

Football 491

Chapter 491 491 Christmas Eve

[Location: Rose Isle, Orlando, Florida | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 10:30 AM EST]

[Lisa's POV]

Florida sunlight poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows of our lakefront living room, turning the polished oak floors into a mirror of warm bronze. Outside the sliding doors, Lake Sue winked beneath a December sky so blue it looked photoshopped. If you squinted, you could almost convince yourself it was a calm Christmas Eve morning, almost.

"Ben, the garlands go on the bannister, not in a tangled heap beside it!" My voice ricocheted off the vaulted ceiling. Eight metres up, plastic storage tubs labelled X-MAS sat like colourful landmines on the mezzanine, still untouched. We were hours behind schedule, and the airport run clock was ticking.

Ben, in his six-foot-four of half-buttoned linen shirt and stubborn German efficiency, straightened from the staircase and offered his most innocent smile. Turquoise-green eyes, the same shade as our daughter's, sparkled with mischief. "You said decorate with feeling, Liebchen. I'm simply finding the feeling."

"The only feeling I have right now is panic," I shot back, pushing a strand of blond hair behind my ear. Thick ribbons and an entire roll of fairy lights dangled around my neck like eccentric jewellery. "Rakim and May land in four hours. This place needs to scream 'Merry Christmas' before they walk through the door, not 'seasonal mid-renovation'."

Ben's reply was cut short by the thud-thud-thud of socked feet on hardwood. Emma burst from the hallway in black yoga pants, a designer reindeer sweater, and an attitude her older brother would have applauded. "Mum, the outside projector's kaput." She brandished a fried extension cord like evidence at a trial. "I don't even know why we try so much each year, Florida just doesn't fit the Christmas feel."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Fine. Plan B—use the spare LED net; drape it over the palm trees. They'll look like glowing candy canes. Ben, finish the staircase, then grab the airport signs and head out. Emma and I have the rest."

He raised an eyebrow. "And miss my wife's annual tinsel meltdown?"

"Ben!"

"All right, all right." He grabbed the last coil of garland and started wrapping it—correctly this time—around the bannister, muscles flexing under rolled-up sleeves. For a fleeting heartbeat, I remembered stringing popcorn with him in a Chelsea bedsit our first Christmas together, when I took him back to meet my family.

Most men would head for the woods if the woman they were dating took them to spend Christmas with her family after the second date, but not my Ben. In fact, he fit in so well with my family that by day two, they were treating him like their son and me like the girl they were vetting. It was infuriating, sure, but seeing the man I had assumed to be the typical generational wealth spawn upon our first meeting be so natural and open with my family made it all the more special.

"Thanks, love," I murmured.

He winked. "Anything for Santa's chief operating elf."

[30 minutes later]

The entry hall smelled of fresh pine and peppermint diffuser oil. Snow-white stockings—one for each of us, with May's very own emerald-green pair embroidered with her name hanging beside there's. All the girls had their very own stockings at each other's houses since elementary school, adding 3 daughters to each family.

Ben checked his watch. "Leaving now gives me a cushion for I-4 traffic. Text me if you need us to grab anything, stores close at one today, so double check and we can pick it up on our way back. He kissed my forehead, then planted a noisier smack on Emma's cheek. "Try not to electrocute anything else."

"Ha-ha." Emma shoved him playfully toward the door. "Bring my brother home in one piece. I need him to cure Zeus's loneliness." When the front door clicked shut, a hush settled over the house, broken only by distant lawnmowers and the lazy lap of water at the dock. I exhaled, squeezing the ribbon spool in my hand.

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[Location: Atlantic airspace, 38,000 ft | Flight LH464 Düsseldorf → Orlando | Date: 24/12/2019 |  
Time: 10:40 AM EST – 20 min to landing]

[Rakim's Pov]

I woke to the hiss of the cabin pressure valves and the faint jingle of a safety belt chime. The windows of our first-class suite were dimmed to violet dusk, but a pencilled line of Florida sun cut under the shade, strobing across May's cheeks. She was still curled against me beneath the Lufthansa duvet, one hand fisted in my T-shirt, her blond hair tied in a messy bun.

On the screen in front of us, Kevin McCallister was frozen mid-scream, the Home Alone credits quietly rolling. At some point in the night, we'd both knocked the remote off the bed and surrendered to the call of sleep.

A soft voice crackled over the PA—"Ladies and gentlemen, we've begun our initial descent into Orlando. The weather on the ground is a balmy twenty-one degrees Celsius. Local time, ten-forty."

I brushed a thumb across May's temple, coaxing her awake. "Rise and shine—sunshine being literal this time," I whispered.

She stirred, lashes fluttering. " Mmm... tell the captain five more minutes."

"The captain's already telling us tray tables up and seats upright. Twenty minutes and we're on the ground."

May blinked at the window shade, then at the credits on the screen. "We didn't even make it to the tarantula scene."

"I'll queue it at the house—promise." I tapped the service button. A flight attendant appeared with that air-host red-lipstick smile, passing us two steaming towels and a pair of bottled waters.

"Mr Rex, Miss Parker—welcome home. Landing forms are in the side pocket."

"Danke," I said, wiping the last of sleep from my face. May dabbed at her cheeks, then tugged the blanket to one side and stretched, ankle joints popping.

"Please tell me my hair isn't doing that question-mark thing," she mumbled.

I laughed softly. "It's more exclamation point. Hold still."

I smoothed a stray curl back into her bun, then reached for my carry-on. Inside: a fresh white tee, travel-sized cologne, and a red velvet box I'd guarded like prime Kante since Düsseldorf. Not right now, I reminded myself, not 35,000 feet in the sky in a plane filled with strangers.

Rakim tucked the red velvet box back beneath the spare T-shirt, heart thudding louder than the hydraulic whine of the flaps. May slid over to her side of the cabin, lifting the privacy screen so she could get changed. Putting on a white tank top and a spare set of grey joggers, matching his pair of Grey Air Jordan High OG sneakers, switching out his Yeezy's.

It was just in time as May had also finished smoothing her bun and then slid the privacy screen aside, so the two single pods merged again. She had also changed into a new set of White Fox tracksuit matching mine in colour, which she had picked out before the flight.

"Forms first, Food later," she teased, catching the tell-tale snap of the compartment.

"Forms first, brunch later," he corrected, though a guilty smile crept in. "Dad'll have Cuban sandwiches waiting—or he'll claim Orlando isn't 'true Florida' anymore."

May rolled her eyes affectionately. "Your dad's barometer for authenticity is whichever café stocks his favourite hot sauce."

They each bent over the tiny desks to fill in the blue immigration cards. To sum it up, it just asked for what reason he was travelling into the country, and since he already had American citizenship, it streamlined things.

I slid my American passport into the blue form's fold, then tucked both into the sleeve behind the seat. The seatbelt sign chimed on. Outside the window, the Gulf spread out like hammered silver, the coastline curving north toward Cape Canaveral.

The captain's voice came over the PA once more. "(Toon) Ladies, gentlemen, Cabin crew and any storeaway squirrels, if you look to the right side of your aeroplane, you will notice American Airways flight 198 challenging us to a race. I've turned the fasten seatbelt sign back on because shit is about to get real. (Toon)"

May's eyes rounded. "Did the pilot just—"

"—Challenge a domestic flight to Mario Kart at 30,000 feet. Yup." I couldn't help laughing; Lufthansa crews had a reputation for dry humour, but this guy was going full Top Gun.

A ripple of amused chatter rolled down the first-class aisle. Somewhere behind us, someone whooped, "Smoke 'em, Captain!"

The cabin dipped ever so slightly as the flaps extended. Clouds parted, revealing a quilt of lakes and cul-de-sacs, the tidy geometry of central Florida spreading out like a Google Maps screenshot. Disney's distant safari-brown water tower poked above the tree line, and the green glass spine of downtown Orlando shimmered on the horizon.

Chapter 492 492 It's The Season To Be Jolly

[Location: Walmart Super centre, Colonial Drive, Orlando, FL | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 12:22 PM EST]

The automatic doors hissed open and swallowed Rakim, May, and Ben Rex into a fluorescent blizzard of last-minute Christmas Eve shoppers. Somewhere between the greeter's "Happy Holidays!" and the first aisle's inflatable flamingo Santa, Rakim realised his mother's impromptu list was less "few things" and more "full-scale supply run."

Ben pushed an oversized blue cart like he was captaining an oil tanker through choppy seas. "Okay, team," he said, his baritone cutting through the din of squeaking wheels and Mariah Carey on loop, "we divide and conquer. Twelve items, twenty-five minutes before the bakery closes. No man, or woman, left behind."

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LISA: Remember extra candy-cane sprinkles!!

LISA: And gluten-free gingerbread mix for Emma's friend.

LISA: Pine-scented candles if they're still in stock.

LISA: Ribbon! (Metallic red, not satin.)

LISA: Sorry, love ♥️☐

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"Your mum's in DEFCON 1, if someone doesn't stop her, she will keep adding to her ever-expanding list," May muttered.

"It's best just to follow orders like a good soldier lest the general herself pull you up for a disciplinary hearing. Trust me, this time of the year, she keeps the nuclear football handy." Rakim responded with a wry chuckle as he proceeded to push his trolley forward.

