

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 21:

From the living room, the TV droned on, the anchor's voice cutting through the haze. "Today, the Moore family is holding a grand funeral for the late Mrs. Moore. All relatives and close friends will attend..."

The funeral arrangements had supposedly been made by the Moore family, broadcast for the world to see, poised to become a spectacle the moment the ceremony began.

Fury surged through Cathryn as the reality hit: her mother's ashes were gone. Bettina had been reduced to ash, and the Moore family still wouldn't let her rest in death.

Cathryn spun around, her voice cracking with grief and barely contained rage. "Mr. Miller!"

The butler hurried to her side.

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“How many guards do we have here?” she demanded.

“Twenty, all at your disposal,” he answered.

Without a second thought, Cathryn grabbed the axe by the door, her eyes steely with resolve. “Gather them all. We’re going to the Moore family’s estate.”

Traffic already choked the drive outside the Moore estate, cars lined bumper-to-bumper beneath the noon sun. Guests streamed in from every corner of Antaford society, each arriving under the polite excuse of being “old friends of the family.” In reality, they had all come for Bettina.

Once, the Sterling family had been one of the most distinguished families in southern Antaford. But Bettina—stubborn and unyielding—had been cast out after defying her father and insisting on marrying Richard, a man with nothing to his name.

Her father’s rage had been final, but her mother had quietly sent her off with a large box of jewels and gold—enough to start a life—on the condition that Bettina never set foot in the Sterling house again.

Harold, an old friend of Bettina’s father, had stepped into the role her family abandoned, treating Bettina as if she were his own daughter.

Because Harold commanded extraordinary influence across Olekgan's political and business elite, the Moore family had long basked in the reflected glow of Bettina's connection to him.

Everyone understood Harold would be present at Bettina's funeral today. That fact alone drew half the city's big shots to the Moore estate, all scrambling to be noticed while offering their respects.

The garden had been transformed into a somber stage. A white funeral marquee stood at its center, and beneath it lay a gleaming black casket blanketed in lilies and wreaths, the air heavy with floral perfume.

Harold sat nearby, his grief plain in the deep lines carved into his face. Around him, the marquee overflowed with guests—politicians, business partners, old allies of the Moore family—each speaking in hushed tones.

At the casket, Richard played the part of the shattered widower, one palm pressed reverently to the lid as convincing tears streaked his cheeks. He cried hoarsely, "Bettina, you cut ties with your family just to marry me, a man with nothing back then. Fate was merciless. We only had five short years together."

With a harsh thud, he slammed his fist against his chest, his voice breaking. "My love... If not for my responsibility to run the family business, I'd have thrown myself into the grave with you, never letting us part."

The display was so perfectly pitched that even those who had cursed his name days earlier now wiped their eyes, swayed by his calculated grief.

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Chapter 22:

In Olekgan, everyone knew the old tale—how Bettina had defied her family to marry Richard. For years, it had been passed around as a tragic romance, told in hushed, admiring tones. Whatever became of them later, their love had once burned bright.

Zoe sank to her knees before the casket, hypocritical tears spilling freely. “Bettina,” she sobbed, her voice deliberately strained, “I will only ever be a stand-in, looking after Richard because you’re no longer with us. You’ll always be the true Mrs. Moore.”

At her side, Jordyn played her part as flawlessly as her mother. She clutched the casket and wailed, her cries so heartrending that more guests reached for their handkerchiefs.

Richard caressed the polished wood as though it were flesh, his tone solemn yet theatrical. “Bettina will forever remain my wife. She will rest in the Moore family mausoleum, and when my time ends, I’ll lie beside her—together for eternity.”

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Harold, taken in by their performance, suspected nothing. His sigh was heavy, tears carving tracks down his weathered face as he placed a consoling hand on Richard’s shoulder.

The mood inside the marquee began to shift. Guests exchanged glances, their earlier hostility toward the Moore family fading under the weight of Harold’s gesture.

From the doorway, Cathryn watched, ice settling in her veins. She saw through every word and every movement. This wasn’t a tender farewell—it was theater. A meticulously staged performance meant to salvage the Moore name and lure back business partners who had turned their backs.

