

Chapter 6 That Thing Doesn't Suit You

Caiden flicked a lighter and brought the flame to the tip of his cigarette, letting it dangle loosely between his fingers. "If you're that attached to Jessica," he said flatly. "Then just treat her like your own daughter-or better yet, move in with the Dales and stay with her. As for Noreen, if she bothers you that much, we'll stop troubling you altogether."

Noreen went rigid, a muted heat rising through her chest even as a knot tightened beneath her ribs.

Her gaze drifted to the burning cigarette balanced between Caiden's fingers, its ember pulsing faintly as a ribbon of bluish-white smoke veiled the clean lines of his face. His words, calm and detached, rang out all the clearer through the haze.

For the first time in two years, she heard him speak up for her.

Her fingers curled against her dress, crushing the fabric into a small, trembling knot in her palm.

Caiden's sudden defense felt like sunlight spilling through a crack in winter's chill-so warm it made her heart ache, yet so brief it hardly felt real.

Ivy's eyes swept across them, sharp and cold, before a derisive laugh slipped past her lips.

As she turned to go, her indifferent gaze slid over Noreen like ice. "Think carefully about what I said. You're clever enough to make the right choice."

As she walked away, Caiden ground the half-burned cigarette into the ashtray, irritation flickering briefly across his face.

His gaze slid to the shawl resting on Noreen's shoulders. "That thing doesn't suit you. It looks awful."

"It was your mother's idea, not mine. I hate it too. Here-take it back." Noreen slipped the shawl off and draped it across his arm with careless precision.

The sharp gesture drew a quiet laugh from Caiden, a humorless curve of his lips edged with resignation.

"Wait here. I'll grab you a coat, then we'll head back," he told her firmly.

She stayed where she was, eyes tracing the line of his retreating back.

She knew him too well. If he truly didn't care, he wouldn't have said a single word.

"Thank you," she murmured, the sound barely more than a wisp of air.

She hadn't expected him to hear her, yet he suddenly turned. Though his expression stayed cool, something flickered in his eyes when he noticed the faint redness at the corners of hers.

"It's nothing. This is between us. No reason for anyone else to interfere," he stated aloofly.

That simple phrase-between us-struck Noreen like a warm current against winter skin, softening her for a heartbeat before leaving a bitter sting in its wake.

Her gaze drifted to Caiden's hand, where the wedding band caught the light and shimmered softly. He'd been wearing it all this time.

Something heavy tightened in Noreen's chest, stealing her breath for a moment.

Once, he had treated her with a kind of tenderness that made her forget how to stand on her own.

Those memories still clung to her like shadows she couldn't shake.

The thought of him defending her just moments ago twisted inside her, turning warmth into something far more painful. She couldn't help wondering where that gentle Caiden had gone-why they couldn't simply return to how they used to be.

Driven by a restless need to know, Noreen quickened her pace and slipped inside, her steps echoing with unspoken questions.

But just as she crossed the threshold, she nearly collided with Jessica.

Jessica caught her by the arm, steadying her with a faintly amused smile. "What's got you running like that? If Ivy catches sight of you in this state, she'll blow up again. Noreen, you grew up with the Evans family-didn't you learn a little of her poise?"

Rigid as a statue, Noreen couldn't tear her eyes from the glittering necklace resting against Jessica's collarbone.

The gemstone was exactly the same design as the one around Noreen's neck.

"This necklace..." Her voice wavered, barely above a whisper.

Jessica brushed a fingertip over the jewel, her lips curving into a bright, self-satisfied smile. "Caiden's the one who gave it to me. He told me it's been passed down in the Evans family."

She leaned in, lowering her voice as her finger flicked lightly toward Noreen's chest. "Oh, and your necklace..."

Noreen instinctively shifted back a step. The gemstone resting against her skin suddenly felt unbearably heavy, squeezing the breath from her chest.

Whatever warmth had flickered to life moments earlier bled away, leaving a chill burrowed deep beneath her ribs.


It hadn't been affection. Just a polite gesture dressed up as kindness.

A low, bitter laugh escaped her lips before she could stop it.

The questions she'd wanted to ask and the fragile courage she'd gathered dissolved like mist, leaving her throat dry and her voice gone.

The sound of Caiden's even footsteps reached her from the end of the corridor, but she pivoted on her heel and walked away without a backward glance.



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