

A Love Forgotten (Arianna and Elijah)

Chapter 221

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My

Logan's eyes suddenly spried. "Air pischurring trouble falling asleep, **

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With that, he closed his eyes, slipping into a deep sleep alone immediately.

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"I just might have to take a táte," he

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"AM" I pasped astepted my hand and pressed ir apainor bis eturs, keeping in there,

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Whut watruertly was I Inging for?"

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Was I really that desperate?

I mentally scolded myself and shot Logan a sheepish grin. "Alright, Logam You should sleep. I promise I won't bug you."

He gave me a long, searching look before finally closing his eyes again and drilling off

I tried to settle down, but my mind kept wandering Listening to his steady breathing and feeling the warmth of his body right beside me... was definitely testing my self-control in unexpected ways

I drifted between feeling restless and trying not to think about it, and eventually, I dozed off without even realizing it.

What I didn't know was that after I'd fallen asleep, Logan opened his eyes, quietly wrapped his arms around me, and held me close until he drifted off as well.

When I woke up, it was practically lunchtime.

I got myself together, and as soon as I walked into the ditchen, Lora was there with a spread of food

She rambled nervously, still shaken. "Ms. York, you really scared me. Please, don't take baths anymore. Maybe you should stick to showers from now on. Long baths can be hard on your body.

I nodded absently, munching on what was either breakfast or lunch-I wasn't quite sure anymore.

"By the way, where's Mr. Wood?"

Lora, who always coforced to him as "Mr. Wood," beamed. "Oh, he was up early, ane breakfast, and headed to work. He even complimented my cooling!"

I coughed a bit, trying to sound casual. "Did he say anything else?"

With a smile, Lora nodded "Mr. Logan said to make sure I had breakfast ready for him tomorrDW, TOO."

My cherka flushed, and I ducked my head, focusing on my plate.

Lora, noticing my reaction, leaned in with a conspiratorial grin. "Sa... how you two... you know what I'm talking about?" she held up her fingers to imitate a kiss.

I stammered, "No! We didn't do anything like that. He was just worried about me being alone and stayed, in the quest i com to keep me companied."

Lora chuckled, not buying it at all. "You can't fool me! I saw him coming out of your touch this morning. He even gave me a friendly nod."

I wished I could disappear into my bowl right then and there.

With a gentle pat on my shoulder, Lora reassured me. "Come on, Ms. York, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's the 21st century! You're adults. Besides, it's only a matter of time you two over in together."

I hesitated. "But I haven't even finalized the divorce yet. Isn't that kind of inappropriate?"

Lora rolled her eyes. "Inappropriate? Ms. York, you're already spending nights together - don't overthink

I sighed, feeling awkward. "It's just I don't know how to explain it"

She ladled some chicken soup into my bowl as she spoke, "Alright, don't overthink things. Ms. York, you're not exactly young anymore, and you've been through a lot. What happened last night was so dangerous-if I had been five minutes later, who knows what could've happened to you?"

She patted her chest in relief and said, "Thank goodness. Surviving such a close call must mean better days are ahead Ms. York, you need to cherish the people around you. What others say

is their business.

You and Mr. Linden have no feelings for each other anymore. What's left between you both is just a legal formality. Don't let that piece of paper keep you from finding your own happiness." Her words left me speechless. Here was Lora, who hadn't even finished high school, giving me some of the wisest advice I'd heard in ages.

After I finished my meal, lost in thought, I made my way back to my room.

Once I'd gathered myself a bit, I picked up the phone and called Mr. Webb

He packed up almost immediately as if he'd been waiting for my call

"Ariana, great timing," he said. "This morning, Mr. Linden's lawyer reached out. They're proposing a settlement,"

He summarized the details, and nodded along

"Alright, send over the proposal so I can take a look. Oh, and could you also draft an investment agreement for Ms. Stuart and me? It's for a partnership with Silverwood.

"Make sure it's airtight so my assets stay separate."

Thung up, feeling a newfound sense of rebel

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Having a good lawyer really made things so much easier. Mr. Webb went over the settlement offer with me in detail.

The deal was pretty straightforward. Elijah had laid out two options—a ten-year installment plan, gradually paying me back my investment in Linden Group, plus dividends and interest

The second option was to keep my investment in Linden Group but with a spot on the board, voting rights, and a portion of any future profits.