Cathryn’s steps cut sharply across the grass as she strode into the marquee, her voice slicing through the hush. “My mother will not be buried in the Moore mausoleum.”

The tension snapped through the air. Every gaze swung toward her.

Cathryn stood there like a dark flame, an axe gripped in one hand, a wall of black-suited bodyguards fanned out behind her. Mirrored sunglasses and stone faces made several guests flinch and step back.

Murmurs erupted at once, a tide of disapproval rising. “Seriously? Throwing a tantrum at her own mother’s funeral? Absolutely shameless!”

Richard’s hand shook as he jabbed a finger toward Cathryn, indignation finally splintering his precisely orchestrated grief. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Cathryn?”

Harold pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, his voice tight with alarm. “Cathryn, this is your mother’s funeral. Please don’t turn this into a spectacle.”

Yet Cathryn brushed past Harold, her steps sharp, and placed her hand firmly on the polished casket. “Mom, I’m here to take you home.”

Richard stepped in front of her, his face darkening as his voice rose. “She was my wife—the Moore matriarch. She belongs in our family’s mausoleum.”

Harold slipped between them, trying to mediate. “Cathryn, I understand your grief. But Richard is your mother’s husband, her companion in life. Surely she would want to remain by his side forever.”

From among the guests, someone spoke up, their tone almost reverent. “Indeed. Bettina loved him enough to turn her back on her own family. Everyone remembers how she risked everything to marry Richard. She’d want to spend eternity with him.”

Cathryn’s gaze went cold and steady as she faced Richard head-on. “The last person my mother ever wanted near her was you.”

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Chapter 23:

Cathryn had long since seen through her parents’ marriage for what it was: a calculated trap. She remembered how her mother had once been, at worst, emotionally unstable—then, inexplicably, her condition had declined over time, worsening until her clarity was stolen entirely.

Cathryn couldn't shake the suspicion that Richard had been responsible for her mother's illness all these years.

"That's rich, coming from you! You're the one she didn't want near!" Richard barked, fury flashing as he raised his hand to strike Cathryn.

But before the blow could fall, one of Cathryn's bodyguards caught his wrist in a crushing grip and shoved him back a step.

Richard staggered, then quickly recovered. He yanked a folded sheet of paper from his jacket and thrust it overhead for the entire crowd to see. "This—this is Bettina's final will. In her own handwriting, it forbids Cathryn from inheriting any of her assets."

A shocked murmur rippled through the marquee, faces blanching in disbelief. Why on earth would Bettina leave nothing to her only daughter?

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Harold leaned closer to peer at the paper, his voice quavering. "That... that is Bettina's handwriting..."

Cathryn surged forward, her glare crackling with rage. "It's a forgery!"

Richard clutched the paper to his chest, his voice rising. “Harold already confirmed this is Bettina’s handwriting. And the doctors at the hospital can testify that Bettina wrote this in her final moments.”

A fiery glare burned in Cathryn’s eyes. “My mother would never take her own life—never sign away her daughter’s inheritance. This whole thing reeks of your scheme, aimed at her assets.”

Uneasy whispers rippled through the guests as their gazes flicked between father and daughter.

Jordyn suddenly stepped forward, her stare cutting into Cathryn. “If you’re so sure this will is fake, then tell us—where were you the night your mother died?”

The question hit Cathryn like a bolt of lightning, freezing her in place. That night, she’d stumbled into the wrong hotel room and ended up in bed with a Brooks man.

Jordyn gasped theatrically, her hand flying to her mouth. “Don’t tell me you were with some stranger, Cathryn—sharing another man’s bed?”

Harold’s temper finally snapped. “Richard! Your younger daughter has slandered Cathryn again and again. If you won’t rein her in, I will.”

Richard shot back without missing a beat. “The night Bettina was rushed into emergency care, I called Cathryn over and over. Not once did she pick up. I want to know as well—where exactly was she?”

The marquee fell silent. Every gaze locked onto Cathryn.

Harold’s tone softened as he turned to her. “Tell them the truth. I’ll help clear your name.”

Heat climbed up Cathryn’s neck as her fists clenched, her face burning. How the hell was she supposed to confess?

The night her mother died, she had been tangled in a stranger’s arms.

