Mom alone overseas. With Wendy there, she’ll be cared for. I’ll visit whenever I can. Two years isn’t forever.”

The room fell silent for a moment. Finally, Sebastian said, “If that’s settled, then let me handle the travel arrangements. I’ll make sure their flight is secure and they arrive safely.”

“Thank you,” Simon said sincerely.

“No thanks needed. We’re family,” Sebastian replied.

After checking in on Molly, Caitlin and Sebastian left the hospital. But Caitlin’s heart was troubled.

On the way back to Vanderbilt Manor, she turned to her husband with a frown. “If Wendy breaks things off with Benjamin... and now she’s going abroad... doesn’t that mean it’s really over between them?”

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“I can understand Wendy. After what happened, no girl would be in the mood for romance,” Sebastian said.

“But Simon never left Molly’s side, did he?” Caitlin countered.

She couldn’t help comparing the two. Simon and Molly’s relationship had survived the ordeal untouched, yet Wendy and Benjamin seemed to be drifting apart.

“That’s different,” Sebastian replied. “Molly nearly gave her life to save Simon. If he abandoned her now, he’d be a complete bastard. They’ll never break up. Wendy, though, she’s softer inside. After everything her family went through, she probably can’t face it all. Leaving the country might be the best thing for her—it’ll help her heal.”

Caitlin sighed. “When I get the chance, I’ll go see her.”

She turned her gaze to the window, her mind heavy with worries. Not just for her friend, but even more for her brother.

“By the way,” Sebastian asked gently, “back at the hospital, was there something you couldn’t say in front of everyone?”

“Yes. About the Shard of Life. There are questions in my mind. When I’ve sorted them out, I’ll tell you.”

“All right.”

They left it there, and soon the car pulled into Vanderbilt Manor. They picked up the children and together set out for DanCa Estate.

The luxury car rolled to a stop at DanCa Estate. As soon as the doors opened, the children tumbled out.

“Let’s see who finds Grandma first!” Arthur shouted.

At once the others sprinted after him, their laughter ringing through the bright garden.

By the time Caitlin and Sebastian reached the villa entrance, they found all four children crouching by the doorway, peeking inside, none daring to enter.

“Why are you all just standing here?” Caitlin asked.

Patricia turned her big eyes toward her. “Mommy, is that really our grandma?”

“Yes, it is. Come on, let’s go in together.”

She took her daughter’s hand and called the boys to follow. Together they stepped into the living room.

Kelly, seated with a photo album in her lap, set it aside when she heard them. “Caitlin, Sebastian, you’re back.”

Her gaze shifted to the children. “And these... they’re yours? Quadruplets?”

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“Yes, Mom.” Caitlin introduced them one by one. “This is Howard, the eldest. Then Bruce, Arthur, and the youngest, Patricia.”

“Go on, say hello to Grandma.”

“Grandma!” the children chorused.

Kelly’s face lit with joy. “Such good children. So beautiful.”

Patricia wriggled onto the sofa beside her, studying her curiously. To her, having another grandmother felt strange and magical.

Kelly smiled warmly at the little girl, then turned her eyes to the boys. She adored them immediately—their handsome little faces, each one striking.

“Adorable. Just adorable.”

She pinched their cheeks, ruffled their hair, hugged and kissed them, delight spilling out of her.

Patricia, however, noticed Grandma showering more attention on her brothers. Her little mouth turned down in a pout. This grandma wasn’t as good as her other grandma, she thought.

“All right, kids,” Sebastian said. “Daddy will take you outside to play so Mommy and Grandma can talk.”

He ushered them out, leaving Caitlin and Kelly alone in the sitting room.

Caitlin sat beside her mother. Kelly spoke first. “Harrison’s back now. He’s upstairs. He seems much better already.”

“Yes. Aurelius purged most of the poison—about eighty percent.”

Kelly nodded thoughtfully. “I see.”

Caitlin studied her mother’s face. “Mom, do you remember when we were in A-country? You told me about the codex map pointing to a place... Atlantis, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Atlantis.”

“How did you know that was the place hidden in the map? Do you actually believe Atlantis is real?”

“I heard it from your grandmother,” Kelly answered. “I suppose it must be. Otherwise, why would there be such legends?”

“If Grandma shared such an important secret with you, then you must also know about the Yuncey family history, don’t you?” Caitlin pressed.

Kelly sipped her tea, set the cup down, and nodded. “Yes. The Yuncey fortune came from your grandmother’s side. Timothy and his father Miles stole it all. They were frauds who usurped everything.”

She wasn’t wrong. Those facts were public record, easy to verify.

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Caitlin tried again. “And did Eleanor tell you who her closest friend was in Departure City? Or who helped her escape?”

Kelly frowned, thought for a moment, then shook her head. “No. I don’t know. She never told me that.”

Caitlin’s lips pressed together. Inside, doubt churned. How could Eleanor have left out someone so important? Billy had sacrificed so much for her—surely Grandma would have mentioned him. Why claim she hadn’t?

Perhaps sensing Caitlin’s persistence, Kelly tried to steer the conversation away. “The past is gone, child. Let’s not dig it all up again.”

But Caitlin picked up the album her mother had set aside. “You say not to bring up the past, yet here you are flipping through old photos. Doesn’t this album remind you of anything?”

Kelly’s smile softened. “Plenty. You and Harrison when you were little.”

Caitlin pointed to one photo, filled with cherry blossoms. A picnic under the trees, her mother sitting with her and Harrison.

“Do you remember where this was taken?”

“Cherry Blossom Ridge,” Kelly answered with a smile. “It says right there, the date and the place.”

“Yes. And do you remember what we buried beneath the trees that day?”

Kelly’s smile faltered. Her eyes grew distant. At last she shook her head. “It was so long ago. I can’t remember.”

“Then never mind. It’s all in the past anyway.”

Caitlin forced a smile, took her mother’s hand, and stood. “Come on. Let’s go see Harrison together.”

“All right.”

Upstairs, they entered Harrison’s room. He lay quietly on the bed, his face calm, his color mostly restored. But still there was no response.

Caitlin’s heart sank. She had thought that once she found her mother, their family would finally be whole, that everything would be resolved at last. But now she knew—things were far from over.

“Mom,” she asked softly, “you lived on Ebonreach Isle for years. Did you never notice anything suspicious? Those portraits you said were poisoned—how did you know? And why was it that you stayed there unharmed, but Harrison went once and was poisoned?”

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56 vouchers

Caitlin turned her gaze on her mother. She didn’t want to think she was paranoid, but after years apart, something about this reunion felt off.

It was as if Kelly were hiding things from her, avoiding truths she should have spoken. And without those truths, Caitlin’s search for answers was growing painfully slow.

She wanted more. She wanted something real from her mother's lips.

Kelly's face paled slightly. After a pause, she said, "I don't know either. Maybe the poisoner wasn't targeting me at all. Maybe they kept me alive only to use me against you. That's probably why I wasn't poisoned."

"You're right," Caitlin nodded. "If Doña Dolores went to such lengths to capture you but never harmed you, then she must have intended to use you as leverage. And their ultimate goal must be tied to Yun's Aromatic Codex."

Kelly sighed. "If I had known how valuable the codex was, I would have died before letting Hector take it. I failed to protect it. You must find the missing half quickly."

"Don't blame yourself, Mom. I'll find it. First, I need to learn everything I can about this Hector."

Kelly nodded, then asked carefully, "The upper half of the codex—it's still with you, isn't it? Could you let me see it once more?"

Instead of answering, Caitlin countered, "Do you know where I found the upper half?"

"Where?"

"Buried under the cherry tree at Blossom Ridge."