"If Linden Group has potential, the second option is feasible, Ms. York," Mr. Webb said. "But.. it sounds like Mr. Wood suggested a third option."

Curious, I asked. "What's he proposing?"

"Mr. Wood's advice was to have Elijah pay you a lump sum of 50 million dollars over three years, with annual interest payouts, settling everything within five years."

I was puzzled. "Why the rush

Mr. Webb chuckled awkwardly. "Mr. Wood might not have much faith in Me. Linden's company's future."

That made me pause. Elijah was capable-I knew that. But for Logan to suggest something so specific, he must have had real concerns. I told Mr. Webb, "Alright. I sleep on for a couple of days" After I hung up, my phone buzzed again-it was Evan, calling from his new boarding school. Since it was mid-morning,

"Hey there!" I answered.

"When are you picking me up, i?" he asked bluntly.

I raised an eyebrow. "You've only been there a couple of days, and you're already homesick?"

He groaned, "I hate it here. It's wind being in a dorm."

was likely on a break.

In learn some independence."

I thought about Logan possibly staying over at my place soon and gently nudged, "You're old enough now, Evan. It's good to

But somehow, Evan had caught on "Come on! You just don't want me around as the third wheel with that Logan guy, right?"

Busted. I cleared my throat, "Even if you came back, you'd stay at your own place. You know that, right?"

He protested, "I'd rather stay at yours! If I go home, my Mom will kill me, and Elijah will just lecture me. I'm not going back there."

Upon hearing him grumble, I could only promise to pick him up tonight and let him crash for the night,

Satisfied, he chirped, "Thanks, Arif I'm packing my stuff right now."

Before he hung up, I hesitated, "Hey, Evan.. about me and your brother."

There was a pause on his end "Are you really going through with the divorce?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes We're working on a settlement. He's agreed to pay me back

He sighed. "I get it."

A pang of regret hit me. He was still just a kid- this wasn't his burden to bear.

Trying to lighten the mood, I offered, "Hey, look on the bright side. Once it's all settled, I'll have money to take you out for some real feat. So, where do you want to eat tonight?"

He muttered a suggestion half-heartedly before ending the

I couldn't help but smile ruefully. Some big sister I was, huh? And knowing Evan, he'd likely figure out Logan was staying over soon enough. Thru myself for whatever reaction he'd have

I picked up Evan, and just as expected, his spirits were pretty low, slumping in his seat as we do. I tried cracking a few jokes, but he barely cracked a smile.

With a sigh, I apologized. "Hey Evan, I'm sorry. I know all this with me and Elijah must be tough on you."

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Evan pulled himself together and gave a little shing. "Look, my booties messed up. That's on him. Not your fault, Ari "

Trying to keep it light, he added, "I still see you as a sister. He's still my brother. Nothing really changes for me

His words made me think of something. "Hey, you mentioned your great-grandpa?"

Elijah scratched his head "Oh, right. He said he wanted to talk to you sometime. Should I give him your number!

Sarprised, Lasked, "Wait You haven't already?"

With a righteous look, he shook his head. "Uh, no way! A girl's number isn't something you just hand out. Plus, I don't know if he's planning to actually help or if he'd just call to chew you out. "And what it he's blutting about helping you get that money back?"

bchuckled, amused by his loyalty. "You know, you're kinda malang sense. How about we just call him together over dinner?"

Evan nodded in agreement. So, I took him out for his favorite steak, and we called Jeremy. I listened as Evan spoke with him, giving a quick rundown

"Yeah, Grandpa She's cool to meet. And yeah, they're gonna try to settle this without going to court.

"I'm not too sure about that. You've gotta ask Ari that yourself."

After a beat. Elijah handed me the phone. I took a steadying breath. "Hello, Mr. Linden Senior

His voice was warm and a bit gravelly. "Ah, AL Good to finally talk with you."

"Yes. Mr. Linden Senior Evan said you wanted to have a chat?"

Mr. Linden Senior cleared his throat. "I heard you're trying to reach a settlement with Elijah. What kind of deal is he offering?"

I hesitated, unsure if I should share too many details. After all, this was still a confidential matter

Sensing my hesitation, Mr. Linden Senior chuckled softly. "I'm just an old shareholder curious about the situation. Nothing for you to worry about."