They hit the aisles with military precision, each of them peeling off like a well-drilled unit as they moved their trolleys forward. Rakim tackled the baking section, where he snagged the last gluten-free gingerbread mix after a minor standoff with a teenage boy in a "Team Elf" hoodie. Rakim had faster reflexes and used a quick redirect of 'Is that Santa over there giving out free presents?' Using the boy's distraction to scadadel and avoid squabbling up, Rakim left to cross off the next thing on his list.



May hunted down the metallic red ribbon with surgical focus, ducking beneath hanging wreaths and elbowing past a herd of frantic mums swarming the clearance bin. She found exactly three spools wedged between off-brand tinsel and a crushed snow globe, snatching them up like they were golden snitches. On her way back, she even managed to snag the last candy cane sprinkle jar from an abandoned bottom shelf, whispering, "Victory is mine," as she dropped it into the cart like a mic.

Meanwhile, Ben handled the candle situation with ease as no one wanted to fight with the friendly giant for goods. After sniffing his way through a wall of seasonal options and stepping over a rogue toddler with a lightsaber toy, he emerged triumphant with two pine-scented candles and an emergency backup in cinnamon fir, just in case.

A couple of minutes later, they regrouped near the self-checkout. Ben and Rakim's baskets were filled with the bare minimum of what they were assigned to procure. May's, on the other hand, was filled to the brim with things that weren't even on the list. Ben simply gave her a weird look before guiding them to a self-checkout counter.

"Ahem, you sure you didn't miss anything?" Rakim asked her only to receive an annoyed glare.

"Barley, an old lady basically bodied me out of the way to reach the last pack of chocolate pretzels," She complained with an arrived expression as she proceeded to scan various types of sweet and sour snacks with practised ease. Completely ignoring the weird look her boyfriend gave her, she finished scanning the rest of the goods at speeds that the automatic scan system could barely keep up. "Anything else?"

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[Location: Rose Isle, Orlando, Florida | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 13:15 PM EST]

"I'm home," Rakim exclaimed the moment he walked through the front door and was immediately treated by a tantalising smell. His mother was off her Christmas cooking, and the aroma that greeted him immediately caused his stomach to churn in desire.

Before he could even move forward to check what wonders she was performing in the kitchen, an excited woof greeted him. The sound of paws impacting marble resounded before the excited figure of a large German shepherd rounded the pillar in the living room and jumped into his embrace. Barley keeping himself standing, he was assaulted by excited licking attacks.

"Hahaha, I missed you too, Zeus," he said between laughter as he moved his upper body back to the ground so he could get a breather.

Zeus wagged his tail like a turbine, practically vibrating as he pressed his head into Rakim's chest and let out a long, grumbling whine that sounded like months of pent-up emotion. Rakim scratched behind his ears and gave his side a good rub. "You're thicker than I remember," he muttered. "Mom, what are you feeding him? Dinosaurs?"

From the kitchen came Lisa's voice, cheerful but edged with authority. "Real food. Unlike that overpriced muck they call dog food, wash your hands and set the table, we're behind schedule!"

"What, not even a hug and hello to your favourite son?" Rakim pouted as he kicked off his shoes, placing them into the designed cabinet and slipped on a pair of sliders. "Sigh, I guess what they say is true, no relationship can battle absence and distance,"

Lisa poked her head out from the kitchen, flour dusting her cheek like war paint. Her turquoise-gold eyes narrowed. "Oh, is Liam here? Why didn't you say so?" Looking at her eyes that were earnestly searching for another person, only to droop the moment she saw her son, her husband, caused Rakim's eye to twitch in annoyance.

Before Rakim could even muster a word of complaint, she began firing off a string of orders like a seasoned drill sergeant. "You want a hug? Grab a ladle and help stir the gravy. Do you want love? Bring me the cranberry sauce from the pantry."

Looking at her retreating figure in disbelief, his dad placed a hand on his shoulder with a sympathetic smile as he carried the shopping bags into the dining room. "Don't worry, son. The cranberry sauce is a form of affection in this house."

"Brother, your home I missed you so much," Emma's cheerful voice exclaimed from upstairs, capturing his attention as she skipped down the stairs two steps at a time. She slipped the last two steps, launching herself forward, forcing Rakim to catch her lest she grow a bump the size of Everest.

"You act like you didn't just see me last month," Rakim complained, but the smile on his face did not lessen. "Though I can't complain about the warm welcome."

Emma pulled back from the hug, eyes gleaming, cheeks flushed from either the stairs or sheer excitement. "You brought me snacks, right?" she asked, peering over his shoulder like a raccoon scouting for treasure.

Rakim nodded toward the bags his dad had just placed on the counter. "May might've raided half the snack aisle, so yes. We dropped her off at her parents' house first, and she will join us for dinner, though."

Emma's eyes widened with glee, and she bolted toward the bags with the enthusiasm of a kid in a candy store. "I knew there was a reason she was my best friend," she declared, tearing into the first plastic sack and pulling out a jumbo-sized pack of sour belts.

"Emma Luisa Rex, you better put that down or you and I will have a problem," Lisa, who had immediately homed in on her daughter just as she had buttered the roasted potatoes, putting them back in the oven to roast a little longer.

"Son, you better get cleaned up for dinner, this could turn into another world war," Ben commented from the side, nudging his son up the stairs just in time as the two women in the family began arguing. The funny thing is that despite arguing, the efficiency with which they completed the tasks seemed to rise a notch.

Nodding at his dad, Rakim sneaked up the stairs like a seasoned shinobi, immediately heading to his room. "Sigh, it's like this every Christmas, you would think someone is grading by how seriously she takes it."

Chapter 493 493 Pinewood & Porcelain

[Location: Rose Isle, Orlando, Florida | Date: 24/12/2019 | Christmas Eve | 16:45]

(Dinnng Doooong)

The unmistakable chime of the doorbell rang out in the Rex household just as Rakim finished adjusting the collar of his black Sainclair turtle in the floor-to-ceiling mirror in his closet. Pulling out a pair of brown Oliver Sweeney loafers from his formal section, he compared them to his Hugo Boss pair once before settling on the former. Not hesitating, he slipped them on and gave himself a once-over, causing that f-boy smile to grace his lips.

Walking over to his neckpiece section, which consisted of 3 black mannequins, which were just the chest and neck on a podium. Various silver chains and pendants hung on the leftmost neckpiece, all neatly laid out. On the rightmost stand were gold chains, and in the middle were the ones that were diamond-encrusted. Without thinking about it, Rakim picked out a silver stainless steel chain and a silver dog tag pendant.

"You look good, babe." He heard a honeyed sweet voice from the closet entrance prompting him to look up. Ignoring his navy figure in the mirror, his eyes looked onto the figure of the angel behind him, dressed in a soft, satin cream dress that hugged her curves with elegant subtlety.

Her late mother's pearl necklace and earrings accentuated her long neck as her peach-blond hair fell in loose waves over one shoulder. However, for Rakim, it was her green eyes that were the most mesmerising part of her. "You know, I'm starting to understand why the people in the Middle Ages started wars over beauties," he told her as he sneakily put his arms around her thin waist, pulling her close.

The scent of lilies immediately floated into his nose as she melted into his embrace, her hands resting lightly on his chest. "Good for you, this girl can handle herself in a fight," May whispered with a small laugh, resting her forehead against his. Just as their lips were about to meet, she sent him a cheeky smile as she pulled back. "Now come on. If we make them wait any longer, your mum might actually kill us. And not the passive-aggressive kind either. I mean real, full-blown homicide."

Rakim chuckled, letting out a playful groan as he followed May down the hallway. The rich scent of roasted honey-glazed ham, spiced cinnamon, and freshly baked dinner rolls wafted through the air, mingling with soft jazz playing from the Sonos speakers hidden in the ceiling. As they reached the stairs, Rakim spotted the rest of his family along with the packers chatting in the living room as Mum finished setting the food on the table just how she liked it.

The living room lights were dimmed to a warm amber glow that set the crystal ornaments sparkling in beautiful light. Rakim spotted his dad immediately as he burst out laughing at something Reece had just said, while Emma and Evelyn were locked in conversation. He only spotted Victor Parker outside on the back porch just before our galaxy pool when they reached the bottom of the steps.

Due to the weather, the enclosure for the pool was up, letting the early moon reflect off the glass, shining into the water. Rakim immediately focused on Victor, who paced back and forth, thumbs skating across one phone as he talked on another. "Your Dad is as busy as ever." Rakim whispered to May as they joined the rest of their families in the living room.

"I don't think he realizes that he is supposed to be on holiday," May lamented in annoyance but did her best not to let her smile falter. "Just stay by my side today," she half whispered her voice barely audible as she clenched her fist.

"What?" Rakim tried to inquire, not having heard her over Mariah Carey's loud voice that sounded like that white old money laugh as she collected her Christmas tax.

"Rakim darling, how are you? It's been a long time since..." Before he could confirm with her, he was pulled into a tight hug by Evelyn Parker May's stepmother. But the only thing he could discern was the flowing burgundy wrap dress as she pressed her assets against his lower chest.