Kelly's expression shifted into sudden understanding. "So that's where it was. No wonder. It must have been so long I completely forgot. My memory isn't what it used to be." She gave a soft, weary sigh.

Caitlin said nothing, only stared at her. Inside, her doubts felt like cracks in a riverbank: the more questions she uncovered, the wider the cracks grew. And once the cracks dipped below the waterline, suspicion would burst forth like a flood, swallowing everything.

But outwardly she showed none of it. Smiling, she took her mother's arm. "I got you some new clothes. Come, try them on."

They spent the next while with Kelly trying on dresses. Kelly laughed, pleased. "My sweet girl's all grown up, so thoughtful, so caring. It makes me so happy."

"As long as you're happy. Harrison and I only wish you a good life, for us all to stay together as a family. Harrison was torn away from us so young. Now that I finally have him back, I just want him well again. I don't ever want us to be apart."

"Yes," Kelly echoed softly. "Never, apart again."

Caitlin studied her for a moment before adding with a gentle smile, "I do still want to know who our real

55 vouchers

father is. But since you don't want to tell me, I won't force you. Maybe one day, when you're ready, you'll tell me yourself. Right?"

Kelly nodded.

At DanCa Estate, Caitlin left people behind to watch over Kelly and Harrison. They stayed through lunch, then in the afternoon she and Sebastian took the children back to Vanderbilt Manor.

When they returned, Sebastian shut the bedroom door before asking, "Caitlin, earlier you said you had something to tell me. What is it?"

She met his eyes. "Do you remember what I said at the hospital? About the Shard of Life—that I had questions I wasn't ready to share yet?"

"And now?"

"Not clear, not completely." She took his hand and drew him to sit on the bed. "Here's where we stand. To cure my brother, we have to find this so-called Shard of Life. But to even begin, we need the missing half of the codex, which means finding Hector in D-country. Only with both halves can we uncover the path to Atlantis. Right?"

“Yes.”

“And that’s the problem. I can’t shake the feeling we’re being drawn into a trap. A giant web, stretched out around us.”

Sebastian frowned, listening carefully.

“Think about it,” Caitlin continued. “I pressed Black Hawk for information, I found my mother, and we should’ve been done. We could have lived in peace. But suddenly my brother is poisoned. Tell me that isn’t too much of a coincidence.”

“You’re right. That does sound far too neat.”

“And then there’s this. Alicia told me Scentbane was created by Aurelius’s first disciple, Quarta. Aurelius’s cure for Harrison included the Shard of Life. Doesn’t that imply someone else was poisoned before? That this treatment had been used before? Otherwise, how could such a prescription even exist? And if the Shard is nearly impossible to find, how was its medical value proven in the first place?”

Sebastian nodded slowly. “That’s true. Every proven cure in history exists because it was tested again and again. Aurelius’s recipe... it seems untested, almost theoretical.”

“Exactly. That’s the key. If not for Princess Nevaeh’s poisoning, I might never have doubted. But Aurelius treated her Scentbane without any Shard of Life. Why is it only my brother who suddenly needs it?”

“You think Aurelius gave you that prescription just to send us searching for the Shard of Life?”

“Yes. And that’s not all. The biggest problem of all... is my mother.”

“What about her?” Sebastian asked, startled.

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55 vouchers

“I don’t know if she’s who she says she is.”

Sebastian stared. “What do you mean?”

Caitlin’s face grew tight with unease. “She feels... different. Her look, her voice—it’s more than just the years apart. At first I told myself it was just time, but the more I talk with her, the more like a stranger she seems.”

“Maybe you’re being too sensitive?” Sebastian suggested, hoping she was only imagining things.

“No. I trust my instincts. When I asked who our father was, she wouldn’t tell me. Fine. That could be grief, or secrets too painful to share. But then I asked her about the past. Some things she

recalled with detail, like the Yuncey family's history. But when I asked who helped Grandma escape Departure City, she claimed she didn't know. How could she not know?"

Caitlin's voice grew sharper. "And when I told her I found the codex under the cherry tree, she actually agreed. But it wasn't true. She entrusted it to Xavian, and it passed through Blake's hands before reaching me. She should never have gotten that wrong."

Sebastian listened in silence, doubt now rising in his own mind. "So you think... she might not be your mother at all?"

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"Yes. If it really was Doña Dolores who took her, then why hasn't she seen Dolores even once in all these years? Could it be that this Dolores is nothing more than an invention?"

"Or maybe it was Black Hawk's lie?" Sebastian suggested.

"No," Caitlin shook her head firmly. "I don't think Black Hawk lied. What he said might actually be true. But here's the problem—since Black Hawk ended up in our hands, the mastermind behind him must know by now. They would also know that Black Hawk might betray them eventually and tell

me the truth. Which means they probably moved my mother before we ever set foot on Ebonreach Isle.”

She rose to her feet, pacing as her thoughts sharpened. “Let me take this further. They captured my mother but didn’t kill her. That means revenge wasn’t the motive. It had to be about the codex.

“And suppose this woman we found isn’t my real mother at all. If she’s a plant, then the point of letting us ‘rescue’ her was to lead us here—to the moment my brother was poisoned. And in my conversations with her, when I asked about Atlantis in the codex, she explained it all in detail.

“Then, almost on cue, Aurelius prescribes a cure for Harrison that involves the very same Shard of Life my ‘mother’ mentioned. That can’t be coincidence.

“She says the lower half of the codex is with someone named Hector. Aurelius tells us the only cure requires the Shard. And where is the Shard? In Atlantis. Where do we get the map to Atlantis? From the codex. One thing leads to another, all too neatly.

“Put it all together, and what does it look like? Someone is pulling strings behind the scenes, using me to gather the codex, to unlock Atlantis, and ultimately to retrieve this so-called Shard of Life.

“This isn’t fate. It’s a setup. We’ve been walked right into it.”

Her reasoning was razor-sharp, threading scattered clues into a single, chilling line of logic. Sebastian felt as if a veil of fog had been pulled away, leaving only cold clarity behind.

“Then what if we just take her and interrogate her?” he asked. “If she’s a fake, she has to know the truth. And Aurelius—what if he’s been bought by them too?”

“No,” Caitlin said quickly. “Not yet. They’re only pieces on the board. Whoever orchestrated this is planning something far bigger. If we move now, without knowing who we’re up against, we’ll only spook them and ruin our chance.”

“So what then? Do we just let them keep leading us by the nose?”

“Not exactly.” Her eyes flashed with resolve. “We’ll play along. We’ll go to D-country, find Hector, secure the lower half of the codex. We’ll piece together the map, unlock Atlantis, and hunt for the Shard of Life. If the mastermind wants us to reach that point so badly, then that’s exactly where we’ll go. And once we do... they’ll have no choice but to show themselves. And when they do, we’ll finally have the truth.”

Originally, Caitlin had no intention of chasing down the missing codex. She thought she could revive the Fragrance & Dye Studio without it. But now, with a hidden hand pushing from the shadows, she had no choice.

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55 vouchers

For her brother, for her mother, for the fragile hope of peace—she had to walk this path.

“No matter what, I’ll face it with you,” Sebastian said, taking her hand. His eyes were steady, unwavering.

Caitlin nodded. “First, I’ll find a way to quietly test my mother’s identity. If she really is who she says she is, or not.”

“Good.”

After speaking with him, Caitlin left the manor. She had another stop to make—Wendy.

Ever since the tragedy at the Smith household, Wendy and Simon could no longer bear to live in their old apartment. The place had been cleaned, the blood washed away, but to them it was a grave. They had moved instead into the villa Caitlin had given Wendy, the LL Villa.

