

## Chapter 12 What's This All About Now

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Caiden leaned forward, bracing both hands on either side of the chair, caging Noreen between his solid frame and the dining table. His voice slid out in a low, quiet rasp. "Noreen, what's this all about now?"

The familiar bite of his cologne wrapped around her, the crisp citrus scent flooding her senses.

Her lashes lowered, and her gaze fell to his fingers gripping the chair's edges, knuckles paling with the pressure.

"Nothing," she murmured, her voice barely above a breath. "I'm just... tired, that's all."

Something flickered in Caiden's eyes, his pupils tightening like a storm gathering behind them.

In one swift movement, his hand closed around her chin, tilting her face upward.

The gesture carried a quiet dominance, his grip precise and deliberate. He held her just firmly enough to strip away any chance of escape, yet his touch never crossed into pain.

His eyes narrowed, a dangerous edge sharpening his voice. "Is this about Jessica?" he demanded, the menace in his tone threading through every syllable. "Jessica's only in that position because..."

"It's not about her," Noreen cut in, prying his hand from her chin with steady fingers. "This is my choice. You've always known this isn't where I belong."

Caiden straightened slowly, his throat tightening as his Adam's apple bobbed.

Without another word, he turned toward the floor-to-ceiling window, his

tall frame etched against the glittering city lights.

Beyond the glass, the skyline pulsed with life, but his gaze was flat, unreadable.

"Fine," he bit out at last, his voice glacial. "Since you're so set on leaving, the termination fee goes into the company account within three days. If not, I'll take legal action."

He pivoted on his heel and strode for the door.

As Noreen watched him pull away, her breath caught. "Caiden!" she called, her voice slipping past her composure before she could stop it.

In an instant, Caiden came to a halt, as though something had rooted him to the spot.

His jaw tightened, lips pressing into a hard, thin line. Just as he started to turn back, Noreen's trembling voice followed. "The last time at your family's house, your mother told us to get a divorce. She said I shouldn't keep you from being with Jessica. So I..."

"Oh, really?" Caiden's sharp laugh sliced through her words. "You're unbelievably naive, Noreen."

The chill in his tone left Noreen momentarily frozen. She stared at him, confused, but he didn't offer an explanation. He shrugged on his suit jacket with practiced ease and strode out, never once glancing back.

The door clicked shut with a muted finality that echoed louder than a slam. A few seconds later, the low rumble of the car engine drifted away, leaving the house achingly silent.

Only then did Noreen uncurl her hand. Four crescent-shaped marks were embedded in her palm where her nails had bitten into the skin.

Greta appeared hesitantly in the doorway, wringing her hands. "Mrs. Evans..."

"It's fine," Noreen rose to her feet, the curve of a brittle smile pulling at her lips. "Put the soup away. I've lost my appetite."

Greta lingered, worry etched into her face. Her lips parted more than once as if she wanted to say something but no words ever came.

Instead, she quietly cleared the table and left Noreen alone in the hollow stillness of the diningroom.

Her gaze lingered on the empty chair across from her, and for a heartbeat, she imagined Caiden sitting there again, the way he used to—reaching over to serve her a warm dish with that rare, gentle smile.

The rim of the porcelain plate still carried a fading trace of heat, a ghost of the warmth that once existed between them.

Her fingers drifted toward the chair, brushing over the smooth leather. It felt cold, stripped of the life that used to fill this room. They had once shared laughter and quiet meals here.

Back then, she had believed she'd finally found her place, a home wrapped in his quiet affection.

But after a single year, everything had turned unrecognizable.

She could have endured the emptiness if he had never cared. What made it unbearable was knowing how fiercely, how tenderly he'd loved her at the beginning.

She had once been held by that wholehearted warmth, and she couldn't shake loose from its ghost now that it was gone.

The thought alone sent a sharp ache cutting through her chest.

The harshest sorrow came not from being denied something precious, but from having it and then losing it.

She had known the sweetness of being cherished, so the hollow that followed felt endless.

Noreen drew her knees against her chest and folded herself into the chair, hiding her face in the crook of her arms.

For two relentless years, she had tried to win Caiden back.

But the story had already been written to its end.

She was exhausted—too tired to keep clinging to something that no longer wanted to be held.