Evelyn was an attractive woman in her own right, standing at 5'7, with dark hazel hair matching her brown eyes. Plus, for someone who was 38, she looked no older than her woman in her late twenties. 'Guess those yoga and Pilates sessions are not a scam,' Rakim thought to himself as she released him from her hug, giving him a good view of the figure god had blessed her with.

"Yes, it's been a while, how have you been, Mrs Parker?" he immediately asked, going through his default conversation dialogue with people his parents' age. He knew that he wasn't cute enough to get

away with something he got away with at age six and immediately adjusted to a more formal speech when dealing with his elders.

"Oh, you, how many times have I told you to call me Evelyn or Ev?" She responded with a small pout, and from what he could smell, a little buzzed.

"My mother will have my neck if I even consider such a thought," He responded with a light chuckle, earning a short laugh from the woman. Their conversation lasted for about five minutes before the woman turned her attention to her daughter, and Emma joined them for a girls' chat.

Rakim nearly smiled at this and moved on towards the kitchen, making sure to greet Reece on the way. He was locked in a discussion over American football, baseball and other extreme sports with his dad. "Yo Merry Christmas Reece? Congrats on the top 200 Ranking."

"Cheers, bro, same to you, and congrats on Poland," He responded with a light smile on his pearly whites as he fist-bumped him, only to pull him into a side hug. He was dressed in a slim-fit cream blazer over a black polo and burgundy chinos as the outfit hugged his defined muscles.

Before Rakim could move on, after wishing his father a happy Christmas and a quick bear hug. Reece's words halted his movements. "Clear something up for us real quick, who are you betting your life savings on, Randy Moos vs Ray Lewis?"

"Oh man, that's not even fair," Rakim laughed, draping an arm over Reece's shoulder. "You're talking about the human highlight reel versus the Terminator. If my life's on the line, I'm putting it on Ray Lewis every single time. Dude used to finish games with grass in his facemask and people's souls in his pocket."

Ben burst out in a booming laugh. "That's exactly what I told him," he said, reaching around Reece to thump Rakim on the back. "A linebacker who can read a play before the quarterback even blinks? Money in the bank."

Reece pretended to clutch his heart. "Y'all are sleeping on Randy Moss's Go-go-gadget arms, but okay, okay—I'll concede the table to the old heads."

Seeing that the two were about to launch another debate as Dad brought up Formula One, Rakim channelled his inner Kuroko and vanished from the situation. "You need any help, Mum?" Rakim asked as he took off his blazer coat, hanging it on one of the stools in front of the kitchen aisle and rolled up the sleeves of his turtleneck.

"Ah, ah, you only come when the food is done," She retorted with a hint of annoyance as she turned off the oven, as the pies she had been making had completed baking.

"I figured it's better to help with the clean-up than get in the way of the master in the midst of battle," He responded with a lit smile as he slipped on a pair of kitchen mittens and proceeded to take out the first pie before his mother could move. "Where to, Captain?" he asked with a light wink.

Lisa twirled a wooden spoon like a general brandishing a sabre. "Starboard," she commanded, pointing to the marble counter where a row of crystal-rimmed pie stands waited. Rakim set the steaming pecan pie in formation beside its pumpkin counterpart, releasing a buttery-brown aroma that blended into the cinnamon-laced air.

"Alright, I think that's everything. Give me 20 minutes to get ready, and we can eat, which will give the chicken a chance to drop to the perfect temperature." She said with a light smile, removing the apron from around her neck as she headed up to her room.

Chapter 494 494 Gamble or Genuis

[Location: Rose Isle, Orlando | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 18:20 | Christmas Eve Dinner]

The Rex dining room looked like it belonged on the cover of a luxury home magazine. The long mahogany table had been extended with gold-trimmed runners placed neatly over a snowy white linen base. Each place setting had name cards written in elegant cursive, courtesy of Lisa, alongside polished silverware, folded cloth napkins with cranberry sprigs, and crystal goblets already half-filled with chilled sparkling juice.

Soft instrumental jazz played in the background, blending holiday warmth with a relaxed atmosphere different from the usual Christmas carols. The tree in the living room glowed a soft white and gold behind them, casting an ambient shimmer over the entire dining space. Lisa had freshened up, changing into a deep-green velvet wrap dress that picked up the glow of the chandelier above the twelve-seat mahogany table.

A couple of moments later, the table was filled, each person having comfortable spacing, and 4 of the 12 seats were removed. On the porch outside, Zeus munched on a large bison leg, ravishingly enjoying the meat. Ben had procured it from the estate's high-end butcher, which slaughters animals based on demand, not for volume, with most people having to preorder a day before if they wanted something specific.

(Ding Ding Ding) Before they could dig in, the ding of Ben's glass at the head of the table drew everyone's attention as he rose to his feet. "First, thank you to my lovely wife for preparing this heartwarming meal. We appreciate your efforts every day of the year, more so on holidays." He said with a warm smile as he grasped Lisa's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Let's keep this sort since I can already hear some of your stomach protesting for a bit." He added with a light smile as he sent Emma a wink, causing her face to turn a shade of red before sending a glare his way. He didn't mind, though, as he raised his glass into the air, "to family, friends, health... and a good slide into the new year,"

"Cheers," the table echoed in unison, glasses clinking gently under the chandelier's warm light.

As everyone took their first sips, plates were passed around with messy hunger-filled fluidity. They were all hungry and didn't know where to start. May reached for the butter-roasted potatoes, her hands crisscrossing with Emma, who was after the red cabbage and gravy sauce.

Ben busied himself slicing up the lamb and roasted chicken, which was seasoned to perfection. Soon plate began to be filled, and the sounds of pleased food moans resounded as they took their first bites. Shortly after their hunger was satiated, Laughter began to bubble up between mouthfuls and shared plates.

The clink of cutlery danced with the jazz in the background as conversations around the table flowed. "Lisa, what do you call this sausage and bacon thing? I don't think I've ever had anything quite like it," Evelyn said after taking a bite of the tiny roasted sausages wrapped in bacon.

"Oh, that its something we call a pig in a blanket over in the UK. I wouldn't recommend eating it regularly, but as a delicacy for an occasion, as this their quite delicious," Lisa commented with a light smile as she proceeded to tell the woman stories of her grandmother's shocked expression when her mother served it at a Christmas dinner one year.

"The woman almost had a stroke, glaring at my mother for the entire dinner since she grew up only eating the proper dishes. However, one taste and it has been on the menu ever since. Now we try a new dish each Christmas Eve, and this year it's chicken and dumplings" With that's she motioned for a medium-sized ceramic bowl filled with white dumplings and small chicken strips floating in a creamy white liquid.

"How are you feeling, sis, after completing your first semester at Cambridge? Is it everything you imagined it would be?" Rakim asked on the other end of the table as he savoured a slice of lamb roast on his plate.

"Yeah, what's it like in one of the ivy's of the college world?" Reece asked in genuine curiosity as he had been visiting colleges since the start of the year looking for the best fit. His mother wanted him to consider an Ivy League school, but he wanted a more competitive D1 program.

Emma gave a small, knowing laugh as she dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "Cambridge is... intense. Inspiring too, don't get me wrong—but between lectures, tutorials, clubs, and the workload, I'm convinced the library sees more of me than my own bed."

Everyone chuckled, and Reece leaned in, clearly intrigued. "So, what's the vibe like? Is it super posh? Or do people chill out?"

Emma smiled wryly. "It's a bit of both, actually. You've got your tweed-wearing debaters who sound like they were born for a career in politics. Law students practically run the campus, but it's the theatre troupe who everyone wants to be around on campus, especially for parties, night outs or simply chill with."

"How so?" May asked with genuine curiosity as she stopped eating for a moment and turned her attention to her friend. "Don't tell me your flatmate managed to convince you to audition for one of their street performances?"

Emma laughed, shaking her head. "God, no. I'd die of embarrassment before stepping onto the street, Oxford Street in London, to perform a play for strangers, but some of the actors in my building actually love it. There's this one guy—Freddie—who does monologues in front of Tesco for fun. Complete lunatic, but somehow he always pulls a crowd."

"That's wild," Reece said, chuckling as he reached for a second helping of the creamy chicken and dumplings.

Rakim chuckled. "Sounds like an off-brand Hogwarts, minus the magic and a lot more Shakespeare."

"Well said," Emma agreed, lifting her glass toward him in salute. "And speaking of circuses, the end-of-term parties are no joke. You haven't lived until you've seen future prime ministers, judges, and Ceo's get wild without a care,"

Rakim smirked, swirling the sparkling apple juice in his glass. "Sounds like you're enjoying yourself. How is it living with Jenna after all these years?"

Emma raised a brow, lips curving into a sly grin. "I didn't say I wasn't, and it's basically like being on a school trip with a friend. It does help that we can do most things together, as most of our classes are the same."

"Haha, I can't believe that happened on your honeymoon, what did you end up doing?" Evelyn asked mid-mid laughter that was echoed by the rest of the group of adults.

"So, get this, after a 17-hour flight, we reached our honeymoon villa on the island." Ben explained with excitement, "Keep in mind we were slightly buzzed from the wedding, so all we did was sleep off our jetlag on the first day."