Their mother, Rebecca, was more stable now, though she still didn’t recognize her own children. To keep her safe, Simon hired a full-time caretaker, afraid she might try to harm herself again.

Wendy had returned to work, managing the café by day and returning home in the evenings to care for Amelia. While she worked, Benjamin came every day, parking his car outside the café, waiting for her to finish her shift.

But since their breakup, he had fallen apart. Just days without her, and he looked hollow, sleepless, as if his heart were being carved open piece by piece. He couldn't let go, but Wendy refused to see him. Even when he stood before her, she was cold, distant, unreachable.

At first, he thought it was just grief—that the chaos in her family made her too tired for love. But time passed, and nothing changed. He had to face the truth: she truly didn't want to be with him anymore.

Still, he couldn't give her up. The pain was suffocating.

Desperate for even a glimpse of her, he ordered delivery after delivery of coffee from her café. But it was always Vicky, Wendy's coworker, who brought it out.

"Benjamin, here's your order," Vicky said, setting the cup in his car window.

"Why doesn't she bring it herself?" he asked hoarsely.

"Um... she said she doesn't want to."

Vicky knew well enough what was going on: Benjamin chasing, Wendy resisting. She hated being stuck in the middle, ferrying messages between them, but there was no avoiding it.

As she turned to leave, Benjamin stopped her. "Tell me. Why won't she accept me? Has she ever told you why?"

Vicky thought hard, then shook her head. “Not directly. But... maybe it’s because she feels inferior.”

“Inferior?”

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55 vouchers

“Yes. Think about it. You’re from one of the most powerful families in the country. She and I—we’re ordinary. Maybe she feels the gap is just too big. That’s only my guess, though! Don’t be upset with me if I’m wrong.”

Benjamin waved her off, sinking back in his seat as her words gnawed at him. Wendy’s insecurities—he knew about them. But was that really why? She had always said they weren’t a good match. Did she truly mean his identity was the barrier?

Or... had she never loved him at all?

If it was the former, what could he do? He couldn't change the family he was born into. And if it was the latter –if Wendy had never truly cared for him–then the ache in his chest only deepened, unbearable.

He was lost in the spiral when a familiar car pulled up nearby. Caitlin stepped out, and Benjamin's eyes lit up like a drowning man spotting land.

“Caitlin!” he called, rushing to her side.

She turned, startled, and then sighed when she saw the state of him. He looked thinner, paler, beaten down.

“You and Wendy still haven't made up?” she asked gently.

His eyes were bloodshot, his voice raw with desperation. “No. She won't even see me. She hides from me every day. Caitlin, you have to help me–I'm losing my mind.”

Help me. Please.

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Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“Don’t panic. I’ll ask Wendy out, and we can all sit down and talk.”

“Yes, yes, please—go now.”

With Benjamin’s desperate request in her ears, Caitlin pushed open the door to the café.

23

55 vouchers

Every time the wind chimes on the door rang, Wendy’s shoulders tensed. She couldn’t stop herself from glancing at the entrance, bracing for Benjamin to appear again. But when she saw Caitlin, her face softened.

“Welcome back, Caitlin! You’re home!”

“Mm.”

Caitlin walked to the counter, studying her friend. Wendy looked thinner, paler, as if her burdens had eaten away at her strength.

“Are you busy right now? When you have a break, I’d like to take you out for a walk. I’ve found my mother.”

She used that as her excuse. Wendy’s eyes lit with relief. “You found Aunt Tang? That’s wonderful. Simon already told me. I was planning to visit you after work.”

Wendy untied her apron, turning to Vicky. “Can I leave things to you? I may be out for a while.”

“Of course! Go on. In fact, why don’t you just take the rest of the afternoon off? I’ll call the manager and have the intern cover your shift.”

“That might be best.”

Wendy had already submitted her resignation. She only had a handful of days left before she would leave the café behind for good.

The two women stepped out together. Across the street, Benjamin stood stiff beside his luxury car, his gaze locked on Wendy. She knew he was there but refused to turn her head. Instead, she slid into Caitlin’s car without hesitation.

Benjamin waited until they drove off, then quietly followed.

Caitlin brought Wendy to a nearby park. They strolled side by side along the shaded paths.

“Wendy,” Caitlin began gently, “you don’t have to accompany Rebecca overseas yourself. If you trust me, I’ll arrange the best caregivers to look after her. You could stay here, focus on your career. Remember when you studied bridal design abroad? You could do that here. I even offered you a place at TIG before—you turned it down, saying you wanted freedom. But then you bounced through jobs, never settling. I don’t know what you’re chasing. If you want it, TIG is still open to you. I can place you immediately.”

She had tried to help before. But Wendy always refused, preferring to drift from one short-lived position to the next, her talent untapped.

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255 vouchers.

Wendy shook her head. “I don’t want to rely on connections. And I’m not sure I’m capable. What if I drag you. down?”

“You’re my best friend. Why shouldn’t you use the connections you have? Stop thinking of it as a burden. And if working under TIG feels like too much, I’ll help you start your own bridal studio. I’ll invest, you create. Simple as that.”

“It’s too much trouble. Don’t. You already have enough on your shoulders.”

“It’s not trouble. But fine, what if we compromise? I’ll create a bridal design line within TIG. You’ll lead it as head designer. How about that?”

But even her best intentions couldn’t sway Wendy. Her decision had already been made.

“Don’t worry about me, Caitlin. I’ve decided. I’m going abroad with my mom. I need to care for her myself. I couldn’t trust anyone else to do it.”

Her reasoning was sound. A sick mother in a foreign land, with no one familiar nearby—what daughter would abandon her to strangers?

Caitlin tried another tack. “And Benjamin? He loves you. You love him. Why not give him a chance?”

Wendy lowered her gaze, staring at her shadow on the ground. “Sometimes love doesn’t mean you’re right for each other.”

“I think you are right for each other.”

“No. We aren’t.”

“You mean because of his background? Sure, being from the same world makes things easier. But real love breaks barriers. That’s why Cinderella and the prince is a story that still lasts. And Benjamin—he’s not the kind of man who cares where you came from.”

“I know...” Wendy’s voice trailed off. In her mind, another face loomed—Mrs. Jones. Benjamin’s mother. She had promised that woman she would walk away. And a promise was a promise.

They reached a sprawling banyan tree, the same spot where she and Benjamin had once sat together, laughing, dreaming. Standing there again, the air felt heavy with loss.

“Stay strong, Wendy,” Caitlin urged. “When Rebecca recovers, I’ll help you build your career. Become independent. Earn your own strength. Then you’ll find real confidence—the kind that comes from inside, not outside. No one will shake you again.”

“I’ll try.” Tears blurred Wendy’s vision. Caitlin brushed them away with a sigh.

“But remember this—career can wait. Love can’t. If you let this slip away, you may regret it for the rest of your life. Time changes people. Two years from now, what if Benjamin isn’t still waiting? What if you’ve lost him?”

“If he finds someone better, I’ll be happy for him.”

The words were sincere. She wanted him free, not shackled to her.

“I don’t want your blessing!”

23

55 vouchers

The voice rang out from behind them. Wendy froze, her heart jolting. She turned slowly.

Benjamin stood a short distance away, disheveled, haunted. His eyes never left her as he walked closer.

Caitlin leaned in to whisper, "Talk to him. Give each other a chance." Then she left them alone beneath the banyan tree.

Benjamin stopped in front of Wendy, close enough to see how thin she'd grown. It hurt to look at her.

"These days you wouldn't see me. So I didn't force it. I just sat outside your work, waiting, just to catch a glimpse of you. Wendy, isn't it enough? Can't you come back to me now?"