That secret would never leave her lips.

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Chapter 24:

Gavin lingered at the edge of the chaos, watching Cathryn buckle under the weight of every accusation thrown at her. He knew he couldn't expose Andrew's identity to shield her, but he also couldn't let her face this alone. There was only one thing he could do: contact Andrew.

Meanwhile, across town, Andrew sat behind his desk, every muscle taut, his expression carved from stone. "Let me get this straight," he said coldly. "Richard spoiled Jordyn like a princess while treating Cathryn like a punching bag?"

Karl nodded grimly. "Yes. And he went so far as to commission a special whip just to hurt Cathryn whenever he was displeased."

Andrew's eyes darkened, anger simmering beneath the surface.

Karl pulled up a photo on his phone and slid the device across the polished wood. "Here. This is the one he used. Custom-made."

One glance was enough for Andrew to understand. The whip's leather tails glittered with tiny metal barbs—each strike designed to tear skin, leaving wounds that would never truly heal. It was one of the underworld's notorious instruments of torture. No wonder Cathryn's back was a latticework of scars.

"The servants at the Moore mansion say Cathryn lived worse than the household staff," Karl continued. "Cathryn could only have what Jordyn no longer wanted or had worn out. And that's not the worst of it..."

Andrew's voice dropped, colder still. "There's more?"

Karl hesitated, sympathy flickering in his eyes. "It's about school. Richard never let Cathryn set foot in a classroom."

Andrew let out a sharp breath, disbelief tightening his features. To think a daughter of a wealthy family had been kept from school entirely was unthinkable.

And suddenly, it all made sense—Cathryn's confusion over the prenup, the way she'd asked him to read it aloud. No wonder she couldn't even write her own name properly; the signature had looked like a child's scrawl. Cathryn was illiterate.

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Karl shifted uneasily beside the desk. "Mr. Brooks, do you have any idea why your grandmother chose a woman like that for you?"

Andrew lowered his gaze. “That’s a question I plan to ask her in person.”

But at this point, the answer hardly mattered. All he could see was a girl who had survived hell—and still stood tall against everyone who tried to break her.

Just then, Andrew’s phone buzzed with urgency—Gavin’s voice tight on the line. “Mr. Brooks, the Moore family members are ganging up on Cathryn.”

Andrew’s gaze went flat and cold. She was his woman now. He wouldn’t allow anyone to mistreat her. He snapped an order at Karl. “Get me every second of footage from the Olekgan Hotel that night.”

With the Brooks Group owning the hotel, pulling the surveillance footage would be no trouble at all.

Outside, the sky above Olekgan churned with dark clouds, heavy with the promise of thunder.

In the garden at the Moore estate, Zoe lifted her chin and let her voice ring over the crowd. “Cathryn is unfaithful. While her mother was on her deathbed, she spent the night with another man at a hotel. Bettina was so devastated that she cut Cathryn from her will entirely.”

Whispers swept through the guests, swelling with every second. “So that’s what really happened.” Accusing eyes snapped toward Cathryn.

“Cathryn left her dying mother just to spend the night with another man? No wonder she didn’t get a cent from her mother.”

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Chapter 25:

“Looks like Cathryn was the first to cheat, and poor Liam only turned to her sister out of pain.”

Under Zoe and Jordyn's careful manipulation, the atmosphere inside the funeral marquee curdled. Guests leaned together, voices lowered, fingers pointing. Judgment filled every gaze fixed on Cathryn.

Cathryn dug her nails deep into her palms, the sting drowned out by the tremor running through her body. Her mother was gone, yet it didn't stop the shameless Moores from staging a spectacle to serve their own agenda. Here they were, painting her as a whore—twisting baseless humiliation into a ladder they could climb to protect their wealth and status after stealing her mother's assets.

But Cathryn's silence only looked like an admission. It was all the confirmation the gathered guests needed: she must have spent that night with some random man, all while her mother was slipping away.

Harold sagged back into his chair, his face drained of color. He had always believed the Moores had been mistreating Bettina and Cathryn, but now he wasn't so sure.

Zoe and Jordyn exchanged a triumphant glance, convinced they had dragged Cathryn's name through the mud—and that she would never be able to wash it clean.