Still cautious, I let out a polite laugh. "Evan mentioned you could help me get what's mine. Was he serious about that?"

Mr. Linden Senior chuckled again, this time with confidence. "He's right. What you're owed will find its way back to you. You can trust me on that"

Then, he gave me a meeting time and an address and ended the call. I hung up, feeling a mix of curiosity and caurice.

Dran looked at me, raising a brow. "Do you think my great-grandfather could help you get back what's supposed to be yours?"

I shrugged. "I guess we'll see soon enough"

He thought for a moment, then said, "I could ask my mom about it and see what she knows."

I shook my head. "No. Don't ask her. If she hears about any of this from you, she'll lose it."

With a sigh, he lowered his gaze "Alright. Maybe you're right. Just drop me off at home the

I frowned. "What's with the sudden change?"

He tried to avoid my gaze but eventually caved. "I want Jocelyn out, Ari She's awful."

I looked him dead in the eye. "Listen, I don't want you getting into trouble on my account. You either keep up with your schoolwork, or we're done talking about this, Do you understand?" Evan saw how serious I was and reluctantly nodded. "Fine. I won't mess with her."

But life had a funny way of proving a point. As the old saying went, "Speak of the devil, and he shall appear. Well, it turned out to be one of those moments

No sooner had we finished talking about the Lindens-bum-there they were

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Just as we were about to slip out, Evan's mother, Mrs. Linden, strutted in through the main i

She was all dolled up big, bouncy curls, pale foundation, and lipstick as tadas aller engine. She was walking arm-in-arm with two other women, chatting and laughing loudly as they entered.

Trounght sight of her first and immediately grabbed Evan's arm

"It's time to go!" Lwhispered, pointing toward the back exit. -

Evan glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes went wide. He looked like he wanted to dive under the table,

Before we could escape, though, Mrs. Linden spotted us, and her face went from surprise to fury in two seconds.

"What are you doing here, Evan?" she snapped, practically stomping over to our table. "Are you skipping school again?"

Evan stopped in his tracks, stepping in front of me protectively. "What are you doing here?" he asked defiantly,

Mrs. Linden's gaze landed on me, by and full of contempt. She scoffed. "Ch, so Ms. York thinks she can just steal one of my sons and now wants to run off with my other one too? What a piece of work

My jaw nighbtened. "Mrs. Linden, Evan is your son. Don't you think insulting him because he's with me is insulting yourself?"

She looked taken aback for a moment but shot me a withering glance before turning her attention to Evan "You little brat, dropping out of school behind my back! Have you lost your mind?."

"I wouldn't have even known if your brother hadn't told me you were suspended. I heard you're in a private boarding school now. You didn't even discuss it with me beforehand! Do mean anything to you?"

Evan rolled his eyes, clearly fed up. "Oh, now you want to act like my mom? It's been days since I left school, and you're just finding out now? Go back to playing chess and leave alone."

Max. Linden's face flushed with anger at being called out in public "You're such a problematic child, and now you're hanging around this... this bitch who's trying to squeeze us dry! Don't tell me you're spilling our family secrets to her!" Evan named red, anger flashing in his eyes: "What could possibly say? You and the rest of the

by talk bad about Art enough. And you've got some nerve!

"You used to say she was nice to us when she gave us that 50 million dollar loan! Now that she's asking for it back, you can't stop running your mouth about her."

Mrs. Linden looked like she was about to explode, her hand flying to her chest. She stammered, unable to even form a coherent response.

Watching this all unfold, I felt a bitter, cold realization settle over me. Evan wasn't even grown yet, but even he could see what my time with his family had really been like. Mrs. Linden, out of arguments, grabbed him by the arm. "You're coming with me! I won't have you running around with this-this bitch."

Evan yanked his arm away. "I'm not going anywhere. You don't care about me. Why would I go back

He looked at me, desperate, silently asking for help.

na little more calmly?"

I sighed, stepping between them and gently pulling them apart. "Mrs. Linden, he's still a kid. Could you maybe try speaking to him a

Mrs. Linden looked at me with a ranting look. "Oh, and who are you to tell me boys talk to my son?"

Evan shot back, "Am I really your son?" "You barely even know me."