His eyes shone red with sleepless nights and heartbreak.

Wendy shook her head, struggling to steady her voice. "Benjamin, can't you see? We're finished. I won't go back to you. Don't wait for me anymore."

“Why? Why, Wendy? Don’t tell me you never loved me!”

He seized her shoulders, his lips trembling. “Don’t you understand? No matter what happens, no matter what pain comes, I’ll stay. I’ll protect you. I don’t want to let you go. We were only just beginning. You promised you’d always take care of me, remember? Why are you giving up on me now?”

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65 vouche

When a frivolous young heir suddenly falls deeply in love, he will treat the girl in his heart as his one and

only.

Benjamin was exactly that kind of man. He loved Wendy, and besides her, no other woman could ever matter.

Wendy understood his heart, but she couldn't give him what he wanted. She had no choice but to let go. Maybe if she was cruel enough, he would finally stop hoping.

"You want an answer? Fine, I'll tell you. When I said we're not right for each other, I meant it. The real reason is that I don't love you. Not only do I not love you, I can't stand you. I hate your arrogance, your domineering temper, your sharp tongue.

"Yes, being with you strokes my vanity, makes me feel special for a moment. But that's not enough. You're reckless, immature. You don't even know what I truly need.

"So I won't waste any more of my time. I don't want this kind of explosive, all-consuming love. It doesn't suit me. Don't push me anymore!"

She shouted it with all the force she could summon, her words sounding cold and vicious, while inside her chest her heart was bleeding.

This was her first true love. And here she was, stabbing it to death with her own hands. Every harsh word she hurled at him was a blade sinking into herself.

Before her tears betrayed her, Wendy turned to flee. But Benjamin caught her, pulling her back against the rough bark of the banyan tree.

"I don't believe you," he whispered hoarsely. "I know you love me. I can feel it. Just love me one more time- prove *it*."

He pressed his mouth against hers, desperate, clumsy, trying only to make her feel how much he needed her.

“Smack!”

Wendy shoved him away and struck him hard across the face. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

“Don’t you dare force me again! Benjamin, I never loved you! I’m leaving soon—stop waiting for me!”

With those cruel words, she turned and ran, crying.

Benjamin stood frozen, his cheek stinging, his heart tearing apart. Then he shouted after her retreating figure, his voice breaking, “I’ll wait for you! I’ll wait! Wendy, I’ll never let you go!”

She heard him. But she didn’t slow down. She ran even faster.

Benjamin’s knees buckled, and he collapsed onto the grass, staring at the space where she had vanished.

Nearby, Caitlin had witnessed the entire exchange. She sighed heavily. So many things in life can be mended

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55 Vouchers

-but once love is broken, sometimes it can never be healed. Not even her sharp mind could intervene in this.

She walked to Benjamin and laid a hand on his shoulder. "There's still time. Don't lose hope. Wendy and her family have moved into LL Villa. I'll send you the address."

Benjamin snatched his phone, glanced at the screen, and surged to his feet with sudden energy. "Got it. I won't give up. Not now."

He sprinted off in the direction Wendy had gone, as though sheer willpower alone could bring her back.

On her way back from the city, Caitlin received a call from the guards at DanCa Estate. Ximena had come to visit Kelly and was waiting at the gate.

Caitlin gave her approval, and the guards let her in.

Years had passed since Ximena last saw Kelly. When they met in the villa, even she felt uncertain.

“Kelly, it’s been so long.”

“You are...?” Kelly emerged after hearing a visitor had arrived. She looked blankly at the woman before her.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember.” Kelly’s expression showed no trace of recognition.

“It’s Ximena,” the other woman explained, astonished. How could Kelly forget her, after all that had happened?

“Oh, I see. And what brings you here?” Kelly asked politely.

“I heard you were back. I wanted to see you, to talk.”

Kelly had no idea what she wanted to talk about, but she welcomed her guest inside and ordered tea to be served.

“I’ve wronged you in the past,” Ximena said softly. “I wanted to apologize face-to-face.”

“There’s no need. The past is past. I’ve forgotten it already.”

“You may have forgotten, but I remember everything. I made many mistakes. What I regret most was what I did to him.”

“To who?” Kelly asked.

“Xavian. You don’t remember him either?”

Once, both women had been deeply entangled because of Xavian. Ximena thought he was the one man Kelly could never forget.

Kelly quickly sipped her tea and nodded. “I remember, I remember. How is he?”

“He’s gone. Caitlin didn’t tell you?”

“No, she didn’t.”

68 vouchers

Kelly's face stayed strangely calm, as though the news meant nothing to her. Ximena was baffled. If Kelly truly hadn't known, how could she react so coldly, after what Xavian had once meant to her?

The conversation faltered. Ximena sat in silence, uneasy. Kelly seemed like an entirely different woman.

At last, Kelly excused herself, saying she felt unwell.

"Alright. Rest well then. I won't disturb you further. Maybe we can meet again another time."

Ximena forced a smile, said her goodbye, and left.

As she drove out of the estate, she crossed paths with Caitlin's car. Caitlin pulled up beside her.

"Ximena, leaving already? You didn't see my mother?"

"I did," Ximena said with a sigh. "But she didn't want to talk to me. Maybe she still resents me for what I did before. I came to apologize, and I did. That's enough."

Caitlin's eyes narrowed. "Tell me honestly—when you spoke with her, did you feel... anything off? Could you still feel the person she used to be?"

Ximena shook her head. "No. She feels... different. Like a stranger. She barely remembered anything I said, and even when she did, she seemed uninterested. I don't think she wants to see me again."

Stranger.

Even Ximena felt it. That only deepened Caitlin's suspicion—something about her mother was truly wrong.

"Don't take it too hard," Caitlin said, forcing a smile. "She's only just come back. Maybe she needs time to adjust. When she's stronger, we'll all gather together again."

"Maybe so. But Caitlin—stay close to her. She told me she wasn't feeling well."

"I will. Drive safe."

After Ximena left, Caitlin entered the villa and went upstairs. She found her mother in her room.

“Mom,” she said gently, “I just ran into Ximena outside. She told me you weren’t feeling well. How about we go to the hospital for a checkup? I already made an appointment.”

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“I don’t need to go to the hospital. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Kelly leaned against the headboard, brushing off Caitlin’s concern.

55 vouchers

Caitlin sat beside her, gently insisting. “Ever since you came back, I’ve been meaning *to* get you a full checkup. Today I finally have time.”

“There’s no need to trouble yourself.”

“It’s no trouble at all. You’re my mother. Your health is the most important thing. I already booked the doctor, so don’t make me cancel.”

With Caitlin pressing the matter, Kelly had no choice but to go with her.

At the hospital, Caitlin asked Simon to examine her mother. After a preliminary check, Simon shook his head.

“Everything looks normal. If she feels unwell, it might just be a bit of acclimation—maybe the water or the climate.”

Whether Kelly was really unwell, only she knew. But since Simon found no illness, Caitlin suspected her complaints were nothing more than an act.

“Come on, let’s get the full physical done,” Caitlin said, not exposing her doubts.

Kelly underwent the full round of tests Caitlin had scheduled. When it was over, Caitlin took her to visit Molly’s ward. Eliza was there, as well as Blake, who had dropped by to deliver food on behalf of his mother Octavia.

Blake greeted Caitlin briefly before leaving. Kelly sat with Eliza and exchanged polite conversation. Eliza brought up Caitlin and Sebastian’s wedding, chatting happily, while Kelly simply listened quietly.

Caitlin turned to her cousin. “Molly, are you feeling better?”

“Much better. Don’t worry about me. Now that your mother is back, you must feel relieved. How’s your brother?”

