

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 11:

Cathryn slipped into a white shirt that hung well past her thighs, the hem brushing her bare legs with every step.

Water still clung to her hair, dampening the thin cotton until it clung lightly to her frame. The collar sat loose, shifting with her movements. The moment Andrew saw her, something hot and sharp stirred in his chest.

She padded across the cold floor toward him, silent except for the soft drip of water. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, unfocused, as if she were searching for something.

Andrew stood at the end of the hallway, unexpectedly still, and watched as she drifted straight into him. Her trembling form pressed against his chest, her skin still warm from the shower. He tensed immediately.

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Cathryn lifted her gaze, weary and unfazed. "Didn't realize you were home, Mr. Brooks."

Andrew caught her chin between his fingers. “Trying to seduce me?”

She shook her head. “I just wanted to dry my hair and go to bed. I didn’t see where I was going and bumped into you. That’s all.”

After the shower, she’d gone searching for the hair dryer, drowsy—and walked straight into him.

“Don’t move,” Andrew said, sliding his fingers into her wet hair.

As he did, the shirt shifted, and the fabric pulled just enough to expose what lay beneath—scars etched across her shoulders and back, some faded, some still stark.

A shadow crossed Andrew’s face. “Who did this to you?”

Cathryn hugged the shirt tighter, covering herself. “Those are from when I was a child. My father did it.”

Since childhood, Jordyn had always found a way to frame her, and Richard had never cared to hear Cathryn’s side. He’d believed every lie Jordyn fed him, taken up the whip, and lashed out at Cathryn instead.

Andrew's voice dropped, thoughtful and edged. "You're smart. Why didn't you fight back?"

A wry smile tugged at Cathryn's lips. "They held my mother's fate in their hands. Fighting back would have put her in even more danger."

Back then, fear for her mother had kept her quiet. But now, with nothing left to lose, she wasn't afraid of them anymore.

Andrew's gaze sharpened. "Is that why you want me in your life? To get revenge for your mother?"

Cathryn lifted an eyebrow. He was perceptive—he'd guessed her motive with unsettling accuracy. "I assume you have your own reasons for marrying me. I'm not the only one with something to gain, am I?"

He tipped her chin higher, holding her gaze. "Maybe it's mutual use. But remember this—a contract marriage is still a marriage. From here on out, I'm the only man you call husband. That includes dropping any other names from your lips."

The words jolted her back to the banquet, to the moment she'd cried for Liam and let the word "sweetheart" slip in front of everyone. Somehow, Andrew already knew.

She met his eyes evenly. “I honor agreements. After we register our marriage, you’ll be the only one I call my husband.”

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Chapter 12:

Andrew’s stare deepened, his tone dropping. “From the moment we slept together, you became my woman.”

Cathryn hesitated, uncertainty flickering across her face. “Legally, I’m still tied to Liam. Until the divorce is final, the law still calls him my husband.”

Before she could say another word, Andrew pulled her in, his grip unyielding around her waist. “Legal paperwork means nothing to me. Right now, in every way that counts, you belong to me. Keep boundaries in mind when you interact with others.”

He put pointed emphasis on “in every way.”

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Heat rushed to her cheeks. She had never heard anyone lay claim with such calm certainty. There was no romance in it—only a cold, clear bargain. Their bodies might meet, but their hearts would never be part of it. She’d assumed they would simply register the marriage and keep their distance. She hadn’t expected him to be this commanding.

Cathryn lowered her gaze. “All right.”

She had already spent three years in a loveless marriage, untouched. Living one more year without sleeping with a man was hardly a hardship.

Andrew studied her, his expression unreadable. “I’m not Liam. Don’t waste your time playing games, and don’t try to reel me in. I won’t fall for you.”

Draped in his shirt, half-dressed, appearing in front of him—pretending to stumble into his arms, then letting him glimpse the whip marks across her back—Andrew was convinced every move she made had an agenda.