Max Linden's face contorted in anger. "I don't need to know you to be your mother! Where would even want to claim you? You'll never be half the man your brother is

Her words were sharp and brutal, and I saw Evan's shoulders sag. The anger in his eyes gave way to a dull, hurt expression

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Evan slumped behind me, his shoulders shrinking as if he was trying to disappear

"Mrs. Linden, he's just a kid. Could you ease up a little? Evan is a good boy"

I shot Mrs. Linden a hard look, my hand finding Evan's

shoulders and reassuringly seeing it

seed, her eyes full of judgment. "Oh, you sure like to stick your nose in, don't you"

"First, you were so desperate to marry my son, and now, you're so eager for a divorce. I heard you've already found someone new. Well, that explains why you were so eager to divorce Elijah.

Her two friends, who were dressed as primly as she was, shot me looks of disdain. They whispered to each other, eyes cutting like daggers, making the room feel suddenly stifling. Evan looked ready to snap back at his mom, but I quickly held him back. Trying to keep my cool, I said, "Mrs. Linden, we're in a public place, and making a scene here won't look good for anyone"

She scoffed, almost laughing. "Oh, you want to talk about dignity? Did Jonathan think about dignity when he came storming into our business, demanding we pay up? Did he care about dignity" when he ran off with that money?"

I suddenly understood the venom behind her words. When I was at my lowest, thinking my life was over, Jonathan must have confronted them, leaving them with a lasting grudge. That explained her hostility toward me. Not wanting to cause more of a scene, I motioned for the manager to guide us into a private room. Once inside, it was just the three of us—Mrs. Linden's friends opted to stay outside their codger, probably eager to gossip. Mrs. Linden crossed her arms, looking down her nose at me. "Listen, Ariana, don't push your luck. If you m

make this divorce too messy, don't blame me if a few of your 'skeletons' get ahead

Her words were sharp, but I wasn't about to back down. "Mrs. Linden, I've already been through the worst. I'm not afraid of your threats"

She hesitated, knowing that whatever "

she might try to weaponize wouldn't bother me anymore-and Jonathan's vengeful nature likely had her second-guessing too

She gave a frustrated buff. "Fine. As long as you don't go overboard, I'll see that Elijah offers you a little more. But don't expect any more than that."

I forced a polite smile and nodded. "Fair enough, Mrs. Linden. I won't go overboard. But I'd like to talk about Evan now."

Her brows shot up suspiciously, her gaze darting between us. "You're not taking my second son too, Ariana!"

Evan was fed up and fired back, "Watch your mouth! Ariis like a sister to me!"

Mrs. Linden just rolled her eyes, letting out a scott. I tried to explain that Evan simply y wanted to attend a private school, hoping for a chance at a decent education and a fresh start. didn't seem remotely interested though. In the end, she threw up her hands. "If you're so determined to stick your now where it doesn't belong, then line. Go ahead and take him"

you want. But if he gets into

She cast a cold, dismissive look at Evan, then mustered under her breath, "You sure didn't burn our like your brother. If it weren't for well, whatever. Do what your trouble, I'll make sure you're the one answering to the police And with that, the tossed a final, mocking look my way, "Guess you just can't stay

With a smug grin, she strode out of the room

den family, hub? Seems like you're still clinging to us."

Evan stood there, fists clenched, his eyes glistening with frustration. "Why didn't you argue back, Ari? She was so mean I don't even want to call her my mom anymore."

His shoulders shock, a raw disappointment evident in his voice.

My heart ached for him. No child should have to beg for a parent's love and attention, but it was painfully clear he'd never known any from her.

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Evan clenched his fists so tightly that they made a cracking sound. He looked at me with despair. "No, she won't. Because Linden op will go to Elijah, and I don't have any shares. To her, I'm just a burden." My heart ached, but I did my best to reassure him. After all, Evan warsilia kid, and belme king, he calmed down under roaring

He said firmly, "Ari, I'll go back to school and study hard. I'll make sure everyone who looks down on me eats their words in the end."

Inodded. "Good"

Evan stared at me for a long time before lowering his head and choking back tears. "You're my real sister. One day, Tilrepay you

I wanted to give ham a reassuring smile, but for some trasoni, my nose tingled, and I felt a lump in my throat.