“He hasn’t woken yet. We’re still trying.”

“I hope he pulls through.”

After spending some time there, Caitlin brought her mother home. As they walked out of the hospital, Caitlin noticed that Kelly’s expression seemed more relaxed—perhaps the act of socializing had worn on her.

On the drive back, Caitlin quietly sent Quincy instructions to obtain a sample from Kelly’s blood test and have it analyzed.

As they continued home, Caitlin smiled at her mother. “Feeling better now? You look healthier than before.”

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“I told you, I’m fine. I feel better already.”

“Good. Since you’re alright and it’s still early, let me take you to see Xavian.”

Kelly said nothing. Caitlin stopped at a flower shop, bought a bouquet, and drove straight to the

At Xavian's grave, Caitlin said, "Mom, this is where he rests."

cemetery.

Kelly placed the flowers before the stone, her face calm, and sighed. "So many years have passed, and old friends are gone. He wasn't that old either. Such a pity."

"Yes. You and Xavian were close. He was the one you trusted most. Do you know if he left anyone behind?" Caitlin's tone was casual, but her questions were deliberate. She wanted to see if Kelly would trip up.

"I don't know. Did he?"

"You don't remember who lived with him back then?"

Kelly furrowed her brows. "My memory's terrible these days. So many things slip away. I really can't recall."

"It was his son, Blake. You must have known him."

"Oh, yes, Blake. He must be grown by now."

“He was already grown. Four years doesn’t change much. He’s just more mature now. We saw him earlier in Molly’s ward—you didn’t notice?”

Caitlin’s smile was faint but sharp. Kelly blinked, then forced a look of realization. “Oh! I didn’t notice. Blake’s a young man now, very handsome. Looks just like his father did.”

To cover her awkwardness, Kelly fussed over the bouquet, arranging it neatly in front of the stone.

Caitlin maintained her gentle demeanor, acting close and warm, but in her heart she felt nothing but cold certainty. The more time she spent with this version of Kelly, the more she sensed an act.

A fake was still a fake. No matter how well someone imitated, they could never replace the real thing.

Once the test results came back, Caitlin would know for sure.

That night, she stayed at DanCa Estate. When she offered to help her mother bathe, Kelly refused.

“No need. I can wash myself. You go rest.”

“Then can I at least sleep with you tonight?” Caitlin teased.

Kelly laughed. "You're too old for that. Go home to The Vanderbilt Family. Don't keep Sebastian waiting."

"Alright then. Sleep well, Mom. Good night."

The moment Kelly closed the door, Caitlin's smile vanished. A chill radiated from her as she turned away and headed to her brother's room.

nished & chill

23

55 vouchers

She sat at his bedside, clasped his hand, and gazed at his peaceful, unconscious face. James's life was sustained only by nutrients and injections. He wouldn't die, but if this continued, it would consume him.

"Harrison," she whispered, her voice trembling, "I'm sorry. I was careless, and now you're suffering for it. Please hold on. I swear I'll find a cure."

She removed the protective amulet Beatrice had given her and placed it around his neck. “This was a gift from Beatrice. I’m giving it to you now. May it keep you safe.”

She tucked the blanket around him and rose with

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There had to be another way. Beyond searching for the Shard of Life, there was still Quarta, the woman who had created Scentbane. If Caitlin could find her, maybe she could cure James completely.

Only Aurelius knew about Quarta. No one else even knew her name. Caitlin needed to press him for answers.

That night, she made arrangements for Aurelius to come the next morning to reexamine James.

By midmorning, Zeke arrived, bringing Aurelius and Alicia with him to DanCa Estate.

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Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“Caitlin!”

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Alicia hopped out of the car and waved. Caitlin smiled and went to greet them. “Aurelius, Alicia, Zeke, you’re here. Come on in.”

She led them inside the estate, where Kelly was already in the living room, helping to welcome the guests.

“Caitlin, take me to see your brother,” Aurelius said after finishing his tea and rising to his feet.

“Mom, please help entertain the others. I’ll take Aurelius upstairs.”

“Alright.” Kelly nodded.

Caitlin guided Aurelius to the second floor, opening the door to James’s room and letting him in. Once inside, she closed the door firmly and turned to face him.

“Aurelius, I’m begging you. Please save my brother. I know you must have a way. He’s my only brother—I can’t lose him. Please, I’m begging you!”

Caitlin never begged easily. Unless it was truly necessary, she never lowered her pride. Yet now, her eyes shimmered with tears as she pleaded with the old healer, hoping he still had some hidden means.

“Caitlin, stand up,” Aurelius said softly. “I already gave you the prescription. Only by gathering all the ingredients and the catalyst can your brother be cured.”

Hearing the same answer again, Caitlin rose slowly. Tears remained in her eyes, but her gaze had grown

colder.

“Is that really true, Aurelius? The Shard of Life you mentioned is too elusive, too mythical, like something out of a legend. In all your years, how many patients poisoned by Scentbane have you actually treated? Do you have any real cases to prove this?”

Aurelius faltered. “I have encountered patients before, but none so severe as your brother. Others had milder symptoms, similar to the princess consort. With detoxification and antidotes, they could recover.”

“So you’ve never treated a case this serious before, is that it? Then tell me, Aurelius, on what basis did you write that prescription?”

“On past experience, and what I’ve learned from ancient texts...”

“Aurelius, have you ever even seen the Shard of Life?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know it’s needed as a catalyst? Where did you find that it could treat Scentbane?”

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Aurelius had no answer. His brows drew tight, the struggle clear in his silence.

23

155 vouchers

Caitlin pressed harder. “When I studied under you, didn’t you teach me that a true healer carries the heart of a parent? That saving lives is the foundation of our duty? Then why now... why would you let my brother die?”

“I truly have no way.” Aurelius sighed deeply, torn with guilt.

“No! You do! Even if you can’t cure Scentbane completely, you must know where to find Quarta, the woman who created it. If I can find her, surely she has a way. Just tell me where she is—I’ll go myself!”

“I don’t know where Quarta is,” Aurelius said, shaking his head heavily. “After I cast her out, she surely bore a grudge against me. To this day... she may still hate me.” He sighed again, the sound weighted with sorrow.

Caitlin studied him carefully. A man with such strict principles, yet bound by silence—it could only mean someone held a powerful threat over him. She remembered the Graystone guards stationed outside the Healing Institute in Santa Aurelia. Could it be Zorro’s hand behind this?

She let the point drop. “Very well. Since you don’t know, I won’t press further. Please, at least examine my brother again. Perhaps with repeated treatments, there’s still a chance he might wake.”

Aurelius had no choice but to agree. He went to James’s bedside and began his examination, while Caitlin sat close, watching anxiously.

As Aurelius cleaned and redressed the wounds, a small gold pendant slipped from James’s neck. Aurelius picked it up, and the moment his eyes fell on it, his face froze in shock.

“This... this... he... he...” His voice stuttered in disbelief.

Caitlin’s heart lurched. Thinking something had gone wrong with her brother, she rushed forward. “What is it, Aurelius? What’s wrong with my brother?”

Aurelius turned toward her, his usually calm face now trembling with emotion. His hands shook as he held up the pendant. “This medallion... how does your brother have this medallion?”

Caitlin’s suspicions surged. Why was the old man so shaken by the sight of it?

“Aurelius, what about this medallion? Do you recognize it?”

Tears welled in his eyes as he nodded. “Yes... yes, I know it.”

Then, before Caitlin’s astonished eyes, he pulled out an identical pendant from beneath his own collar. Caitlin’s breath caught. Could it be... Beatrice and Aurelius were long-lost siblings?