Inside, Cathryn burned to protest, but she swallowed the words. He hadn't shown his face in this place since she moved in. She'd honestly believed he didn't live here at all, so slipping into his shirt to hunt for a hair dryer hadn't seemed risky. How was she supposed to know he would suddenly appear tonight?

She tightened her grip on the collar. "I had nothing else to change into. I grabbed whatever was there. Your shirts were the only thing in the closet."

The movement drew his attention to the curve of her chest. Andrew's gaze flicked away at once. "I've asked Margaret Lewis to handle anything you need. Tell her if you want something."

"Thank you," Cathryn said softly, then turned and retreated into the bedroom without another word.

Her scent lingered in the hallway—a soft trace that clung to the air and wrapped around Andrew, stirring the memory of her body pressed against his. The craving he'd tried to bury threatened to boil over.

Andrew strode into the bathroom and turned the water as cold as it would go, trying to shock the want out of his system. While drying off, something slipped to the floor and landed at his feet.

He bent to pick it up. His fingers closed around a scrap of white lace.

Her lingerie.

A hard knot formed in his throat as desire surged back, hotter than before. “Damn it.”

So much for the cold shower.

He yanked open the bathroom door and called out to Margaret, “Set up a different bedroom for me.”

Gavin, assuming they were already husband and wife, had sent Cathryn straight into Andrew’s bedroom. Now, thanks to that mistake, Andrew found himself exiled to the guest room.

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Chapter 13:

He lay staring at the ceiling, every thought circling back to Cathryn. Maybe she'd left that lace behind on purpose. Maybe her innocent look was just another move—bait to see how far she could push him.

But Andrew prided himself on his composure. He was in control, always. No woman—no matter how tempting—would ever turn him inside out.

In the morning, Margaret slipped in for routine cleaning. The moment her eyes landed on the trash can and the crumpled, damp tissues inside, she paused.

She didn't need to guess.

Heat crept up her face, and she quietly went about her work, pretending she hadn't noticed a thing.

Cathryn blinked awake and opened her bedroom door, stopping short when she saw her bra hanging from the doorknob.

For a second, her thoughts scattered. Last night, exhausted and half-asleep, she'd showered and somehow forgotten it in the bathroom.

"Margaret, did you take my bra from the bathroom?" Cathryn asked.

Margaret shook her head with a gentle smile. "No, ma'am. I never saw it."

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Heat rushed to Cathryn's face. If Margaret hadn't picked it up, then her soon-to-be husband must have been the one to hang it there. Her cheeks burned so fiercely she wished the floor would open and swallow her whole.

"Where's Mr. Brooks?" Cathryn asked.

"He left before sunrise," Margaret replied.

Cathryn nodded. So he wasn't one of those idle heirs. He'd already gone to work while she was only just getting out of bed.

Margaret hesitated, then ventured carefully, “Forgive me for asking, ma’am, but why don’t you and Mr. Brooks share a room?”

From Margaret’s perspective, Andrew was young, handsome, and clearly in his prime. Yet with his wife under the same roof, he still chose to lock himself away in the guest room night after night. It struck her as almost tragic.

Caught off guard, Cathryn fumbled for an answer, her face growing even hotter. “We had a fight. That’s all.”

Margaret chuckled knowingly. “Oh, young couples argue all the time. A little closeness usually helps patch things up.”

Cathryn wanted to disappear. There was no love between her and that man. Their one night together had been a drunken accident—nothing more. Now that sobriety had returned, she couldn’t imagine anything like that happening again.

“Margaret, would you mind picking up some new toiletries for me? And some pajamas—please, just the plain kind. Nothing flashy or see-through,” Cathryn said.

Meanwhile, in the CEO’s office at Brooks Group headquarters, Andrew slouched at his desk, rubbing his temples, looking worn out and utterly spent.

Just then, his phone buzzed. His grandmother’s name flashed on the screen.

Amanda's voice came through, warm and pleased. "Andrew, I hear from Gavin that you've finally brought your future bride home?"

Andrew didn't bother hiding his irritation. "What kind of grandmother gets her own grandson drunk and plants a woman in his bed?"