"However, instead of waking up in paradise, we were rudely awoken by a blaring alarm. My dear Lisa was cranky, to say the least, as she charged out guns blazing with a bird's nest on her head, ready to throw a string of explicit at the manager and staff." He continued with a smile, using his hands to outline just how crazy Lisa's hair was at the time.

"Hey, I didn't look that bad, did I?" Lisa questioned, pouting her lip in displeasure, but her husband merely chuckled at her expression. "Honey, I have photo proof plus the workers called you Vahine Maamaa (Crazy Lady) after that day,"

His words immediately caused the Parker couple to chuckle in amusement as Lisa lightly punched his shoulder in annoyance. "Where was I? Ah yes, my dear wife ran out in her bathrobe robe hair looking like it had been through a blender, only to hear someone shout. 'Ma'am, you need to go to the caller. Brender is coming, the Big one.' before running off as if his life depended on it."

Ben paused dramatically, letting the room simmer in anticipation. "Turns out, a bloody typhoon had changed course while we were knocked out and decided to visit us. All other visitors had been warned and ushered to the sheltered, but little did we know as we counted Zs in our sleep. The entire resort was on evacuation protocol, and we were one of the last people still not taken to a shelter."

Lisa took over the story, her voice tinged with exaggerated disbelief. "I barely had time to change into a pair of tracksuits and grab my phone before Ben carried me to the shelter after seeing I was taking too long. I managed to grab Ben's Nokia brick before we ended up in this underground shelter packed with people from all walks of life."

The table erupted into laughter as the kids managed to catch the end of their conversation, pretty much grasping the gist. "You mean to tell me," Reece gasped between chuckles, "that your honeymoon turned into a disaster movie?"

"It was The Day After Tomorrow, beach edition," Rakim added, earning a wheeze from Emma as another round of questioning ensued. Victor chuckled too, but it was noticeably shorter as he once again excused himself for what was the 5th time since they started eating.

The man's phone screen had been lighting up more than a rave with a DJ looking to cause you seizures with all the lights. Victor rose from his seat, pressing a napkin to his mouth as he offered another polite, vague apology. "Sorry, everyone, I just need to take this—one of my overseas clients. Time zones, you know how it is."

They did not know, well, except maybe Ben, given the size of his business ventures, but he merely frowned at the man's expression before continuing his story. "So, we came to surf and enjoy the beach but ended up building houses...."

Chapter 495 495 Christmas Message

[Location: Rose Isle, Orlando | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 19:00 | Christmas Eve Dinner]

He exited into the garden through the glass doors that had been left open since the Florida weather was quite warm. He stepped onto the back patio with quick but firm steps and slid the door shut behind him. The laughter inside faded behind the glass, replaced by the sharp buzz of both of his phones vibrating again. With an irritated grunt, he swiped to answer.

"What?" he hissed in annoyance at the constant interruptions.

The voice on the other end was also panicked. "Victor, what should I do? I've practically wiped out my brokerage account, plus the 10x leverage.... were screwed, no we are fucked, so fucked. The main branches in New York called for a regular progress report for this quarter, but I know they are onto us."

Victor pinched the bridge of his nose and turned away from the pool, pacing along the marble walkway leading to a wooden gazebo that was illuminated by garden lights. "Calm down," he muttered, though his own voice trembled. "No one's onto us yet—not unless you start leaving voicemails like that. Just... stall them. Buy time."

"But how Victor?" the man on the phone pleaded. "We've used nearly every client's line for that private fund, and there's no way we can cover withdrawals if they check the books. I got four calls today asking to liquidate holdings—we're tapped."

Victor's jaw locked as he stepped into the gazebo, its white lattice casting crisscrossed shadows over his face. The festive garden lights felt mocking now, too bright, too perfect—like stage lights in a performance he was about to fail.

"Tell them we have their money tied up in a package with promising returns at the end of the first quarter in June," Victor said tightly. "That should buy us enough time for our investments in the transportation, hospitality, medical, and automobile sectors."

"Just keep calm once the SoftBank takeover of our 40% shares in WeWork we will more than make back the deficit and even turn a profit," Victor stated with an almost manic grin as he glanced past the garden looking at the moon's reflection on the lake.

"Victor... that deal isn't even guaranteed," the voice on the other end said, lower now. "SoftBank's been stalling negotiations for weeks. If they back out—"

"They won't." Victor cut in sharply. "They can't. They've already sunk too much into the first two tranches. Masa's hands are tied."

"You keep saying that man," the caller sighed, dread bleeding through. "But hope isn't a f***ing strategy. This thing's already cracking."

Victor's nostrils flared as his fingers dug into the painted wood of the gazebo beam. "Then patch the cracks. I'll handle things on my end and try to procure new inflows. You just do your job of keeping the back end from caving in. That's the job, or we will both be sitting in a four-by-four."

He hung up before the man could reply, the screen reflecting briefly in his eyes before he locked it and pocketed the phone. For a few seconds, he stood completely still, breathing through his nose like he was trying to smother a panic attack without letting it touch the surface. His gaze drifted to the manicured lawn and the grandeur of the villa, knowing that if he could manage a portion of Ben's assets, he could dig himself out of the hole.

However, the man guarded his money more tightly than the Whitehouse did their secrets. That was despite the erratic spending he had seen the man do over the years. This fact frustrated him even more as it felt like money was being dangled in front of him in his time of need, only to be yanked away the moment he reached out.

Victor ran a hand through his hair, fingers tightening slightly at the roots before he caught himself and smoothed it back. He couldn't afford to look dishevelled, not even in private. One's Perception was currency, and right now, he needed to appear like a man worth his weight in gold.

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Inside Rose Church, the final act of the Christmas play was reaching its heartwarming close. The sanctuary was aglow in soft amber lighting, twinkling string lights wrapped around columns, wreaths hung from the brick walls, and poinsettias flanked the stage. The wooden cross at the back of the altar shimmered with purple LED lights, casting a serene glow over the gathered congregation.

A small girl no older than seven nervously stepped forward, wearing a pair of cardboard angel wings that wobbled with every move. She spoke into the mic, her voice trembling at first, but growing stronger with each word.

"...And the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David... a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.'"

The audience let out a soft, collective "aww" as the kids gathered around the manger scene. A plastic baby Jesus sat in a hay-lined crate, while the 'wise men', 3 boys no older than 10 shuffled awkwardly in their robes made from old drapes and gold tinsel crowns.

In the fourth row from the front, May leaned gently against Rakim's shoulder. Her voice was hushed as she whispered, "This part always gets me."

Rakim smiled slightly, watching the kids wrap up their performance with a song. "Yeah. Kinda reminds me of when we organised this play, I still can't believe you married Tyler and his annoying swoop,"

May chuckled under her breath, the sound barely louder than the gentle chords of the final hymn beginning to play in the background. "What can I say, I was in my Justin Bieber phase," She whispered into his ear, not caring for his annoyance. "Tyler was the next best thing, plus the fact that he was cute helped."

"Then maybe you should go and lean on his shoulders," Rakim grumbled under his breath, lightly nudging his left shoulder to boot her head off.

May gave him a mock gasp, hand flying to her chest. "You're jealous of a ten-year-old version of Tyler?"

"What can I say, petty is my third, fourth, and fifth name," Rakim shot back under his breath, eyes still on the kids as the last lines of the song repeated themselves. They had sung the chorus one too many times, almost giving Mrs Grette, the lead youth preacher, and a part-time theatre director a heart attack. "And if I remember correctly, you cried when he left for New Jersey."

"I cried because he took the class hamster with him, not because of him," she retorted, hiding a grin. "Relax."

Rakim chuckled, shaking his head just as the kids on stage struck their final pose—a chaotic but well-meaning tableau of Bethlehem, complete with a slightly crooked star hanging overhead and a cardboard camel that had lost one leg mid-performance. The hall erupted in gentle applause, warm and genuine as parents reached for their phones, snapping pictures of their wards.

Some parents were so moved by the purity of it all and wiped tears from their eyes, acting as if their kids had just hit a home run. May clapped softly, smiling through the moment, her fingers brushing against Rakim's as she leaned in.

Before she could say anything, Rakim interrupted her. "Sure. Blame the hamster. I'll remember that line next time you get jealous over a reporter or a fan who decided to get handsy,"

Her head snapped his way so fast that it almost caused him to jump back reflexively from her intense glare. However, before May could reply, pastor Elijah returned to the pulpit, stepping up with a gentle smile and hands folded. He is a black African American man in his mid-fifties, dressed in dark purple with a matching sweater.

"Let's take a moment to thank our children and youth volunteers for reminding us of what this night is really about." He loudly said as his southern Alabama accent slipped through, but his charisma only enhanced the effect.

The crowd chuckled and clapped again, a few voices offering heartfelt whistles as Pastor Elijah gave a small, appreciative bow to the kids seated on the front row of seats.

He adjusted the mic stand, nudging his glasses into focus and continued, his voice steady but heartfelt. "Y'know, I've seen a lot of Christmases in my time. And every year, I'm reminded that the miracle of Christmas wasn't wrapped in perfection. There was no red carpet. No palace. Just a scared young woman, a faithful man, and a newborn lying in the most unexpected place."