“Caitlin... you and James... you are my...” Aurelius’s voice broke, his emotions too tangled to continue.

Caitlin quickly composed herself. She knew he had mistaken them, but she decided to use the moment. Perhaps this was her only chance to uncover the truth.

“Aurelius, this pendant was passed down from my grandmother. I never expected you would have one too. Could it be... you are her brother, the one who was lost long ago?”

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Aurelius, tears streaming, nodded. “Yes... yes, I am.”

Seizing the opening, Caitlin pressed on. “If you truly are my grandmother’s brother, then we’re family. So please, tell me honestly—can you save my brother?”

“Caitlin, I swear to you, I am not lying. I cannot cure such a severe case of Scentbane. But if I could—if I truly could—I would give my life to save him, because you are my kin. I would not need you to beg me.”

His words, choked with grief, carried the weight of his heart.

It seemed Aurelius truly was powerless against the poison in James’s body. Caitlin no longer forced him. She lifted the medallion from James’s neck and explained, “Forgive me, Aurelius. I lied. My brother and I are not related to you. This pendant did not come from my grandmother.”

“Then... then how did you come to have it?” Aurelius’s voice trembled, equal parts fear and desperation. His eyes burned with a single question—was his sister still alive, somewhere in this world?

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E55 Vouchers

“This medallion belonged to Sebastian’s grandmother. Not long ago, she gave it to me, and I’ve carried it with me since. Last night, I hung it on my brother’s neck, hoping it might keep

him safe.”

“You mean... Mr. Vanderbilt’s grandmother... could be my sister?”

Aurelius’s eyes flooded as he clutched the pendant, his weathered face trembling with emotion. To find another piece of the same pendant after all these years was no small thing- it felt like fate itself.

At that moment, Caitlin finally understood. Aurelius’s true family name had to be Gonzales. That was why he had always shown such special care toward Alicia—they came from the same bloodline.

“Yes. If Sebastian’s grandmother is your sister, then your family name should be Gonzales. She once told me her brother’s nickname was Javier.”

“Yes... yes, that’s me. I am Javier...”

The old man's whole body quivered as he spoke. Caitlin steadied him and helped him sit down. "Do you still remember your sister's name?"

"My sister... Valentina Gonzales."

Everything matched perfectly.

"Tell me... how is she now?" Aurelius asked, voice thick with longing.

Caitlin nodded. "She told me she came to the US with her mother. Somewhere along the way, you were separated from them. In the end, only your mother and sister made it here. Sadly, your mother died not long after. Valentina was later adopted by the Sanders family, and that's why her name changed."

"Ah..." Aurelius let out a long, broken sigh. The memories weighed heavy, grief lacing his every word.

"Aurelius, please don't be *too* sad," Caitlin said gently. "I'll take you to see Beatrice. You'll be

reunited."

"Yes... yes..." Aurelius wiped his tears, then turned back to James's bedside to carry out another round of detoxification.

When he finished, Caitlin escorted him back downstairs. Zeke and Alicia quickly stood when they saw them return.

“How is he?” Alicia asked.

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“Still the same,” Caitlin answered. “But Aurelius has treated him again. For now, my brother’s condition is stable. I’m taking Aurelius to the Vanderbilt estate. Let’s go.”

“Of course. We’ll come too,” Alicia replied.

“Mom, would you like to come with us?” Caitlin asked Kelly.

“I’ll stay here with Harrison. You go ahead,” Kelly said.

“Alright.”

They left DanCa Estate together. In the car, Alicia noticed the tears in Aurelius's eyes. "Master, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Aurelius muttered, shaking his head.

Caitlin didn't explain. For now, it was best not to mention the truth about Aurelius and Beatrice being siblings—especially not in front of Kelly.

By evening, the Vanderbilt estate was alive with warmth. Raymond, Jasper, and Richard were in the living room with their families. The children played happily underfoot.

Sebastian, Vincent, and Hazel returned from work. The children rushed forward, shouting for their father, clinging to their legs. Hazel scooped Patricia up with a kiss, Vincent lifted Arthur, while Sebastian showed off his strength, carrying two sons at once.

"We want a turn too!"

Quinton and Kyle tumbled forward, and Vincent laughed, setting Arthur down to pick up two chubby boys.

The living room rang with laughter, a scene full of warmth and harmony.

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Then Beatrice came out from the inner rooms. She glanced around, asking, “Caitlin isn’t back yet?”

“She’ll be here soon, Grandma,” Sebastian answered.

“And Molly? I haven’t seen that girl in days. Where’s she gone?”

They had already agreed not to tell her the truth. “She’s traveling with Simon, Grandma. They’ll be back in a few days,” Sebastian replied smoothly.

“Oh... good, good.”

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Beatrice sat down, her eyes glowing with quiet joy as she watched her family.

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Moments later, the butler came in. “Miss Caitlin has returned. She’s brought guests.”

“Guests? Then bring them in! Make sure the kitchen prepares extra dishes and wine,” Beatrice instructed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Soon, Caitlin appeared at the doorway with Zeke, Alicia, and Aurelius. The family rose to greet them.

“Ah, Aurelius! Welcome,” Sebastian said warmly. “This is Alicia, his most talented student, and you already know Zeke.”

“You are most welcome here,” Beatrice said graciously.

Aurelius stepped inside, his gaze locking onto the elderly woman in the room. There she was -his sister. Decades had passed, yet the image of her from childhood had never left his mind. Now they stood before each other, both old, both weathered by life.

His eyes brimmed, and tears slid down his cheeks. Alicia, startled, whispered, “Master, are you... crying?”

Everyone turned toward him, bewildered by his sudden outburst.

“Grandma, take a closer look,” Caitlin said gently. “Do you recognize him?”

Beatrice studied Aurelius’s face. Something about him seemed familiar, but no memory came.

“I don’t know... I feel like I’ve never seen him before. Yet... his face feels strangely familiar.”

Aurelius pressed his trembling hands to his chest. “It’s me... I’m Javier...”

The name struck like thunder. Beatrice jolted upright, knocking over her teacup with a sharp crash. She stared at him, hardly daring to breathe.

“What.... what did you just say your name was?”

“I said Javier. I am Javier!”

“I... I can’t believe it... I can’t believe my eyes...” Beatrice shook her head over and over, torn between hope and disbelief.

The family exchanged curious glances. Jasper asked, “Mother, do you know this gentleman?”

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Raymond suddenly understood. “Wait—Mom, could he be the brother you lost as a child?”

Beatrice’s lips trembled. Caitlin stepped in, “Yes, Grandma. This is your brother—Javier.”

Beatrice wanted to believe, but doubt clouded her face. “Caitlin, are you just trying to comfort me? Did you find an old man to play the part? Where does he live? Does he even know my

real name?”

Though elderly, Beatrice was no fool. She knew her granddaughter was clever and kind—but perhaps too clever. She feared this was nothing more than a staged act to ease her heart.

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Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“It’s not fake, it’s real. Aurelius lives in Santa Aurelia, and every name he mentioned matches up. If you don’t believe me, look at this.”

Caitlin placed both gold pendants into Beatrice's hands. "This one was yours, the one you gave me. The other belongs to Aurelius. It's because of this that I realized he and you are siblings."

"Oh my... yes, yes... they're identical..."

Beatrice's eyes brimmed with tears as she looked down at the pendants, then up at the old man. With trembling steps, she walked toward him. "You really are Javier... my brother..."

"Valentina... after all these years, I finally found you..."

They had been separated as children, just a few years old when fate tore them apart. Now, after decades of hardship, they were reunited at last.

The two elderly siblings embraced, sobbing in each other's arms. The sight was so moving that nearly everyone in the room teared up, even little Patricia who clung to her mother's neck and cried along with them.