Doubling down on his performance, Richard beat his chest and wailed, "I had been baffled by why Bettina had abruptly taken her own life. Now the truth is out. It was this heartless Cathryn who pushed her to the edge! Bettina left me everything she owned, but I'd give up every penny just to have her back. All I ever wanted was for her to be breathing and smiling by my side!"

His theatrical outburst stirred the guests, who dabbed their eyes and murmured to one another about the tragic devotion between Richard and Bettina.

Richard turned to Harold and blurted, “Mr. Newman, I don’t want Bettina’s money. All I want is to have Bettina laid to rest in the Moore family mausoleum. I want to guard her and ensure her peace, right up until I’m buried beside her.”

Harold gave a weary nod and opened his mouth to reply—when a thunderclap split the sky above the marquee. Guests flinched and gasped.

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Seizing the moment, Gavin hurried across the room and held out his phone for Harold to see.

A video played, its glow washing over Harold’s strained features.

The lines on Harold’s face deepened as he glared at the screen, his voice trembling with anger. “This is absolutely disgraceful!”

Catching the flicker of hotel footage reflected in Harold’s glasses, Zoe turned to Cathryn with a taunting smile. “The footage of your little rendezvous is right there in Harold’s hand. Deny it all you want—the evidence is plain as day.”

Executives who had once distanced themselves from Moore Trading rose from their seats. “Mr. Moore,” one called, “maybe we were wrong to cut ties so quickly.”

A rush of hope swept over Richard, convinced the momentum had finally swung back in his favor.

But Harold’s hand shook as he lifted the phone higher for everyone to see. He fixed a hard glare on Richard and demanded, “This is the kind of daughter you raised?”

A derisive laugh slipped from Jordyn. “Cathryn isn’t fit to be a Moore. Dad already threw her out of the family—”

Before Jordyn could finish, Harold’s cane came down with a sharp crack against her side. He roared, “You shameless woman! It turns out that while Bettina was dying, Cathryn was at that hotel trying to catch you and Liam together!”

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Chapter 26:

The video's audio blared through the marquee, carrying Jordyn's alluring tone. "Liam, if my sister catches us in bed together, she'll lose her mind with rage. Just the thought of it makes me laugh..."

Footage flickered across the screen, showing Jordyn and Liam stumbling into a hotel lobby, arms locked around each other, lost in a kiss before they even made it upstairs to their reserved room.

The next clip cut straight to the two of them tangled on a bed. Cathryn recognized it immediately—the same one that had been sent to her that night. Someone had carefully stitched together every damning moment, from Jordyn and Liam's arrival at the Olekgan Hotel to what happened behind closed doors.

Cathryn's brow creased slightly as her thoughts spun. Who would go to such lengths to help her?

Shock drained the color from Jordyn's face. She could barely breathe. How had anyone gotten their hands on that video of her and Liam?

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While Jordyn was still reeling, Harold's cane cracked through the air as he struck Jordyn across the back. "Your father spoils you rotten and never disciplines you when necessary. I'll give you the lesson you deserve."

Age hadn't weakened Harold's strength. Each blow drove Jordyn farther across the floor, scrambling, fighting to stay upright.

Not a single guest stepped forward to help. They watched in silence, faces unreadable as Jordyn crawled, shame burning through every movement.

Panic seized Zoe. She whirled toward Richard. "Please, help Jordyn! You can't just stand by!"

Richard didn't hesitate. He threw himself in front of Jordyn, shielding her from another strike. Facing Harold, he pleaded, "Mr. Newman, if you want to punish someone, then take it out on me. Don't hurt Jordyn."

Across the room, Cathryn's expression hardened into something cold and unyielding. Even after Jordyn had dragged their family name through the mud, Richard still tried to protect her at all costs.

Disdain rippled through the guests, their expressions stiff and unforgiving.

Without warning, Zoe rounded on Cathryn, her voice ringing through the hush. “Cathryn, you went to that hotel to catch them that very night, didn’t you? Then why didn’t you come home until the next morning? Do you dare swear—here, before your mother’s coffin—that you weren’t with another man at that time?”

Every head in the marquee turned toward Cathryn, waiting for her answer.