The little boy who used to follow me around, calling me "ac", had finally grown up. He could now distinguish right from wrong and was starting to mature

However, what I didn't know was that, in another private room, Mrs. Linden had entered gracefully. Twowell-dressed ladies exchanged a glance and smiled before speaking.

"Mrs. Linden, we've noticed your daughter-in-law is quite the force-sharp-tongued and clever."

"Indeed, Mrs Linden. She seems like the type that's hard to manage. You'll have your hands tell when you get older.

They pretended not to know about the drama in the Landen family, using their words to price at Max. Linden,

Mrs. Linden sat down, letting out a cold laugh. "That Ariana is truly two-faced You all know how she proved to marry my son, don't you? She even served me tea multiple times, acting The two women chuckled quietly. They'd heard plenty of stories about the infamous eldest daughter-in-law of the Linden family.

1 had been a laughingstock among the Halton old money for years, though I didn't seem to realize i

My eccentric behavior during my five years of marriage had become a regular topic of gossip among the idle rich

But Mrs. Linden knew they were there to enjoy the spectacle, but she didn't mind. After all the subject of their ridicule was me, a foolish, love-obsessed woman she herself had no respect for...

With a smug smile, Mrs. Linden said, "Now, she's making a big fuss about divorcing my son as if she's capable of anything. Give it some time, and she'll come crawling back, begging for forgiveness."

One of the women couldn't resist commenting. "But isn't this time different? Even the mistress has gone public online. Can your daughter-in-law just let that slide?"

Another woman chimed in. "Exactly Mrs. Linden, I have to say, Elijah really is something, Handsome and capable-no wonder so many women are desperate to marry him."

Mrs. Linden's face lit up with pride. "Elijah is remarkable. Otherwise, why would that silly Ariana have broken ties with her family and throw money at us just to get married?"

She added in an exaggerated tone, "As for Jocelyn, I know her. She's quite a well-known figure, don't she? Men having mistresses is perfectly normal. If she's carrying a baby boy, I might consider letting her in. If it's a girl, well, she'll be raised elsewhere "We're not the kind of family that takes an just anyone "

The two women exchanged a glance at Mrs. Linden's outrageous comments. Her arrogance was absolutely unrivaled

They both agreed, fueling her pride even further. She was so absorbed in her gloating that she forgot about Evan's earlier rebellion.

Finally, Mrs. Linden declared, "Mark my words. Ariana is too foolish to last. Sooner or later, we'll throw her out not just out, but with her reputation in shambles."

Later that evening, Logan arrived at my place. When he saw Evan, he hesitated for a moment before recalling that he was the "plus one" I'd taken in

The two of them stood awkwardly in the living room, sizing each other up

I broke the tension "Mr. Wood is staying here to look after me

Evan shot me an annoyed look. "Al, at the age of 25 or 26, do you really need someone to look after you? Stop treating me like a kid. Are you two dating?" I grew more flustered. "Well L'

Disappointment and helplessness flickered in Evan's eyes

muttered, "I know my brother wronged you, but seeing you with another man still makes me uneasy."

Logan casually removed his suit jacket, went to freshen up, and came back in casual loungewear.

Evan pointed at him in disbelief. "Al, look at him! How can he wear something like that pre? Get him out of here!"

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Logan sat at the dining table, watching Evan throw a Eit with an amused smick

Trying to calm Evan down. I said. "Hey, you know this place actually belongs to him"

Evan froze, giving me a wide-eyed stare before storming off to the guest room I could hear him angrily tossing his things around in there.

turned to Logan with a sheepish grin. "He's just a kid, and he's only staying here for tonight. Please don't take it to heart."

Logan chuckled, clearly entertained. "I didn't expect anyone from Linden's family to be this entertaining. He's got some spirit-better than my own brother, that's for sure."

I let out an awkward laugh. "Wait. Did you just say your brother?"

"Yeah," he said with a nod "Norman was much more rebellious than this one ever was even now. Mostly causing trouble everywhere."

I couldn't help but ask, "What kind of trouble?"

"Problema with women." Logan let that last word hang, and I figured he didn't want to go into detail.

Just then, Evan walked out with a scowl. "Ari, Dean't figure out this problem."

I glanced at the page-lines upon lines of Bitonic text. My head immediately started spinning

Awkwardly, I said, "I think I might've forgotten....."

Evan stared at me in disbelief. "Ari, didn't you graduate from Halton University?"