"I thought I'd go to my grave without ever seeing you again..."

Beatrice's voice shook as she poured out years of grief, while Aurelius, tears streaming down his face, tried to soothe her.

They wept together for a long time, until their legs trembled from standing. Caitlin and the others finally helped them to chairs. Even seated, the siblings clung tightly to each other's hands.

Beatrice's voice trembled. "After you got separated from us, where did you go? How did you survive?"

"In those days, everything was chaos. After we lost each other, I went hungry for a long while. Eventually, an old doctor took me in. He gave me food, taught me medicine, and treated me like his own son. I took his surname, Varga.

"For decades I followed him, traveling from place to place, healing whoever we could. We even came to the US once, but it was too vast—I never found you or our mother.

"When he passed, I returned to Santa Aurelia and settled there, founding the Healing Institute. I always thought if I stayed in one place, maybe, someday, you would find your way

to me."

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Tears streamed down Beatrice's cheeks. "I did come. Before I married, I went to Santa Aurelia to look for you. But no one had heard of you. I never knew you'd changed your name... I thought you were gone."

“Ah... and at that time, I must have been searching for you abroad. I could never find you or Mother, and I feared the worst...”

Their voices broke as they exchanged their stories of endless searching, and tears flowed again. Words became unnecessary; the way they gripped each other’s hands and stared through tears said it all.

The room had gone still. Everyone could feel the power of blood ties—the invisible thread of kinship that years and distance could never sever.

It was Caitlin who finally broke the silence. “You’ve found each other again. That’s something to celebrate, not to mourn. Please... no more sadness.”

“Yes... you’re right.”

Both nodded, wiping away their tears. Beatrice patted her brother’s hand with a soft smile. “Look at me now. My children and grandchildren surround me, and they treat me well.”

“I see that. And it puts my heart at ease.”

“We finally have this chance to be together. You must stay here for a while, Javier. There’s so much I want to say to you.”

“Of course.”

Aurelius nodded gratefully.

The butler came *to* announce that dinner was ready. Beatrice clutched her brother’s hand. “Come, let’s eat.”

The two walked out side by side. Though age had bent their backs, one could easily imagine them as children again, inseparable.

The Vanderbilt family dinner was lavish and full of laughter.

“Here, try this. You’ve never tasted it before.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

No matter what Beatrice placed in his bowl, Aurelius accepted it with a smile, his heart full.

Watching them, Howard’s mind wandered. Tilting his head toward Patricia, he asked, “Patricia, if someday I got lost, what would you do?”

htly, “It’s okay, I still have two other brothers.”

The boy’s heart cracked instantly. His own sister wouldn’t even look for him? But before he could sulk, she added brightly, “I’d take them with me to look for you. We’d never lose you. And if we did, we’d ask the police for help!”

Howard beamed again. That was more like it.

The meal went on warmly, with stories, smiles, and tears. When it drew to a close, Beatrice turned to Caitlin. “I owe this reunion to you. If you hadn’t cared so much, hadn’t given me that pendant, I never would have found my brother again. I don’t even know how to thank you.”

“It was just coincidence. If you hadn’t given me the pendant, Aurelius never would have recognized it either.”

“Still, I thank you. Caitlin, you truly are this family’s good-luck star.”

Caitlin smiled softly. “I’m just happy you found your brother. It reminds me of my own bond with Harrison. After everything we’ve been through, all I want now is for him to wake up.”

Her eyes face.

flickered toward Aurelius as she spoke. He avoided her gaze, guilt written all over his

Beatrice asked quickly, "What happened to Harrison?"

"He was poisoned when he went to find my mother. He hasn't woken up since."

"Oh heavens... how could such a thing happen? Aurelius, you must help him!"

"I've examined him. There's little more I can do."

Aurelius's sigh silenced the room. No one pressed further,

After dinner, Beatrice insisted her brother stay the night. The butler prepared a guest room, while Zeke and Alicia took their leave.

That night, Aurelius stayed at the Vanderbilt estate, Caitlin and Sebastian went to check on him.

"Aurelius, how is the room? If you need anything at all, just tell us."

"It's fine. Everything is fine here."

He nodded, content with his surroundings, though his heart was most full of gratitude.

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“Caitlin, thank you. If you hadn’t told me the truth, I never would have found my sister.”

Caitlin smiled, sitting across from him. Her clear gaze held his. “You’re welcome, Aurelius. I told you the truth. Now, can you do the same for me? Can you tell me the truth?”

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Aurelius froze at Caitlin’s words, as if struck.

“Are you all right, sir?” Sebastian asked quietly.

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The old man blinked, then slowly sank onto the edge of the bed. His shoulders sagged and he let out a long, weary sigh.

“Aurelius, what is it you’re holding back? Please, tell me. Whatever it is, Sebastian and I will do everything we can to help you. You won’t be dragged down alone.”

Her persistence finally broke through his defenses. After a long silence, Aurelius murmured, “Forgive me, Caitlin. My skills are lacking. I can’t save your brother. If I could, you’d never have to chase after this so-called Shard of Life... Ah...”

“This isn’t your fault, Aurelius. Please don’t blame yourself.”

Her gentle words only deepened his sorrow. He sighed again, then raised his head. “Very well. I’ll tell you everything.”

As Caitlin expected, there was more beneath the surface. She and Sebastian leaned in, listening closely.

“Quarta came to me some months ago,” Aurelius confessed. “She told me she had a plan, and she wanted my help. When I asked what kind of plan, she wouldn’t explain. All she said was, if Caitlin ever came to me for treatment, I was to give her a certain prescription—one that would push her toward the Shard of Life. I had no idea what she was scheming, so I refused outright. She stormed off and vanished. I haven’t seen her since.”

“When exactly did she approach you?” Caitlin pressed.

“About half a year ago.”

Caitlin’s mind raced. Was Quarta a pawn being used, or was she the mastermind pulling strings? From what Aurelius described, it sounded as though Quarta herself was plotting something—and perhaps she, too, sought the mythical Shard of Life.

“But if you refused her,” Caitlin asked sharply, “why now? Why go along with her demands?”

Aurelius’s eyes clouded with shame. “Three days before you came, a man appeared at my door. He threatened me. If I didn’t comply, every member of the Varga family would be slaughtered. When you arrived, that man was still in my house. I had no choice but to obey.”

“Quarta sent him?”

“Yes.”

“And the men posted outside the Healing Institute—were they his?”

“No. Those were Zorro’s men, from Graystone Castle. They’ve been stationed there a long time, watching me and waiting for Alicia. They weren’t with the man who threatened me.”

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He laid bare everything he knew. Seeing the old man's anguish. Caitlin offered quiet reassurance. "I understand. I won't tell anyone. We'll follow their game for now, as if we're walking into their trap willingly. As long as I don't act rashly, they won't risk harming you or your family."

Relief flickered in Aurelius's eyes, and he nodded.

"Aurelius," Caitlin pressed on, "I need more about Quarta. If she's been planning this for months, then she must also know how to cure Scentbane. If I can find her, maybe I can save my brother. What do you know of her past?"

His face tightened with regret. "Quarta she was peculiar from the very beginning. She always claimed she had no family. When I first saw her, she was no more than a beggar girl, fighting for scraps of bread. Beaten and bloodied. I pitied her, remembering my own childhood, so I took her in.

"I discovered she had a sharp mind, a natural gift for medicine. I taught her what I knew. But she learned too fast, and too recklessly. Behind my back, she began experimenting with poisons. To test them, she dosed innocent villagers. Her cruelty violated every principle of a healer. Enraged, I cast her out. Scentbane was her creation, forged in secret."