His gaze swept across the congregation, pausing just long enough to make it feel personal. "And some of us here tonight... we're still trying to figure out our place in the story. Maybe you've had a year filled with blessings. Maybe you've had one filled with loss. Or maybe..."—he paused briefly— "...you've been juggling so many things, afraid that one more drop might make it all fall apart."

He let his eyes travel along the congregation, nodding at a few, sending warm smiles their way. "Here's the good news, family: Jesus wasn't born into peace. He was born to bring it. He meets us in the mess, not after we clean it up. So, whether your heart's full tonight or heavy... there's room for you at the manger."

May exhaled slowly, the irritation fading into a smile as she enjoyed the moment, hopeful for what was to come. Her eyes shot open when she felt a familiar hand grasp hers, and when she looked over at Rakim's smiling face as his eyes remained focused on the pastor, her own smile also brightened. Pastor Elijah raised one hand slightly. "Let's bow our heads in prayer."

Chapter 496 496 Cat Got Your Tongue?

[Rose Church – Second Ballroom | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 22:05]

The second hall of Rose Church had shed its usual identity as a humble lunch space and now glowed with seasonal transformation. Gone were the wooden tables and chairs at the centre of the room instead, a section to the side was prepared. On it, a variety of snacks and drinks were prepared, from cakes to warm punch.

White and Golden paper strings with varying shapes of snowflakes and stars that the kids had made hung from the ceiling beams. A small sound system played a playlist of jazz-infused Christmas instrumentals, creating a warm backdrop to the quiet buzz of conversation, laughter, and shuffling footsteps. Volunteers in cheerful holiday sweaters drifted through the space with trays of warm fruit punch and sugar-dusted cookies.

One corner of the room was cordoned off for the Gift Drive Station, where wrapped parcels of every shape and size were being collected into neat, labelled piles—"Children (5–10)," "Teens," "Warm Clothing," and "Family Packs." Above it all hung a white banner in looping red font: "A Season of Giving – For Those with Less, From God's Children."

"Mum, just how many gifts did you prepare?" Rakim questioned as he made his third trip from the car, clutching gift boxes in his arms. "It's almost like a clown car, just with never-ending gifts."

"This is just the last of it. I've made around four trips to the church already," She responded with a thoughtful look as she patted her son with a you can do it expression, motioning for him to get the next

load. "The gym's profits have been rising, and my finance people told me I needed to donate to something I care about or help Uncle Sam finance another Rocket. So, I worked with a Christian charity called the Heart Foundation to sponsor gifts and initiatives across different churches and places in need."

"You know, I think my first thought of this being a family of Angel's way back then was spot on," Rakim mumbled with a bright smile as he lugged another gift box that was likely a Keyboard, not the computer kind, but the instrument.

Lisa gave a modest shrug, though her eyes gleamed with pride. "If I'm going to be mistaken for an angel, I might as well act like one now and then."

As Rakim set the keyboard box down gently beside a pile marked "Teen Activities", he noticed how meticulously the volunteers were sorting each donation. Nothing felt haphazard. There was reverence in the process—every item handled with care, showing just how much every little bit was appreciated.

Luckily for him, his dad came in with the last of the gifts, allowing him to excuse himself and join the festivities. He walked around the room, greeting a few familiar faces like Max, Damian Green, a few of his old school teammates and Lexi, who was with a group of his old classmates. Since he had left before his junior year, it felt weird seeing kids he had shared a classroom with.

They kept things cordial, though probably prompted by the atmosphere and the fact that they were in the house of the lord. People tend to be on their best behaviour when they know an all-powerful god is among them. "I think Emma and Liv and her went to the garden with a few of their old classmates who are back for the holidays." Reece had told him after he caught him, Bennet, and a few of their friends huddled over a kicker table.

"Cheers and good luck, Eagles for state," He responded, earning a few 'Yeah' in response from the teenagers who were likely part of the team. Walking out of the side hall, which was the most efficient path to the garden, he stepped into a dark corridor illuminated by LED lights.

At the end of the corridor, there was a right turn before the turn on the left side of the corridor, there was a glass door leading to the courtyard. However, just as he opened the door, a familiar voice drifted into his ears, causing him to come to a stop. He looked around and managed to catch the figure's appearance in the reflection of the window further down.

It was Victor May's father, but unlike how he usually carried himself, his mask was gone. The look on the man's face was one he recognised all too well as it drew a surge of memories of his past life that he thought he had forgotten. It was the look the leaders had when they knew they had fucked up colossally and had to answer to a bloodthirsty warlord who sniffed the happy powder with his breakfast.

"...No, listen to me—Langford doesn't have the full picture, and if you trust me, making a 20% profit is the minimum. I'm not supposed to tell anyone, but I have a guarantee from a friend, and it's a sure deal." He heard him say on the phone before pressing a button to mute it with practised ease.

Flicking over to his left, he had answered another call whilst whoever was on the first call rambled on. "Mark, my friend, Merry Christmas, thanks for calling me... if this opportunity wasn't pressing, I wouldn't bother you so late, but the time crunch on this deal... like they say money doesn't sleep even on Christmas."

"The more the better, but we can get you started for just 30, which would only get you a small bite of the cake, but it's still better than nothing, right?" Victor said, looking every bit the snake oil salesman he was as he channelled his Jordan Belfort. He muted the call as his friend responded and went back to the other phone.

"I knew you had the guts to play the long game... You sure you want to add another 25 million... It's not that I don't trust your guts, but maybe you should check in with your wife first, Ok, ok fine, you are the man, just wire the money and I will put you down," he told the man before promptly ending the conversation to deal with the other caller.

For a good 10 minutes, Rakim stood there in silence watching as the man lied through his teeth as he managed to gather more than 250 million dollars. He wasn't done, though, as he picked up yet another call. "No, no, Frank—I promise you; this isn't like last time. That deal had... unexpected variables. This one? Locked in. Institutional backing. Think WeWork but without the PR mess, and I'm giving you early access."

Sighing, Rakim decided to leave, regretting the fact that he had borne witness to this. The man had seemed like a winner in life for as far as he had known him, totally unrecognisable from the desperate expression of a gambler who was scraping money from all directions in order to place that last bet that would fix all his worries. However, just as he was about to gently close the door behind him, he heard him say something that piqued his curiosity.

"I've been expecting your call, Donnie. How are things on your end?" he said in a much calmer yet still serious tone. "Good, I've managed to gather 550, just enough to cover the deficit if I add the two trust funds, making a total of 950m. I just need to have that money back in by April."

"There is no going back, it's already in motion, so let's just execute and make sure nothing gets in the way so close to the finishing line," Victor said with a determined expression, not willing to heed the hesitation from Donnie. "Talk soon, I gotta go, I've been gone for too long, and if I don't make the rounds, I'll have a riot on my hands."

Rakim closed the glass door behind him, not minding whether he was being quiet anymore, as his pulse hammered in his ears. Nine hundred and fifty million dollars? The number rolled through his head like a shockwave. He had never seen so much money as he had never bothered to care about such since he had enough to comfortably live.

To date, he is still unaware of his parents' net worth, only chalking it up to being a lot. It wasn't the fact that Victor was scamming people with false promises that caused his heart to tighten, but the mention of trust funds that did. He had figured the man was desperate from what he had picked up, but emptying his children's trust for what is obviously a gamble wasn't something he ever imagined the man doing.

Now that he thought about it, the signs had been there throughout the year. The biggest clue should have been his lack of pushback when May moved to Germany to be with him and attend the University of Cologne, despite being insistent on her attending Brown after she got accepted. 'Hey Eva, what am I supposed to do with this information?' He inwardly asked as neither his brain nor his heart could come up with an answer.

{...}

'Sounds about right,' he thought to himself as his legs carried him forward quickly, reaching a small burning fire pit where a group of young adults were gathered around with their own special punch.

"Babe, you're finally here. I was just telling them about the snow in Leverkusen. Didn't I almost call the hotel staff about someone throwing fake snow on our balcony?" She exclaimed the moment she spotted him skipping to his side and promptly wrapping her hand around his neck pulling him into a hug, acting like she had missed him for years. Seeing her bright smile, the words got stuck in his throat, and he lost the simple ability to form speech.

"What, cat got your tongue? I know I'm pretty, but if you keep staring, they're gonna think you're a perv."

Chapter 497 497 Christmas Day



[Location: Rose Isle, Orlando | Date: 24/12/2019 | Time: 08:35 | Christmas Day]

[Rakim's Pov]

Christmas morning was a weird one for me, which was weird since I loved the day more than any other of the year. Not even the scent of cinnamon, lemons, Peppermint and Pine made me feel happy. Heck, not even Zeus's smiling face next to me as he pretends to sleep can bring a smile to my face.

I even slept in something I never did, come rain or shine, but the pit in my stomach with which I woke up made it hard to find the joy. The ceiling fan spun lazily above me, its rhythmic hum doing nothing to drown out the replay of last night's conclusion. "In the end, I was too much of a coward to bring it up to her," I mumbled, knowing that all the excuses I came up with were more for my sake than hers.

'Eva, don't you have some system gismo that can make this whole situation go away?' I inwardly mumbled carefully not to be too loud, just in case Zeus would perceive it as a challenge to wreck stuff. Despite him already being an old dog, he only seemed to get stronger with age like a great wolf.