Amanda laughed. "You've avoided every eligible woman for years. If I want to see a great-grandchild before I leave this world, I have to take matters into my own hands."

"Did you ever consider that I might not like her?" Andrew's voice turned icy.

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Chapter 14:

“I chose that girl after looking through every option,” Amanda replied, utterly certain. “Give her a chance. You’ll come around.”

Andrew’s scowl deepened. A married woman? That was the best his grandmother could find?

Amanda continued, “Pick a day and get your marriage certificate sorted. I’ll be back from my trip soon, and then we’ll give you two a proper wedding.”

Without waiting for his answer, she ended the call.

At that moment, the office door swung open and Karl stepped in, a teasing grin on his face as he took in Andrew’s exhausted look. “Mrs. Brooks thought you’d sworn off women for good. Guess she can stop worrying now.”

Karl couldn’t suppress his smile. Only a few days in, and from the way Andrew looked, anyone would assume Cathryn had been keeping him up every night. Amanda’s wish for a great-grandchild suddenly didn’t seem so far-fetched.

Andrew's eyes sharpened, a quiet threat in his tone. "Karl, tell me—who signs your paycheck?"

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Karl's grin faltered. "Of course, it's you, Mr. Brooks. But you should know your stepmother has been making moves behind the scenes. If she had someone drug you again and slip another woman into your bed, it would be a disaster."

Ever since Jorge fell into a coma, Cara had secured a seat at the Brooks Group's boardroom table. For years, she had done everything she could to hold her ground against Andrew.

Before, Andrew had largely lived overseas. Cara's reach abroad had been limited, and that limitation had kept her from tightening the noose too quickly—until she staged a crash, hoping to end him in a foreign land.

Andrew had walked away from the trap unharmed. After that, he deliberately spread rumors that the accident had left him disfigured and crippled. With the story painting him as unfit to inherit Brooks Group, Cara had finally backed off.

Now that Andrew had returned to Olekgan—his legs working perfectly well, his face certainly not disfigured—those rumors wouldn't hold forever. The moment Cara learned the truth, she would strike again.

And because Cara was his legal stepmother, she had leverage. Trying to fend off her schemes at every turn felt almost impossible. Karl's warning wasn't paranoia—it was reality.

“Any update on locating Kestrel?” Andrew asked, keeping his tone even.

Karl shook his head. “Nothing substantial. We only know Kestrel is hiding somewhere in Olekgan. Our team hasn't slept—just waiting for Kestrel to log in again. The moment it happens, we'll trace the signal.”

Andrew gave a curt nod.

Karl turned to leave, but Andrew stopped him. “Call my grandmother. She has a connection to a physician who specializes in treating scars. Get whatever prescription he recommends.”

Andrew hadn't meant to care about Cathryn, but the memory of how rough he'd been that first night clung to him, refusing to fade. He'd assumed she knew her way around intimacy—a married woman, after all. But that night had made the truth obvious: she had been a virgin.

Andrew hated leaving debts unpaid. If he could help erase the scars on her back, he would consider it a way to make up for his own harshness.

Elsewhere, Cathryn had been tiptoeing around the house for days, careful to avoid her future spouse. Keeping her distance was safer than giving him another reason to accuse her of trying to seduce him.

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Chapter 15:

That night, someone knocked on her door.

Not expecting it to be him, Cathryn opened it a crack—only to find the very man she’d been trying to avoid standing in the doorway.

She wore plain black pajamas, buttoned high at the neck and falling to her ankles. Only her face and hands were visible.

Andrew's mouth pulled into a faint scowl. "What's with the full armor? Are you really that worried I'll try something?"

Cathryn stared at him, incredulous. She showed a little skin, and he accused her of seducing him. She covered herself, and he accused her of fearing his advances. There was no pleasing this man.

Annoyance edged into her voice. "Did you need something, Mr. Brooks?"

Andrew tossed a small bottle into her hands. "Use this before bed. In five nights, the scars will fade."

