

Chapter 3 Don't Ruin It

"I'm fine," Noreen answered, her tone so even it sounded more like a recording than a person.

Caiden finally lifted his eyes from the magazine. His cool gaze lingered on her bare face before sliding down to the wedding ring on her finger.

For the briefest second, she thought she caught a flicker of warmth softening his sharp features—but it vanished before she could be sure.

"We're visiting my parents this afternoon," Caiden noted flatly.

An instinctive urge to refuse knotted in her chest.

She recoiled at the thought of returning home, where Caiden's mother, Ivy Evans, filled the place with a quiet, suffocating contempt.

Before she could speak, he continued in a clipped voice, "I've already told them you'll be there. Don't ruin it."

The words she'd been about to say withered on her tongue.

Lowering her gaze, she stirred the porridge again, though the thought of eating made her stomach turn.

His gaze flicked over her again, a frown creasing his brow. "What's wrong with the porridge? Don't like it?"

"It's alright," she responded lightly. "Honestly, it's the best porridge I've ever had—perfect, really."

His lips parted as if a thought hovered on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it back.

Without a word, his long, elegant fingers slid a dark green gift bag across the table. Gold lettering shimmered on the velvet surface, catching the slant of morning light.

Noreen's eyes lingered on it, recognition tightening in her chest.

That logo belonged to the jeweler the women in the Evans family adored—new collections always sent straight to their estate for private selection.

She made no move to accept it. Instead, she brushed the bag open with a light touch, revealing a dark blue velvet box nestled inside.

"Put it on this afternoon when we head back. Otherwise, people might get the wrong idea and think I don't take care of you," Caiden muttered, his tone deliberately casual, as if none of it mattered.

Noreen's fingers tightened faintly against her palm.

"Alright," she answered in a whisper so soft it nearly disappeared in the quiet room.

He finally lifted his head, his cool gaze skimming over her bare collarbone before sliding away without a flicker of warmth.

"It's nothing special," he added stiffly, almost defensive. "Just something I picked up."

A brief silence stretched between them. Then, as if feeling it wasn't enough, he went on, "I was going to toss it anyway, so I figured I might as well hand it to you."

"Mm." Noreen's quiet response carried no weight, no warmth. She nudged the bag aside with the same detachment.

Sunlight spilled through the wide picture windows, carving a pale golden line that seemed to divide the room—and them.

Caiden studied the way her lowered lashes left a faint shadow against her cheeks. For a second, his hand lifted as if to touch her face, but the motion faltered halfway. His fingers curled back, and he reached for the coffee cup instead.

"Maybe try smiling more instead of wearing that gloomy look all day. It kind of kills the mood," he murmured at last.

A light breeze slipped through the window, stirring a loose strand of hair beside Noreen's ear as he rose to leave.

Only when his footsteps disappeared at the top of the stairs did Noreen ease open the jewelry box.

Inside lay an emerald necklace, its deep green gleam catching the morning light.

The design mirrored the piece Cheryl had worn most often, though she couldn't say for sure.

The gifts Caiden handed her were always thoughtless, and this one felt no different—just some trinket he'd been ready to toss, like a leftover freebie that didn't matter to him at all.

"Oh? Isn't that necklace one of Mrs. Cheryl Evans's old pieces?" Greta's curious voice drifted from behind, soft but clear.

She had worked for the Evans family for years, always at Cheryl's side. After Noreen married into the family, Cheryl had assigned Greta to take care of her.

Noreen blinked in surprise, caught off guard by the remark. "Really?"

Leaning closer, Greta examined the emerald carefully, then nodded with quiet conviction. "I'm certain. Mrs. Cheryl Evans had two identical necklaces, both passed down to Mr. Evans."

A hint of warmth flickered over Greta's features as she began to smile. "Since he's giving you this, it means he still holds you in his heart."

With a fleeting glance toward the staircase, Noreen held her tongue and allowed Greta to carefully fasten the necklace for her.