{Sorry, but there is no cheating life,} she cooley responded, but what I heard was 'It's your problem, deal with it,' bringing my irritation to a new level.

'Hey, so what do you call what I'm doing with the system then?' I retorted, not quite understanding how she could spout such BS with the efficiency of a certain Nigerian politician. (They keep taking from us Africans... Why do you have 3 private jets?)

{Let's not kid ourselves, you use the system like a personal trainer rather than what it's intended for. Plus, while you were struggling with what to do, that little girl noticed something was wrong. Never

underestimate a woman's intuition.} She responded with a matter-of-fact tone, leaving no room for me to find fault with.

"Yeah, but how do you even tell your girlfriend that her dad is gambling with a billion dollars? Oh, and btw, he emptied your trust fund to raise that money," I questioned with an exasperated tone, not sure what she found so straightforward.

"What did you just say?!" Emma's voice resounded from the connected bathroom door, and the next moment, she barged into the room dressed in her PJs and her toothbrush still in her mouth. Zeus, who had been peacefully asleep, dreaming about chasing cats and squirrels or maybe last night's Byson leg, jumped up in fright.

His eyes were comically wide as he jumped up in the air, landing ready for a fight, only to realise Emma was friendly. (WOOF) The look of disdain in his eyes as he jumped off the bed and walked off to his designated doggy bed in the corner of the room spoke volumes. "Tell me I'm dreaming and didn't just hear what I think I heard,"

"You're dreaming and.." I started but was interrupted by her flying slippers that smacked me in the face. "Are you some kind of Asian manga character? Use your words, woman."

"Don't give me none of that BS and get serious," she retorted, hands on her hips and a glare that could freeze Everest once over.

"(sigh) Well, I might as well let you suffer with me," I told with a sigh and began narrating last night's proceedings that landed me in this predicament. From start to finish, I told her everything, even some of the colourful words I overheard Victor say.

A long silence was all that met me, with neither of us saying anything. I don't know why I expected her to give me the answer to this situation, but I wanted more than just her expressionless gaze. Just as I felt the urge to knock on her head to see if she was experiencing an information overload, she finally spoke. "Oh, that's not the worst case, we thought you were speaking to another girl, and that's why you were acting so weird last night."

Emma's blunt honesty caught me so off guard that I blinked once, hoping for a clarification, blinked twice and still no 'JK'. "...Wait, you thought what?" I asked, particularly jumping out of bed as I grabbed her shoulders, ready to shake an explanation out of her.

She didn't flinch under my grip. She just leaned back slightly and gave me that patented Rex family deadpan, her toothbrush now clutched like a dagger. "Well, you were being all distant, hardly talking and practically did a 180 on the physical contact you had with May. What were we supposed to think?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but she steamrolled right through me. "And don't look at me like that. May didn't say anything directly, but she's not stupid. You think you're slick, but your poker face is mid at best for those that actually know you," she added with a dramatic sniff, wiping the toothpaste foam from the side of her mouth like she was on a talk show.

"Sigh, you guys are just too broad," I responded, not really wanting to linger on this topic. "Anyway, what are we gonna do?"

Emma tilted her head slightly, her expression losing the sass for a rare moment of genuine contemplation. She stepped back, walking a couple of steps back into the bathroom and tossed her toothbrush into the sink behind her without even looking. Then she came back in front of me and crossed her arms, eyes narrowing.

"We?" she repeated slowly, testing the word like it had too much weight. "Don't drag me into what is obviously a couple's conversation." With those words, she strode back into the bathroom, closing it with a loud thud. "We should get ready for breakfast, I can already smell Dad's baking and Mum's cooking,"

"Coward," was the only thing I could mutter before falling onto the bed with a sigh. Zeus let out a long, dramatic sigh from his corner and turned his head away as if to let me know that he also wasn't going to help.

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The rest of Christmas morning unfolded in quite a familiar upbeat tone, making me forget about all my worries. Dad made his famous German waffles with powdered sugar and punch, a dish he had enjoyed as a young boy. Mum, however, made sure we had a more balanced breakfast with croissants, fresh fruits, homemade jam, and poached eggs.

After breakfast, it was time for everyone's favourite time of the year: the gift opening. It was tradition in our house to do it late morning, allowing us to spend the first part of the morning with our family. Our 12-foot Christmas tree, which, apart from the decorations, had just been empty the night before, was now decked out in presents from all sides.

"Y'know we stopped believing in Santa a long time ago, Dad," Emma said in a deadpan tone as she looked at the plate of half-eaten cookies and milk, which she definitely didn't put out last night. "Plus, how did you get Mum to agree to let you intentionally dirty her cashmere Carpet?"

Dad almost choked on his cup of coffee, and Mum, who was just about to take a seat next to him on the sofa, immediately shot to her feet. "Where did you dirty my carpet?" She exclaimed with so much rage and indignation, immediately demanding an answer.

Dad blinked in confusion, then glanced at me like I was his last hope for backup. Naturally, I just leaned back on the armrest and took a long, dramatic sip from my cocoa. "Don't look at me," I said through the cup, "I thought the Santa gig ended two years ago when Zeus tore apart your sack full of presents when you sneaked in like the third member of the Home Alone robbers."

Zeus, now sprawled in front of the fireplace like he was posing for a calendar shoot, gave a disinterested glance before turning back to the bone in front of him. Mum, meanwhile, had already slipped off her house slippers and was on her knees inspecting the carpet like it had personally offended her. "Benjamin Michael Rex, you better tell me exactly where the mess is before I find them myself and file for Christmas divorce," she snapped, eyes scanning for spills like a seasoned forensic investigator.

"Relax, honey!" Dad laughed nervously. "I put parchment under the glass. It's fine. Totally clean—Zeus didn't even lick it this time!"

That was clearly the wrong thing to say. "You tested that theory on Zeus?!"

The entire room fell into an awkward silence... before Emma let out the loudest cackle I'd heard from her in a week.

Mum finally gave up with a huff, muttering something about "boys and their nonsense" before storming off to grab a mop—even though there wasn't a single stain in sight.

Chapter 498 498 Presents

[Rex Residence – Living Room | Date: 25/12/2019 | Time: 11:46]

Wrapping paper flew like confetti, discarded bows tumbled onto Persian rugs, and the living room echoed with laughter, gasps, and the occasional bark of Zeus, who wrestled with a large Charizard chew toy. Ben and Lisa Rex sat back on the long velvet couch, sipping coffee as they happily watched their kids open up the present they had painstakingly picked out.

Over the years, the presents had gotten more expensive, but they had made a rule that they would only give their kids one big present each year. That only happened when they had been good all year and had made them proud in either school or career, in Rakim's case.

Emma had just unwrapped the final box from her pile, a pair of limited-edition Jimmy Choo heels with a small handwritten note from her grandmother tucked neatly inside the tissue paper. She let out a soft "aww" before leaning back with a blissful sigh against the armrest of the loveseat, her lap already buried under silk, leather, and designer tissue wrap.

"Okay," she said, stretching like a cat. "I officially don't need to go shopping for the next five years."

"You said that last year," Ben quipped without looking up from his coffee.

"And I meant it... at the time," Emma replied with mock indignation, twirling the gold iPhone 11 Pro Max in her hand. "Well, sometimes you need a specific look for an occasion like this." She held up a rectangular-shaped box that contained 10 white tickets with gold ornately designed vines going around it, and a golden Mustang mid-gallop charging towards her. Aurora Vineyards was written in bold letters above in cursive writing.

"How did you even think about getting me a trip to Australia and at a vineyard, no less?" She asked her brother, who was just about to open the last of his presents, a small 5-centimetre square-shaped box.

"Oh, I figured after suffering the weather in England, you could use a sunny destination, plus just staying at a hotel seemed boring. If you go during harvest season, they let you make your own wine for a fee of course, but you get to keep the batch for the future, not that I support drinking, mind you," Rakim Cooley responded as he went back to trying to decipher how to open the gift that had been welded shut with Sellotape.

"Not supporting drinking while sending your sister to a vineyard sounds like textbook hypocrisy," Emma teased, with a smile as she prompted her dad to open the present she had prepared for him.

Rakim finally managed to free the small box from the wrapping paper, revealing a black leather box. Without further ado, he opened the lid, revealing a black car key resting calmly on a purple cushion. Slightly surprised, Rakim looked up from the box, then at his parents, "You got me another Car?" He asked, not quite understanding why they had so soon gotten me a new car.

"Well, it..." Ben started trying to explain but was quickly interrupted by Rakim's excited shout. "Shit it's a Lamborghini!" he exclaimed in fright and excitement after spotting the golden bull, directly throwing the box with the key in the air and sending it flying.

The key box spun through the air like a slow-motion movie prop before bouncing harmlessly on the thick carpet in an anticlimactic fashion. Zeus even looked up, ears perked, as if waiting for someone to yell "Fetch!"

Ben chuckled, shaking his head. "Nice to know all my effort was appreciated."

"Ahem, thanks, but what kind is it?" Rakim sheepishly replied as he walked over to pick up the key now with much more care.

Ben rubbed the back of his neck, a proud smirk tugging at his lips. "It's the Sián FKP 37. Silver. One of only sixty-three made the first hybrid Lamborghini, featuring a V12 engine..."