Feeling cornered, I turned to Logan for help. My grades in college were pretty good, but it had been seven years since then. Now, just looking at a Britonic text gave me migraine. Logan reached out. "Let me take a look."

Evan scowled. "I don't need your help," he muttered before nudging me again, "Come on, Ari. This is dar tomon."

Logan simply said, "She forgot some of this over the years. But if you're dead set on someone helping, you could try me"

Skeptical, Evan crossed his arms. "Are you sure you know all of this?"

Logan pulled out his iPad and opened a report filled with pages of financial data-all in Brit

Evan looked at it, stunned. "Looks like a foreign language to me. That's crazy."

Then, after a pause, he asked, "Alright, but what about math?"

Logan scratched his chin. "It might be a bit out of my league."

Evan smirked, triumphant. "I knew it. No way you remember school math. You're too old for that."

Logan shrugged, "Actually, it's so basic that I can't even remember"

Annoyed, Evan grabbed his math worksheets and dumped them in front of Logan
Evan'ned red tried to keep his cool

"Ahight. Fine, Can you actually teach me?"

Logan rased a brow. "Prasonal tutoring doesn't come cheap, you know And last I checked, you're broke"

Evan scowled yanking his papers back. "it's fine. Damn capitalists calling me broke when you're not even going to teach me.

Unfazed, Logas made a quick call, then said, "Alright. I've lined up a tutor for you. They'll be here in two minutes."

Evan looked skeptical "Are you really this generous?"

Logan's smile was all politeness. "Not exactly. They'll charge you 200 dollars an hour though. Covers everything, Britonic, math, history, biology-whatever you need." "200 dollars? Are you kidding?" Evan exclaimed, nearly jumping out of his SINE

Logan adjusted his glasses. "Didn't you say you wanted to take your studies seriously? Nothing worthwhile comes free. You'll need to work for it."

Evan fell quiet, his expression growing determined. "Tine: ring on the tutor. And as for the money. I'll find a way to work and payi

He threw a fierce book Logan's way, "One day, I'll be more outstanding than Elijah, and then I'll make sure to protect Ari. If you mess with her, you'll have to answer to me." Logan's in widened. "Wow! You're so ambitious. I'll look forward to that."

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I asked, worried, "Why put so much pressure on him? He's still young'

Logan glanced down at his iPad casually, "Nah. He's already a teenager. Besides, we can't i

1 risk him turning out like another ungrateful member of the Linden family

His words rattled me

The arrangements for Evan were finalized. He would stay in the doses, but on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and weekends, he'd be at my place for t

On the surface, he and Logan kept their distance from each other, but I knew Logan didn't really mind having this "plus one" around.

He had Camden find a few top-notch tutors for Evan. Evan, for his part, dropped the rebellious athrude and buckled down to study. And as for me, I quietly waited for my first out-of-cout

for tutoring

settlement with Elijah

The day for our settlement meeting came quickly. For some reason, I had tossed and tured the entire night and showed up the next morning looking rough

1 gritted my teeth and forced meself awake with a strong cup of coffee

Lerlooked at me with concern. "Ms. Yerk, you don't look well. Maybe you should skip today?"

I shook my head, "I just want this over and done with 17 be fine"

After finishing my coffee, I felt a little more asake.

When it was about time, Carides

to pick me up. He explained, "Mr. Wood said you just need to trust Mr. Webb. He won't be attending the

session with you."

I nodded. Logan had to keep his distance. If he showed too much interest, it could complicate things. Besides, Ponathan would be going with me. I wasn't walking in defenseless

the courthouse mediation room, I saw Elijah already there with his lawyer. He looked rough too-his eyes ringed with exhaustion and his unshaven jaw dack with stubble He looked up at me, his gaze conflicted.

The mediation began with the mediator going over the process, and then each lawyer presented their client's proposals.

I'd already seen Elijah's proposal. Nothing too surprising. But he had added stipulation for me to publicly clear his name, stating that our split was mutual and that he hadn't cheated. I laughed, "Mr. Linden, do you think there's any point in clearing things up now?"

Elijah's voice was raspy. "Whether it makes a difference or not, I just want this mess over with. So, I hope you'll cooperate"

I firmly shook my head, "I won't agree."

A vein bulged on his forehead. "Ariana, don't push it."