Her pulse jumped at his words. Was he actually showing concern for her?

"Don't wear this kind of ugly clothing in my presence again," he added, shooting her pajamas one last disdainful glance before turning away.

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Cathryn stomped her foot in frustration. This man was impossible—temperamental, unreadable.

Fine, then. From now on, she would stop caring what pleased or displeased him and simply be herself.

With an indignant huff, she peeled off the pajamas and slipped into a loose nightdress instead.

Stretched out on her bed, she rolled the delicate porcelain bottle between her fingers, tracing the raised “C” etched into its surface.

A memory surfaced—her mother’s friend, Adrian Clarke, a brilliant but reclusive physician who specialized in treating scars. When word of Cathryn’s injuries had reached him, he had sent her scar-fading medicine, but she had always declined politely, determined to keep the scars as reminders of everything she and her mother endured in the Moore estate.

Adrian traveled constantly and was nearly impossible to track down. Yet somehow, her soon-to-be husband had managed to obtain Adrian’s medicine in such a short time.

Still, she thought, the one who truly needed this bottle wasn’t her.

It was Jordyn.

After Jordyn was discharged from the hospital, she followed Liam home.

Once they were inside, Jordyn went straight to him and settled on his lap, her arms slipping around his neck as naturally as breathing. “Honey, I’m so glad we don’t have to keep our relationship a secret anymore. We can finally be together openly,” she whispered.

Instead of letting his hands roam over her with the unmistakable hunger he usually had, Liam only looked down and tugged her clothes lower. The lash marks cut across her neck and chest, and a shadow of distaste flickered over his face. He pushed her back—not violently, but with a firm, deliberate distance. “You’re injured,” he said, flat and final.

Jordyn froze. Normally, when she draped herself over Liam, he couldn’t resist pulling her beneath him—nothing, on ordinary days, would stop them from ending up in bed.

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Chapter 16:

“Liam... do you not want to have sex with me anymore?” she asked. The question was fragile, its edges trembling with tears.

But Liam still wasn't aroused. The lashes ran over her collarbone and across her chest, the raw flesh ridged and raised. The sight of the scars disgusted him, and he had no patience to comfort her.

“Wait until you've healed,” Liam muttered, turning away as he retreated into the spare bedroom. The door closed softly behind him, the sound landing like a verdict.

Jordyn broke into sobs. She grabbed her phone and, with trembling fingers, dialed her mother's number. The line connected after two rings. Her words spilled out between gasps. “Liam won't touch me anymore. He's repulsed by my scars.”

Zoe soothed her with the steady, iron patience Jordyn had always depended on. “Don't stress. I'll take you to the best doctors in Olekhan. We'll get rid of those scars.”

They wasted no time, visiting every specialist the city could offer. Each verdict came in a different voice, but the message was the same: ordinary lash wounds might fade with time and treatment, but scars made by a barbed whip like that were carved into the body like a declaration. They could be softened. They could be improved. They could not be erased.

Outside the consultation room, Jordyn wept so hard she couldn't draw a full breath. "Mom, how will Liam ever marry me now that he won't even bonk with me because of my scars?" she asked, the words raw.

Zoe's face hardened, as if that name had always been a wedge between them. "It's all that bitch Cathryn's fault!" she spat.

A doctor, pity softening his professional tone, spoke carefully. "There is still one possibility—the reclusive physician, Dr. Clarke. His remedies work miracles. He's the only man who might erase scars like yours. But he is notoriously eccentric. He will only ever prepare each remedy once."

Hope flared so bright Jordyn could almost taste it. "Where can we find Dr. Clarke?" she asked, her voice brittle with excitement.

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The doctor shook his head. "He wanders constantly. Finding him would be nearly impossible."

A cool voice cut through the air. “No need to locate Dr. Clarke. Dr. Clarke’s potion is right here.”

Cathryn stepped forward as if she’d materialized from the air itself. She moved with casual, practiced grace and drew a small porcelain bottle from her bag.