Looking at his father's excited face as he listed off the different features of the car left Rakim perplexed. "Since you obviously like it, why did you give it to me, especially since it was just released in September?"

"Ahem, I'm not allowed to keep it," Ben replied with a sulking expression as he sent a hurt glance at his wife, who continued to ignore him.

"Hmph, what does a grown man need with a boy's toy? Don't tell me you want to go out and pick up some hussies?" Lisa retorted from the side, placing the VIP tickets to see Moulin Rouge on Broadway that her kids had gotten her. Rakim and Emma had pooled together to get those tickets and book a week-long spa centre stay for 2 in Costa Rica in the hot spring region for her.

Ben looked over at Rakim, lifting his mug in mock toast. "Enjoy it while you can. It was either you or the garage, plus I got it as a gift from a business partner, so it's not really a loss for me." The mention of a business partner caused Lisa's glare to intensify, prompting Rakim to connect the dots of why his mother really didn't want her husband driving the car.

"Ahem, thanks, guys, I'll take good care of it," Rakim quickly said as he set it aside with the VIP tickets to the Finsbury concert his sister had gotten him. "Looks like I really need to get a house now,"

"Or you can get into college like me and get one for free. Seriously, don't you think that a 7-bedroom villa in the middle of Cambridge is a bit excessive?" Emma commented from the side as she looked at the deed encased in a leather case.

"It's just a detached house, plus it was your great-grandpa Oliver's old house, we just paid half its value, so we wouldn't feel bad," Lisa commented from the side with a light frown. "Apparently, my mother came for a visit at your student accommodation and was horrified at the scene. She nagged me for weeks, saying that her granddaughter is living with heathens and whatnot."

"Now you can just live there with your friends, you just have to pay for utilities, so it's not entirely a gift. We figured this would give you a chance at being a bit more independent, it's your house, so don't let it turn into an animal barn." Ben commented from his seat, a bright smile on his face at his daughter's perplexed face.

The gift process continued in full swing with each family member resenting the presents they had gotten for the other. Other than the car, Rakim had gotten console games for both the PlayStation and Xbox, snatching a copy of Marvel's Spider-Man: Game of the Year Edition, 2K20 on PS4 and FIFA 20 and Forza Horizon on his Xbox X and a Midnight Green iPhone 11 Pro Max. He had also received an allowance to use some of his savings to either purchase or rent a house and of course, the Ultimate VIP Tickets to the Finsbury concert, where his favourite rappers would be headlining.

Emma, other than receiving the house from her parents and great-grandparents, received her trip to Australia, a gold iPhone 11 Pro Max and an assortment of clothes, bags, and shoes from different brands, amounting to a sizeable sum. For Lisa, it was the presents that her husband had gotten her that drew everyone's attention. He had gotten her a rose gold Cartier Watch and necklace, but it was the horse stable in Ocala that threw everyone off guard.

"You enjoyed our stay at Tom's ranch in Montana, so I figured it would be convenient to get a place close by," He reasons upon receiving questioning glances from his kids and wife.

"Dad, you know you can just rent a single stable instead of buying the whole thing," Rakim commented from the side as he stood up to pat his father's shoulder, seriously questioning his worldview.

"Don't you think I know that? I promised to make her happy at our wedding, and since I have the means, I can't do half-measures." He retorted with a smug smile, "You're still a brat and wouldn't understand how a real man treats their wife."

Before Rakim could retort, he watched as his mother sent a quick peck on his father's cheek, prompting a wide smile to appear on the latter's face. "Ahem, anyway, Dad, great minds think alike, so Emma and I got you this," Rakim said as he proceeded to toss a silver Rolls-Royce key to his father.

Ben barely caught the key in time, blinking at the logo engraved on the fob before looking up at his son and daughter. "You got me a Rolls?"

Emma folded her arms smugly. "Not just any Rolls. It's practically the Batmobile, with its bulletproof tinted windows, armour plating, its black on black-on-black colour paint, and a twin-turbocharged V12 engine modified for performance."

Ben's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed in disbelief. "You two got me a rolling fortress?"

"Well, we grew up with you sometimes acting like a human crash test dummy," Rakim retorted with a smile, "Plus it's safer than what mum got you, can't believe they will let you drive a Red Bull in Spielberg no less,"

Chapter 499 499 No Caption Needed

[Parker Residence, Rose Isle Florida | Date: 25/12/2019 | Time: 13:30]

Later that day, Rakim borrowed his mother's electric scooter to make his way down the street to May's house. Emma had gone to see Olivia, giving them some time. Usually, he would just head inside since he was so familiar with the Parkers, but today he rang the bell. He told himself it was due to it being Christmas, but he knew it was due to Victor.

"Oh, Rakim, it's you, come on in," the man he hoped not to run into stated with a happy smile, phone still in hand as he walked back in. Rakim merely nodded in greeting, letting him get back to his Nigerian escapades.

"Merry Christmas, Mrs Parker," he said as he walked through the grand foyer, finding the woman amid a FaceTime call with her parents as she sorted the clothes that had been gifted. Handing over a basket of flowers and freshly baked cookies, his mother had given him he gave her a quick hug.

"Oh, that's sweet of you. May is in her room," she said with a bright smile, pointing to the spiral staircase leading up the stairs.

Rakim alighted the grand spiral staircase, his steps light and fast as he quickly reached the second floor. May's house had always been the biggest in their friend group, as unlike the modern villas they lived in hers was more a blend of modern and older villas. Alighting onto the third floor he quickly reached Mays' door at the end of the left wing.

He reached her door, which stood open just enough to catch the gentle hum of music and the rustle of wrapping paper. He thought about announcing himself, but upon spotting her busily recording something on her phone, he simply waited. She was consistent in her content creation, posting daily on her socials, and posting 3 videos on her Y-Tube a week.

Rakim leaned casually against the doorway, watching her through the sliver of space. May was seated cross-legged on her cream suede rug, sunlight filtering in through the bay windows, giving her peach-blond hair a kind of halo. Her phone was propped up on a mini tripod, angled perfectly as she adjusted the gift bags around her with practised ease.

She wore a satin champagne loungewear set and no makeup beyond a bit of gloss and fluttery lashes, yet somehow still looked like the front cover of a holiday campaign. "Guys," she said softly into the camera with a bright smile. "This Kylie makeup set is the last of this Christmas haul video.

May gently held up the pink-and-gold box to the camera, letting the light catch the shimmer across its surface. "The packaging alone? Insane," she added, turning it for the audience to admire. "Big thanks to Aunt Michelle for this. I haven't tried this line before, but you guys know I'm a sucker for anything peach-toned."

She leaned forward to click the stop recording button, giving the lens a warm wink before shutting off the camera. "And that's a wrap on haul number one. I'll film part two tomorrow, my boyfriend and I are exchanging gifts later. Don't forget to Like... and remember to Laugh Harder, and Cry More Happy Tears." With that she ended the recording letting her recording system analyse for areas where the sound quality needed adjustments.

She stretched out her arms with a sigh and rubbed the back of her neck before speaking again—this time not to the camera, but to the quiet presence she'd sensed behind her.

"I know you're there," May said without turning around.

Rakim smiled faintly, stepping into the room. "You ruin all my dramatic entrances."

She spun around on her knees, one brow arched. "You've never had a dramatic entrance in your life."

"True," he admitted, taking a seat on the edge of her bed. "But I like to think if I tried, you'd at least act surprised."

May rolled her eyes playfully, then stood and padded over, barefoot on the rug. "You hungry? There's leftovers downstairs."

"Already had lunch," Rakim said, tugging lightly at the loose ribbon on a nearby box. "But I could go for dessert."

May swatted his hand away from the gift pile. "Those are for my cousins. Touch anything and I'll revoke your girlfriend privileges."

He smirked. "I didn't know I had any."

"Well, you don't—officially. But I'm in a generous mood today."

She sat beside him on the bed, folding her legs underneath herself. They were quiet for a moment, the atmosphere soft and lazy, like the golden afternoon light outside.

Then Rakim reached into the pocket of his hoodie and pulled out a small, square box, no larger than his palm. "Hey," he said, voice a little quieter.

"I didn't wrap it because I knew you'd judge my tape job."

May blinked, then looked down at the velvet box in his hand. She didn't take it right away, just stared at it. "What is it?" she asked, a little breathless.

"Open it and find out," Rakim said.

She took it gently, hands slightly shaking as her delicate fingers flipped open the lid. Inside was a thin platinum ring—delicate but arrestingly beautiful. The band split near the top into two intertwining vines, each carved with intricate detail. At the centre, cradled where the vines met again, bloomed a platinum lily. Tiny emeralds were inlaid along the petals and leaves, at the centre a slightly larger peach crystal lay, giving the flower the faintest glint of green as it caught the afternoon sun.

May didn't speak. Her fingers hovered just above the ring, eyes wide, lips parted in a silent breath. The sunlight streaming through the bay windows made the platinum gleam like moonlight, the emeralds catching fire, and that soft peach stone in the centre glowing with a warmth that felt almost unreal. She blinked twice, then slowly looked up at Rakim.