Cathryn’s gaze locked on Zoe, icy and unwavering. Forcing her to swear before her mother’s coffin—was there no line Zoe wouldn’t cross?

Zoe’s lips curled into a cold sneer. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue? Can’t deny it because you did spend the night with some random guy.”

Above them, thunderclouds gathered, casting the marquee in shadow. Rain hammered the canopy overhead, so fierce that even the mourners flinched.

Meanwhile, a sleek black Maybach idled outside the estate gates, its engine running. Inside, Andrew watched from the backseat, his eyes never leaving Cathryn as she stood alone beneath the crushing weight of the crowd’s stares.

“Karl, you go in and defend her,” Andrew instructed quietly.

Karl's brows knit with concern. "Mr. Brooks, please reconsider. That would announce to the world that you're back from abroad."

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Chapter 27:

Andrew's recent return to Olekhan had been a closely guarded secret. If word got out, Cara would be on him in an instant.

Andrew's gaze stayed fixed on Cathryn, standing by herself in the storm of accusations. "Still, I refuse to sit by and watch them tear apart my woman."

Karl hesitated, uncertainty flickering across his face, then ventured cautiously, “Why not let Ethan Owens step in?”

Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he considered it. After a brief moment, he nodded. Cathryn would recognize Karl instantly, but Ethan—his other secretary—was nothing more than a stranger to her.

Outside, the storm intensified, the downpour washing the lawn in shifting gray.

Beneath the marquee, all attention remained trained on Cathryn, waiting for her to break—either swear before her mother’s coffin or admit to sleeping with another man.

Harold, his cane hanging at his side, paused his assault on Jordyn, his curiosity now fixed on Cathryn’s answer.

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Zoe sneered. “Cathryn, this is your mother’s funeral. Why not invite your one-night stand to pay respects to your mother?”

Jordyn’s glare burned. “Cathryn is damaged goods—what decent man would ever want her?”

Zoe gave a sharp nod. “Fair point. Cathryn’s cheap fling might be that old driver.”

Just then, a solitary figure emerged from the rain, a black umbrella held steady above him. He strode forward and stopped in front of Zoe, his voice cutting through the tension. “Did you just call Mr. Brooks a cheap fling?”

His stance was unyielding, his expression steely, authority settling over the scene like sudden gravity.

Zoe didn’t know the man, but the sheer force of his presence made her avert her eyes, her bravado faltering.

A ripple of recognition ran through the guests.

“That’s Ethan Owens.”

“Ethan Owens? Isn’t he Andrew Brooks’s right-hand man? But Andrew has been out of the country for ages—has he returned?”

Ethan’s face remained stone-cold. “I heard someone dared to drag Mr. Brooks’s name through the mud. I came to see who the fool was.”

At the mention of Andrew, Zoe stiffened, panic flashing in her eyes. “You’re mistaken, Mr. Owens. I’d never dare speak against Mr. Brooks. He’s far above someone like me.”

Ethan ignored her protests and moved to stand in front of Cathryn. “Let me be clear. That night, Ms. Moore walked in on her husband and her sister. The shock knocked her unconscious. Mr. Brooks was the one who found her and simply arranged a place for her to rest. That was the extent of their contact.”

A wave of shock rolled through the marquee. So Cathryn really had crossed paths with Andrew that night.

Ethan’s gaze shifted back to Zoe, his tone turning even colder. “You called it a ‘cheap fling.’ So tell me—who else could you possibly mean, if not Mr. Brooks himself?”

Zoe’s face drained of color. Her legs gave out, and she crumpled to the floor, all confidence gone. Not once had she imagined Cathryn could have any connection to Andrew.

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Chapter 28:

Ethan's voice rang out, firm and commanding. "Let's get the record straight. Ms. Moore did nothing wrong. She spent that night alone. There was no affair, no scandal."

His words landed with the force of a verdict. In Olekgan, Ethan spoke with the authority of Andrew himself—and everyone knew better than to question it.

Harold rose, his voice carrying across the stunned silence. "Richard, you've allowed Zoe and Jordyn to bully Bettina and Cathryn again and again. From this day forward, the Newman family severs all ties with the Moore family. We refuse to be associated with a family whose matriarch tolerates bullying and slander."