Jordyn’s eyes lit instantly; the world narrowed to that little vessel. Then her mouth twisted into a sneer. “Don’t try to fool me. As if you could get your hands on Dr. Clarke’s potion.”

The doctor adjusted his glasses, fingertips pressing briefly to his temples. His eyes widened, recognition sliding into disbelief. “That is Dr. Clarke’s potion. All his remedies come in the same kind of vial, each marked with a single letter.”

Jordyn snapped her gaze back to Cathryn. “How could you possibly secure it?”

Cathryn twirled the bottle between two fingers, the motion playful and precise. “On my own? I couldn’t. But my man could.”

A cold thread unspooled down Jordyn’s spine. Had Cathryn really found herself a powerful backer?

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Chapter 17:

Zoe stepped forward, forcing a smile that never reached her eyes, and extended her hand to snatch the vial from Cathryn. “Jordyn is your sister. I knew you wouldn’t stand by and watch her struggle with those scars.”

But Cathryn dodged Zoe’s hand by flicking the bottle up into the air. “There is only one dose in the world,” she said. “If it breaks, her scars will stay with her forever.”

With a languid rhythm, Cathryn kept tossing the bottle, each arc higher than the last.

Zoe’s and Jordyn’s gazes tracked every rise and fall, dread tightening with each toss.

Jordyn's stomach twisted. If she bore those marks for life, Liam would, in all probability, never make out with her again. Marriage to him would recede into a future she might never reach. If removing those scars meant winning him back, she told herself she would pay any price.

Clenching her teeth, Jordyn dropped to her knees with a sound like something small giving way. "Cathryn, please—give it to me," she begged.

Jordyn had her own calculation. Bettina had always been softhearted; surely her daughter would be the same. She imagined Cathryn softening, the bottle handed over with a wry smile, the fragile truce of sisters restored. She pictured the remedy gliding over her skin, the scars smoothing like rumpled cloth laid flat, her world returning to a gentler geometry. After that, she would continue to make Cathryn's life hell and rob her of anything she valued.

Cathryn's eyes hardened into shards of ice. She looked down at Jordyn as if from an unreachable height. "So you want me to hand over the bottle to heal your scars so you can keep getting laid with my husband behind my back?"

Jordyn hadn't expected Cathryn to be so unbending. Her rare pleading and tears slid off Cathryn like water off polished steel.

Fury snapped Jordyn upright. She jabbed a trembling finger toward Cathryn's face. "You can't even keep your husband in line? You're useless!"

This time, Cathryn didn't bother responding. With a smirk, she tossed the delicate porcelain bottle high into the air, her wrist loose—almost careless. Then she made no move to catch it.

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The white porcelain bottle crashed against the tiles with a sharp, echoing crack. Shards fanned across the floor, and the brown medicinal liquid spread like a dark stain, winding into the grout lines.

Eyes wide, Jordyn lunged forward, dropping to her knees. Her hands scrabbled desperately, trying to salvage even a tiny amount of the precious scar-fading potion.

But Cathryn moved faster. She lowered her foot and pressed her heel into the largest puddle of the spreading liquid, grinding until the fragments of broken porcelain scraped faintly beneath. The potion, already fouled by dust and dirt, became even more unusable.

A beat too late, Jordyn managed only to seize Cathryn's ankle, her face contorted in a scowl.

Cathryn covered her mouth with one hand in a mock gesture of shock. She looked down at Jordyn, who clung to her like a beaten dog. "Guess you were right," she murmured, her voice soft as a knife. "I really am useless. Couldn't even keep hold of a bottle."

Standing nearby, the doctor shook his head with weary resignation. “Dr. Clarke never prepared the same remedy twice,” he said, his sigh heavy with finality. “What a waste.”

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Chapter 18:

“Cathryn Moore!” Jordyn’s scream cracked, raw with desperation.

Cathryn lifted her foot, her lips curving into something too thin to be a smile. “If you’re that desperate, then strip yourself bare. I’ll kick you, and maybe you can scrape a few drops from the sole of my shoe.”

