

Chapter 7 You Don't Need To Wait Up For Me

Jessica's gaze trailed after her retreating figure, a sharp curl lifting the corner of her mouth.

She unclasped the necklace at her throat with deliberate ease. "You really can't tell a fake, can you, Noreen?" she drawled. "How could someone like you ever measure up to Caiden?"

Caiden stepped outside and saw the quiet spot where Noreen was supposed to be.

His brow creased, a shadow slipping over his face as his grip on the coat tightened.

At that moment, Jessica came into view, her words flowing in an even, velvety tone. "Caiden, Noreen said she wasn't feeling well and went home. She asked you to take me back."

A cold, humorless smile curved Caiden's mouth. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the coat aside as if it meant nothing. "Let's go."

Jessica's lashes fluttered as she slipped her hand through his arm. "I think I twisted my ankle just now. It's a little sore, Caiden. Can you give me a hand?"

Caiden's jaw tightened, lips pressing into a thin line. He didn't bother replying.

Halfway down the road, Noreen suddenly remembered she'd left her bag behind.

She hurried back-only to see Caiden and Jessica walking together the moment she stepped through the doors.

Jessica was practically draped over his arm, their closeness leaving no space for anyone else to slip between them.

"Noreen? I thought you were gone. What brought you back?" Jessica's chirpy voice carried a hint of smugness as she stayed glued to Caiden's side.

"I forgot my bag," Noreen answered evenly, her tone stripped of all emotion.

Without sparing either of them a glance, she brushed past them in silence.

"Noreen," Caiden's voice cut through the air just as she moved past. His gaze swept over her before landing on her neck.

"Where's your necklace?" he demanded sharply.

Noreen hesitated for a heartbeat but kept her back to him. "I took it off," she responded, her voice flat and unbothered.

Caiden's lips tightened before a faint, cold smirk curved the corners. His arm slid easily around Jessica's waist, pulling her a little closer.

"You don't need to wait up for me tonight. I've got things to take care of," he drawled.

"I wasn't planning to," Noreen replied as she strode ahead, her heels striking the floor with quiet finality.

In that moment, the truth settled in like a weight on her chest-Caiden's earlier defense hadn't come from love. It had been nothing more than the possessiveness of a man who refused to let outsiders meddle in what he still considered his. Whatever warmth had once existed between them had long since burned out, leaving only the hollow shell of ownership behind.

By the time she stepped outside again, bag in hand, the car was gone. Caiden and Jessica had vanished into the night.

Noreen drew out the necklace from her pocket. The gemstone still gleamed under the porch light, its beauty unchanged. Yet the sight of it no longer stirred anything in her-just as she no longer held any place of meaning in Caiden's heart.

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Exactly as Caiden had said, with that same effortless detachment, he didn't bother coming home that night.

Noreen lay in bed early, the room shrouded in silence, because she had no reason to wait. Tomorrow would come either way.

Monday morning brought a crisp chill. Noreen arrived at the office ahead of everyone else, clutching her coffee like a shield. She had no family, no one to lean on-her parents had died young, and Cheryl, the only person

who had ever cared for her, was gone too. Over the years, she had buried herself in work, as if the steady rhythm of deadlines could stitch together the hollow places in her chest.

The moment she pushed through the revolving doors of the Evans Group building, a strange current stirred in the air.

In the elevator, colleagues traded furtive glances. Some whispered behind their hands, others pretended not to stare. A few young women looked downright pleased, their eyes sparkling with smug delight she couldn't quite ignore.

Noreen tightened her grip on the stack of documents, her knuckles paling even as her face stayed composed. When the elevator finally slid open on the thirty-second floor, a rush of cool air brushed against her skin.

The moment she stepped out, Leyla Barton, her assistant, came hurrying toward her, worry etched across her features. "Ms. Fowler, you should... brace yourself first," she murmured, voice low and uneasy. Fowler was Noreen's original family name.

Coming to an abrupt stop, Noreen raised her gaze.

Leyla bit down on her lip, then leaned closer to whisper in her ear.

The words hit like a blow to the chest. Noreen's breath snagged, and her fingers curled so tightly into her palm she could feel her nails bite into the skin.

A faint smile curved her lips—thin and brittle. "Got it," she replied with quiet composure.

In her office, the soft wash of Monday sunlight spilled across her desk. The untouched coffee beside her had grown cold for the third time that morning.

Her gaze locked on the promotion announcement glowing on her computer screen. Fingers hovered above the keyboard but refused to move.

The email had arrived at three in the morning, sent to the entire company.

Where "Noreen Fowler" was supposed to be, only "Jessica Dale" appeared now.

A soft knock broke the stillness. "Ms. Fowler..." Leyla stepped inside clutching a stack of documents, her voice laced with unease. "These need Miss Dale's signature, but she hasn't come in yet."

A faint tremor ran through Noreen's fingertips which were resting against the desk.

Only forty-eight hours earlier, her name had still been etched on the office door as "Deputy Director of the Project Department." Everyone had assumed the moment the Southtown project wrapped, she'd step into the general director's chair-a position Caiden had personally promised her.

In the break room, coworkers had already started treating her with a new, cautious respect. Riley Harper from HR had even asked, in a low conspiratorial tone, what color she wanted for her new office chair.

And now, in the span of a single night, all of it had been stripped away.