"I..." Her voice cracked slightly before she cleared her throat. "Rakim, this is—"

"It's not a proposal," he said quickly, hands up in mock surrender, though his eyes didn't waver from hers. "I mean... not that I wouldn't, someday, maybe, if you didn't get sick of me first. But this... this is just a promise for our future together."

"Honestly, living with you in Cologne has been the best part of playing for Leverkusen. Unlike in Glasgow, I had someone to come home to and do the little things with." He took a pause, hands reaching out to grasp her shoulders as a bright smile marked his face. "I figured it would be best to let you know where my head is at regarding our relationship instead of acting oblivious like some two-bit anime protagonist,"

May let out a laugh—a soft, real one that escaped before she could stop it. "Not you dragging anime boys," she said, eyes glistening just slightly as her thumb brushed over the platinum lily once more.

She stared down at the ring a moment longer before quietly slipping it onto her finger. It glided on like it belonged there—a perfect fit, perfect weight, the carved vines hugging her skin like it had been made just for her.

"Okay," she said softly, lifting her hand to study how the emeralds caught the light. "This might be the most beautiful thing I've ever been given."

Rakim chuckled under his breath. "Even more than the Kylie palette?"

She gave him a slow, amused look. "Don't ruin your main character moment."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Fair."

May looked up, met his eyes, and for a moment, neither of them said anything. The air between them slowed, stilled, like the quiet before snowfall.

Then she lunged forward and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder. "I love you so much it's not even funny," she murmured into his hoodie, voice thick.

Rakim smiled into her hair, holding her tightly. "Even when I don't see the appeal in BTS?"

She pulled back just far enough to bop him on the forehead with her own. "Even despite your faults, I love you."

Their foreheads lingered together for a beat longer before May finally let go and sat back, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with her sleeve.

"Ugh, now I'm going to have to film that follow-up haul with puffy eyes."

He leaned back on his hands. "They will understand, plus, isn't your motto Cry More Happy Tears?"

May let out a light laugh, still wiping the corner of her eye. "Yeah, yeah—laugh harder, cry more happy tears. But I didn't mean literally right after unboxing skincare. I have a brand to protect."

Rakim leaned over to pluck one of her unopened boxes from the stack. "Tell them it was a skincare stress test. 'Look how resilient the hydration barrier is after an emotional breakdown.'"

She snorted, nudging his knee with hers. "You joke, but that might actually be the next viral reel."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment longer, the ring catching little flecks of sunlight as May admired it again, turning her hand slowly, letting it sparkle. Then, as if on instinct, she pulled out her phone and snapped a single selfie of them with her ring in full view against the backdrop of her fuzzy cream blanket.

"No caption?" Rakim asked, watching her fingers hover above the screen.

"Not yet," she replied. "Some moments... deserve to live just for us. I'll post about it when I'm ready."

Chapter 500 500 Baby Talk?

[Parker Residence, Rose Isle Florida | Date: 25/12/2019 | Time: 14:15]

May set the phone gently on her nightstand, her hand lingering on the screen a moment longer before she turned back to Rakim. He was now half-sprawled on her bed, one hand behind his head and the other idly flipping through a fashion magazine from her stack. The serenity in the room was almost dreamlike—sunlight, warmth, soft BTS music humming from her speakers, and the scent of her new perfume subtly clinging to the air.

"You know," she said, crawling up beside him and resting her chin on his chest, "my dad's going to see that ring eventually. And he's going to make it weird."

Rakim raised a brow. "Weird how?"

"Weird like... start quoting Bible verses about marriage and dowries. Or suggest you start tithing into the family's future grandchild's fund."

"Wait—there's a fund?" he asked, mock horrified.

"Oh yeah," she teased, propping herself up on her elbow. "My Mother started it when I was 3, along with my trust, but I only get partial access to this one when I get married, but my grandma said it's enough to support a volleyball team."

"Huh?" Rakim exclaimed, now fully sitting up to look at her seriously contemplative gaze as if she was inwardly crunching the numbers. "My daughters will be playing football or Tennis, basketball is okay too, but women's volleyball is a pervert's sport."

May let out a bark of laughter and shoved his shoulder with just enough force to make him fall back against the pillows. "Excuse you! Volleyball is graceful, empowering, and has been played by some of the most badass women alive."

Rakim rubbed his chest where she hit him, pretending to wince. "It's also the only sport where the camera angles should be illegal. Most of the viewers are either hardcore volleyball fans or perverts who are there to appreciate the scenery. Don't ask me why I know that."

"You are so lucky you're cute," she muttered, crawling over him until she straddled his waist, eyes narrowed in mock reprimand. "But for real, how do you feel about a volleyball team of daughters?"

He blinked. "Wait. That was a serious question?"

May nodded, crossing her arms. "Hypothetically."

He took a moment to read her face, trying to gauge how much this hypothetical question would bite him if he didn't take it seriously. In the end, it was safer to just give an honest answer instead of saying something dumb, especially over something he couldn't control. "...Well, I mean, if they're all like you—sassy, terrifying, smart, and capable of emotional warfare—I guess I'd have to restart my taekwondo practice for when they start dating,"

Seeing his excited expression as he subconsciously started doing stretches as if he was about to perform a few kicks, May palmed her head in exasperation. "Oh god, you're gonna be just like your dad, aren't you?"

"Naturally, babe, I'll be the fun one they get to see in the afternoon after training and let them get away with murder out of guilt. But also, the one they are scared of disappointing the most." Rakim naturally responded with his smug smile appearing bigger as he leaned towards her. Putting a hand on her shoulder, he lightly said. "Thank you in advance for taking one for the team."

May narrowed her eyes, lips twitching like she wanted to stay annoyed but couldn't quite manage it. "Oh no, no no. You're not dumping parenting duty on me like that."

Rakim raised both brows, still smirking. "You already said I'd be like my dad. I'm just living up to the prophecy."

She smacked his chest with a pillow. "Prophecy or not, if I'm birthing them, you're raising them too. Midnight diaper duty, school drop-offs, awkward puberty talks—you're not getting out of any of it."

He groaned dramatically, flopping back onto the bed as if the weight of future fatherhood had just knocked him out. "I knew there'd be fine print with this relationship."

Both burst out in laughter a moment later, thanking their stars that all these worries were ways away in the future. "Don't worry if all else fails, we have Auntie Emma and my mother to dump them on."

"Wow, your resistance lasted a whole two minutes, and you're already planning on how to hand off your kids to your sister," May retorted with an eye roll as she looked up from his embrace, briefly looking up. "I do love the fact that we will be able to focus on just living our life with them without worrying over money,"

Her comment caused a soft exhale from Rakim behind her, but what she didn't see was the contemplative look on his face. He seemed to be debating something until he finally made up his mind. "Bae, there is something..."

"(Boom) Sis, you guys need to come down, our cousins are here, and we're gonna have a late lunch together," Reece exclaimed from the door as he barged inside like some unhinged bull. "Oh, did I interrupt your baby-making session?"

Looking at his teasing expression as his off-handed comment eerily hit the bullseye caused a tic to appear on May's face. "Reece Parker, I'm Going To KILL YOU!!" Reece's eyes widened for a half-second before ducking and scrambling out of the room as a clock, pillow, and even an Alexa flew at him with the accuracy of a machine gun.

Reece barely made it past the top of the staircase, cackling like a maniac as the door slammed behind him. One of the pillows clipped his shoulder mid-sprint, and the Alexa device bounced harmlessly off the wall, shouting, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

May stood at the door, fuming, one hand on her hip and the other braced against the wall like she needed it to keep from launching another object. Her chest rose and fell with adrenaline, her peach-blond hair wild from the chaos. "I swear," she muttered, loud enough for Rakim to hear as he sat up on the bed, "when he turns eighteen, I'm buying him a one-way ticket to Siberia."

"You didn't even help!" she snapped, grabbing the final pillow and chucking it weakly at his stomach.

He caught it with ease and shrugged. "He had the speed of a man running from child support. What was I supposed to do, trip him?"

"Yes!" she huffed, pacing towards the bed. "That's exactly what you were supposed to do. We need more present fathers."

Rakim sat up, slipping on his slippers as he made his way toward the door. "True, but for now, we should go greet your cousins and maybe put your ring in a chain if you don't want to give your family a heart attack."

She huffed in annoyance but did just that, removing the ring from around her finger and slipping it onto her silver chain. "By the way, what were you going to say?"

Rakim paused mid-step, hand resting on the doorframe as he turned back to look at her. The playful glint in his eye from earlier had softened into something more serious. He leaned his shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms like he needed the posture to keep the words in check.

"I was going to say... we need at least one set of twins," he said with a cheeky smile as he stole a quick peck of her lips, surprising her.

May blinked, stunned into momentary silence as Rakim pulled back with that smug grin of his already in place. Her hand instinctively came up to touch her lips, and then slowly, she narrowed her eyes.

"You jerk," she murmured, though the affection in her voice betrayed her smile as it tugged at the corners of her mouth. "You had me thinking you were about to drop some life-altering bomb—and you come at me with twins?"

He held his hands up in mock surrender. "Hey, you're the one who started talking about volleyball teams and generational funds. I'm just following the blueprint."

May laughed, shaking her head. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously good-looking," Rakim added with a wink.

She rolled her eyes. "More like ridiculously lucky, I like you."