A ripple ran through the crowded corridor. Nurses looked away; patients leaned forward with scandalous curiosity. If not for the crowd, Jordyn might have actually done it. This might truly be her last chance.

“The potion is already drying,” Cathryn added, tipping her heel to inspect the faint residue clinging to it. “Too late for regrets.”

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Jordyn’s eyes were rimmed red, the whites threaded with rage. Pride crumbled. She had dropped to both knees in full view of strangers, her shaking body bowed before Cathryn—who had just destroyed the one thing she desperately needed.

Zoe’s voice sliced into the scene, sharp with scorn. “Cathryn, you have more lash marks on your body than Jordyn ever will. Without that remedy, you’ll never erase them either. Do you think your loaded backer will still want you once he sees what’s beneath your silk gowns?”

Andrew’s face flickered through Cathryn’s mind. That night had been cloaked in darkness. He hadn’t seen the scars on her back. If he had, he never would have touched her.

Cathryn let out a cold snort. “Maybe so. But I do know this—Liam no longer desires Jordyn.”

The sentence cut like a blade.

Jordyn's frame shuddered violently, her voice splintering. "You'll pay for this, Cathryn!"

Cathryn's gaze sharpened, a chill curve at the corner of her mouth. "As far as I can see, you're already paying."

The humiliation was too much. Jordyn's body gave out, collapsing to the floor as she fainted.

Gasps rippled through the corridor. But Cathryn simply turned and walked away without a backward glance. She left the hospital with the same calm composure with which she had entered.

That night, steam still clung to Cathryn's skin as she stepped out of the shower.

Andrew was there.

Startled, Cathryn took a step back, and Andrew's gaze dropped, tracing the delicate fabric of her nightdress. She blurted out, the words spilling over one another in a rush, "Mr. Brooks, this gown is loose, knee-length, perfectly modest. It shows nothing. It's only normal sleepwear. I wasn't trying to tempt you. There's nothing here for you to misunderstand."

Andrew's eyes darkened, his silence heavy. Then his voice—low, commanding—cut through the steam. “Turn around.”

Confused, she obeyed.

The moment she faced away, his hand caught the nightdress and dragged it down from her shoulders.

Cold air licked across her back. Whip marks—raw, uneven—ran in cruel lines over her skin.

Her breath snagged. Panic surged. She clutched her arms across her chest, her voice sharp with fear. “What are you doing?”

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 19:

Andrew's voice cut through the silence, laced with irritation. "You didn't use the scar-fading potion I gave you, did you?"

Cathryn hesitated. "It broke. I dropped it—by accident."

She knew how rare Adrian's remedies were. Even the Brooks family had to pull strings for something like that. Anyone would be furious to see it wasted.

In a flash, Andrew's hand closed around her throat, firm but not cruel. "Was it really an accident, or did you smash it on purpose?"

After just a few days with him, Cathryn had already realized how sharp he was. Whatever she did, he seemed to see straight through her. A shaky breath slipped out. "I broke it. On purpose."

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His thumb pressed against the pulse in her neck, his gaze burning with anger. He rarely showed anyone real concern. The first time he'd done so for a woman, she had thrown his gesture away.

"Give me a reason," he demanded, his voice cold and even.

Cathryn met his stare, her voice barely above a whisper. "I wanted revenge on Jordyn. That's all."

Andrew's jaw tightened in frustration. "You'd rather live with those scars forever just to get back at her?"

Tears threatened, but she refused to look away. "Yes."

He ground his teeth. "All this because she took your husband?"

An icy laugh bubbled up. "That scumbag? He isn't worth the trouble."

His grip loosened, then fell away from her neck.

Calmly, she smoothed her nightdress, her eyes lowered. “Thank you for the scar-fading potion. But my scars are my burdens alone. You don’t need to concern yourself with them.”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and closed the bedroom door behind her, leaving him standing alone in the hall.