His voice broke. "I once thought she would inherit my mantle. Instead, she betrayed everything I stood for. For the sake of her research, she became ruthless."

“Do you have a photograph of her? I need to see what kind of woman we’re dealing with.”

Aurelius shook his head. “She destroyed most of them. But I hid one, long ago.”

“Where?” Caitlin asked at once. “If you tell me, Alicia can ask Davor to retrieve it and send it here.”

He hesitated, then finally gave her the location. Caitlin immediately contacted Alicia, who promised to coordinate with Davor.

“That’s enough for tonight,” Caitlin said gently. “Rest now, Aurelius. Stay here at the Vanderbilt estate for a while. Sebastian and I will be leaving for D Country soon.”

Once he was settled, Caitlin and Sebastian left the room.

They wandered through the Vanderbilt gardens together, cool night air drifting around them. Caitlin wrapped her arms across her chest, and Sebastian slipped off his jacket to *lay* across her shoulders, pulling her close as they walked.

“The day after tomorrow, we head to D Country,” Caitlin murmured. “I can’t **say** whether it will go smoothly.”

This mission felt nothing like their return to Departure City, where Caitlin had *at least* carried the weight of her Yuncey bloodline. Hector, on the other hand, was a stranger. No kinship bound them, no promises. Anything could happen.

“Hector has influence in D Country,” Sebastian said. “On the surface, he runs a perfume empire. But beneath that, I suspect it’s much darker. We’ll need to investigate carefully.”

“The Jonathan family is hosting an international perfumery competition in Regalis soon. If I enter under Odessa’s identity, I can get close without drawing suspicion. From there, we’ll see what they want.”

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Her plan was taking shape, though she lacked leverage. “Taking back the codex won’t be simple. He’ll want something in return. What should I use as bargaining power?”

“We’ll see what he demands,” Sebastian replied. “If his price is too steep, we’ll find another way.”

“Fine. But I also need a detailed breakdown of the Jonathan family—everyone, their ties, their habits. Everything.”

“You’ll have it. By tomorrow night at the latest.”

He had already dispatched people in Regalis to dig up every scrap of information.

For now, Caitlin's departure would wait until she received her mother's DNA results. Only then could she leave with a clear mind.

As they neared the manor's doors, Caitlin's phone buzzed. It was Alicia. A photo file appeared on the screen.

"Davor found it. Quarta's picture is here."

Sebastian leaned close. "So... what does she look like?"

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Caitlin studied the photo carefully. The woman in the old picture looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. Her features were plain, not striking, but there was a warmth in the way she smiled that made her face pleasant to look at. The most distinctive mark was the small dark mole above her upper lip—something that could easily make her unforgettable.

As Caitlin stared at Quarta's photograph, a sudden flash of recognition sparked in her mind. She had seen that face before—seen that very mole.

"Looks ordinary enough," Sebastian commented, glancing at the picture. "Nothing you can read from her face."

Caitlin's eyes widened. "I remember now!"

"What is it?"

"I've seen this woman before. I know her..."

"You know her?"

“Yes. In one of my family’s old photo albums. There’s a group picture of my grandparents, my mother, and a woman with them. I remember it clearly—the woman in that photo had this exact same mole above her lip.”

“What was her name?” Sebastian asked sharply.

“Cecilia. Years ago, she even came to visit my mother. I only knew she was somehow connected to my grandmother’s family—an old family friend’s daughter, I think.”

Sebastian frowned deeply. “You’re sure you’re not mistaken? Aurelius said when he first met Quarta, she was destitute, practically a beggar. So why would she turn up in the States as a well-put-together woman calling on your mother? What was she like when you met her—shabby or normal? Do you even know what she did for a living?”

“She looked completely normal, kind even. Gentle personality. I don’t know what her occupation was, but that face—and that mole—I’m certain. I’ve seen her. Once we check the old photo album at DanCa Estate,

we’ll know for sure.”

“It’s late,” Sebastian said. “We’ll go tomorrow.”

“Alright.”

When they returned to Vanderbilt Manor, the four little ones were still wide awake, waiting in the living room. The moment Caitlin walked in, they rushed to her.

“Why aren’t you in bed yet?” she asked.

“I want to sleep with Mommy!” Patricia tugged her hand, pouting sweetly.

“Me too!” Howard demanded.

“Me three!” Arthur chimed in.

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“Childish,” Bruce muttered with the air of a tiny old man. But when Caitlin turned to him and asked if he wanted to sleep beside her, he immediately raised his hand. “Mommy, me too!”

“Alright then. All of you, upstairs with me.”

She led the way, the four kids trailing behind her in a noisy little line.

“Hey! What about me?” Sebastian called after them.

“Daddy, you can sleep on the couch!” Howard shouted back.

“Or outside the door!” Arthur added.

“Or on the floor!”

“Or in our playroom!”

The children were quick to assign him places, none of which included Mommy’s bed. Sebastian grumbled loudly about ungrateful kids stealing his wife.

The manor had a special tatami room, designed just for nights like this when all the children wanted to sleep with Caitlin. Knowing she’d soon be leaving for D Country, Caitlin decided to indulge them.

After baths, the children piled onto the wide tatami mat. The moment Caitlin lay down, they nestled against her, two on each side.

Sebastian emerged from the shower and stretched out beside them. “Any of you want to sleep in Daddy’s arms tonight?”

“No!” Howard scooted even closer to Mommy.

“Me neither. Daddy smells like stinky man,” Patricia announced with a giggle. “Mommy smells the best!”

“You little rascal. What do you know about man-smell and woman-smell?” Sebastian scooped her up. “Daddy just showered! Smell-see? Not stinky at all!” He tickled her until she squealed with laughter.

The six of them lay together, warm and snug. Caitlin began telling an adventure story, her clear voice captivating the little ones until their eyes grew heavy.

“Alright, darlings, time for sleep,” she whispered at last.

“Mommy,” Patricia murmured sleepily, “I hope when I wake up tomorrow morning, you’ll still be here.”

“I will. Now close your eyes.”

The children drifted off one by one. Caitlin leaned down and kissed each small face in turn, her heart aching. She hadn't been there for them enough when they were little—her sons wandering with her, her daughter raised away from her. Even now, she was always coming and going.

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“I hate leaving them again so soon,” she whispered. “If only I could turn them into tiny beads and keep them on a chain over my heart.”

“Maybe this trip to D Country won't take long,” Sebastian reassured her.

“I hope I make it back in time for Bruce's martial arts competition.”

“You will.”

The house grew quiet as everyone fell asleep. Only Caitlin lay awake, mind racing. If Quarta was Cecilia—the same Cecilia her family had once known—then why had she created Scentbane? Why target Harrison? Was it also about the codex? Where was she hiding now?

The next morning, Patricia stirred first. Opening her eyes, she saw both parents still there and smiled wide. She leaned over and planted a kiss on Caitlin's cheek.

Caitlin's eyes opened at the touch. She smiled and ruffled her daughter's hair. "Morning, sweetheart."

"Good morning, Mommy."

The boys woke one after another. Caitlin threw off the blanket. "Come on! Let's race—whoever gets dressed and washes up first wins!"

"I'll win!"

"No, me!"

"First place is mine!"

They bolted out of the room, laughter echoing down the hall. Watching them, Caitlin's chest filled with warmth. This was happiness—these ordinary mornings with love overflowing.

Sebastian slipped behind her and pulled her into his arms. "Come here." He held her close until she swatted him playfully.

"Enough of that. We've got a busy day ahead."

She dragged him up with her. This morning, they would return to DanCa Estate and search the photo albums.

She had to know—was Cecilia truly Quarta?