I shot back, "What do you mean by me pushing it? Why don't you get Jocelyn to make a statement? Let her admit she was talking nonsense in the first place."

Elijah fell silent. After a long pause, he muttered, "Ja need to uphold her public reputa

I laughed bitterly. Right, I had no "reputation".

Jocelyn could throw a fit and delete her posts like nothing ever happened. But somehow, I was the one expected to clean up the mess so they could move on to their perfect little future. How Elijah saw my resistance. Frustrated, he sighed. "Fine. We'll leave that clause up for negotiation."

The meeting continued, with both sides clashing over my third proposal. Eventually, Elijah himself had to jump into the debate

He demanded, "Alana, I've already agreed to pay you back. Why are you making this so hard?"

Disappointment flickered in his eyes. "Are you trying to ruin me and Linden Group?"

I stayed silent

Mr. Webb spoke up politely, "Mr. Linden, please recognize a fact-five years ago, if it hadn't been for Ms. York's investment, Linden Group would've gone under," Elijah was stunned

Looking at his familiar but now distant face, memories flashed in my mind.

"A Linden Group would've gone bankrupt if it weren't for you. I'll take good care of you, Ari. I know you really love me."

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"Elijah, are you really serious?"

"I'm serious

"I swear, it never let you down, I'll...."

"What

My voice was as steady as

someone who betrays true love has to swallow a whole bottle of hot sauce. So, Elijah, don't let me down...

"Don't let me down."

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through my head, and I instinctively clutched my forehead

H

Seeing me like this, Elijah couldn't help but sneer, "Ariana, cut the poor-me act. You know I don't have that kind of money right now.."

Fighting through the pain. I looked at him and spoke slowly, each word deliberate, "Someone who betrays true love has to swallow a bottle of hot sauce" Elijah trees. "What?"

I laughed humorlessly, "You swore-if you ever let me down, you'd swallow a bottle of hot sauce!"

He fell silent, unable to respond.

I turned to Mr. Webb, "I'm not feeling well. You can handle the rest."

Without another word, I quickly walked out of the room, ignoring the startled look around me

Everything felt blurred, my head spinning so badly that I could barely see the path in front of me, I wasn't sure where I'd ended up-all I knew was that it was finally quiet "Ms. York are you done with the meeting?".

Through my fog vision, I saw Jocelyn approaching, bundled up with a mask covering everything but her eyes

Looking around, I realized I was by the back exit of the courthouse. I wasn't sure why she was there, but she seemed to be following w

Took a deep breath. "Ms. Cornell, I have nothing to discuss with you."

I moved to find a lounge area, but she stepped in front of me. "Ms. York, I really hope you'll accept Elijah's terms."

Feeling worse by the second, I replied curtly, "Ms, Cornell, whether I accept or not is between Elijah and me. It's got nothing to do with you."

She raised her chin, almost triumphantly, and said, "But I'm carrying Elijah's child. So, it has everything to do with me.

I glanced at her stomach, barely even showing, and felt my headache intensity. The discomfort was so overwhelming that I just wanted to leave. I pushed her aside. "Please move, Ms. Cornell

She stumbled back, watching my pale face with satisfaction. Then, she suddenly laughed "Ms. York, you still love Elijah, don't you? That's why this is so hard for you." A wave of irritation surged through me. My head throbbed with a pain that felt foreign as if something was clawing to the surface of my mind.

A sharp fear gripped me. I realized I was terrified-terrified that my memories would come rushing back and change everything.

No, I couldn't remember, I didn't want to return to being that Ariana-someone with no self-respect or dignity

I pushed her again, this time, my voice laced with impatience.

"Move! I'm not feeling well"

Behind me, Jocelyn continued

"I, Ms. York. You're still hung up on Elijah, which is why you can't handle this. But it's too late to take it all back now

taunting, her voice mocking. "Admit it,

"Elijah isn't coming back. You know, there's nothing like a child to sway a man's heart."

I gritted my teeth, barely resisting the urge to shut her up right then and there.

Seeing my silence, she went on, her tone laced with contempt. "Ms. York, do you even know how this baby came to be?"

I growled, "I don't want to know!"

Her eyes sparkled with satisfaction. Even with her face hidden behind the mask, her eyes betrayed the thrill of victory. She just couldn't resist rubbing it in my face.