During his long stay abroad, Andrew had survived countless attempts on his life and brushed past death more times than he could count, always certain nothing could truly shake him. But seeing her bare back—each scar a deliberate strike that spoke of cruelty, not discipline—rattled him more than he cared to admit. What kind of strength did it take for someone so seemingly delicate to survive that?

Andrew grabbed his phone and called Karl. “Dig into Cathryn’s history. I want every detail about her life in the Moore house.”

Meanwhile, Jordyn, afraid her scars would deepen Liam’s distaste for her, returned to her family’s estate, not daring to visit Liam’s place again until she healed. She threw herself onto the.....bed, tears running down her cheeks as her mind drifted again to the scars marring her skin.

Zoe, hardened by a lifetime of navigating every kind of situation, offered only a cold remark. “If I’d let myself fall apart as easily as you do, you would never have enjoyed life as the Moore family’s pampered daughter.”

Through ragged sobs, Jordyn managed, “Liam won’t come near me anymore, Mom. What am I supposed to do?”

Zoe's gaze sharpened. "You're not after Liam—you want the title of Mrs. Watson."

Jordyn's crying stopped.

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Chapter 20:

"Starting tomorrow, wear high collars to hide the scars. If Liam asks, tell him you're using Dr. Clarke's scar-fading potion and the marks are already fading. Give it three weeks, get him to register the marriage, and you'll have the Watson title."

Jordyn frowned. "But the scars aren't going away. He'll see the truth eventually."

Zoe's look was razor-sharp. "Dr. Clarke is still alive—he's just lying low. Once you're Mrs. Watson, money and gifts will draw him out. By then, you'll get the scar-fading potion you need. End of story."

Jordyn wiped away the last of her tears, a sly smile creeping across her face. Her mother was right—she'd let Cathryn get under her skin and lose her composure. She'd already lied

boldly to forge a close connection with Kestrel. There was no limit to what she could pull off. And her mother had lied and schemed her way into the Moore family, turning herself into Mrs. Moore and securing a life of comfort. Why couldn't she do the same?

Zoe's jaw tightened. "I underestimated Cathryn. I expected her to inherit her mother's soft personality—nothing more than a doormat to push around. Turns out she's got a cunning streak I didn't see coming."

That sparked a memory for Jordyn. "The night Cathryn stormed into the Olekgan Hotel to catch Liam cheating, she ended up staying there herself. She didn't leave until the next morning. I had someone dig around. The room was booked under a man's name. I couldn't get my hands on the security tapes, though."

A dangerous glint lit Zoe's eyes. "So you're telling me she spent the night alone with some man?"

Jordyn nodded, bitterness lacing her words. "A man and a woman in a hotel room until morning—what do you think they did?"

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A cold laugh slipped from Zoe. "Cathryn exposed Liam for cheating while she was doing the exact same thing behind closed doors."

Jordyn's jaw clenched. "Too bad we failed to expose her at your birthday banquet. We let the perfect chance slip away."

Zoe's smile sharpened, predatory. "If..."

...the opportunity slipped away, we'll just create a new one."

Jordyn stared at her, confused. "How?"

A dark look settled over Zoe. "There's someone who can help us set the stage."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Bettina."

Jordyn blinked, caught off guard. "But she's dead. What good can she do us now?"

Malice danced in Zoe's gaze. "Didn't Cathryn always say Bettina was the rightful Mrs. Moore? Then let's give this so-called Mrs. Moore a farewell no one will forget."

The day broke beneath a blanket of gray clouds, the air heavy with tension.

Cathryn woke with a weight she couldn't shake, a knot in her chest warning her that disaster was close at hand. She'd spent the past few days wandering cemeteries, desperate to find the right place for her mother's burial. Bettina's ashes had waited too long at the funeral home—her mother deserved peace at last.

Just as Cathryn finished breakfast, her phone buzzed. On the other end, a somber voice from the funeral home said, "Ms. Moore, I'm sorry, but your mother's ashes are missing."

Cathryn's blood ran cold. Who would stoop so low as to steal the remains of the dead?

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