The company executives wasted no time. One after another, they stepped forward. "We've been tricked. From now on, Moore Trading is finished with us—and we'll make sure no one else in Olekgan dares do business with Moore Trading either."

Just like that, Moore Trading was exiled from the city's business world.

Richard stood rooted to the spot, speechless. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined their messy family drama would end up involving Andrew.

Not wanting to be caught in the fallout, the guests turned away. Without a word, they filed out into the pouring rain.

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Still clutching the axe, Cathryn looked at Ethan in bewilderment. “May I know why Mr. Brooks would step in to help me?” she asked, confusion plain on her face. She believed she had never even laid eyes on Andrew before.

Ethan’s expression remained unreadable. “The Olekgan Hotel is a Brooks Group property. Someone tried to hack into the hotel’s security footage, which put the incident on Mr. Brooks’s radar. He saw everything that happened and decided to step in. That’s all.”

Cathryn nodded. So it was only coincidence.

She seized the chance. “Could you help me arrange a meeting with Mr. Brooks?”

Ethan’s face stayed blank. “Mr. Brooks does not meet with strangers.”

With nothing more to say, he turned on his heel and strode out.

Cathryn's gaze shifted back to where Richard, Zoe, and Jordyn sat huddled together. She lifted the axe, her stare cold and unflinching.

Richard's face drained of color as he stared at the axe. His voice shook. "You... you would point a weapon at your own father?"

Cathryn strode forward, the axe scraping the floor like a growl, her stare colder than the lightning flashing overhead.

Thunder tore through the heavens, shattering the silence above the funeral marquee.

Richard, Zoe, and Jordyn crumpled near the casket, their faces drained of color.

"Murder! Kathryn is going to kill us—someone help!" Zoe's scream sliced through the air.

The Moore family's guards surged in to stop Kathryn, but at Gavin's sharp signal, the Brooks family's men moved in. Within seconds, the Moore guards were sprawled in the dirt, groaning in defeat.

With the axe raised high, Cathryn's bloodshot eyes blazed with unrestrained rage. The trembling trio huddled together, sobbing even as they spat curses. "Cathryn, rot in hell where you fucking belong!"

A bone-rattling crack split the air as the polished black casket shattered cleanly in two.

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Chapter 29:

Cathryn swung again, prying it open wider—then she cradled the urn in her arms. Scalding tears streamed down her face as she whispered, her voice shaking, "Mom, I'm taking you home."

Richard's eyes went wide, wrath choking his voice. "Cathryn, how dare you defile your mother's casket? I swear I'll fucking ruin you for this!"

Through the downpour, Cathryn's voice ripped out, jagged and fierce. "From today forward, my mother and I cut all ties with the Moore family. The coffin you bought—my mother doesn't want it."

She clutched the urn tight against her heart and muttered, "We're leaving, Mom."

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Cathryn didn't spare a glance behind as she marched unflinching into the storm.

Lightning flared across the sky, thunder chasing close behind as rain battered the marquee, the canvas shuddering under the onslaught.

Amid the storm, the Moore family's curses and howls dissolved into the roar of wind and rain.

When Cathryn reached the gates, blurred by the curtain of rain, a man's face came into view. It was none other than her soon-to-be husband.

Her lips parted to speak, but her knees buckled. He lunged forward, and she collapsed straight into his arms.

A couple of hours later, the haze of sleep lifted, and Cathryn found herself sprawled facedown on a bed that radiated warmth.

“Don’t move.”

A firm yet gentle palm rested against her back. The voice was low, rough-edged, unmistakably male, filling the quiet room.

Whenever the rain fell, the lash marks on her back burned and itched without mercy. This time, cool relief spread across her skin, numbing the sting.

Andrew knelt close, his brows drawn as he worked the potion into each scar. “You’re in luck. Dr. Clarke swore he never repeats a prescription, but by chance another bottle arrived.”

Cathryn knew it wasn’t luck. The moment Andrew requested the medicine, Adrian would have known who it was meant for. For her sake, Adrian had gone against his own rule. She silently vowed she’d find a way to reach him—before Jordyn tried to trick her way into getting the scar-fading potion.

The brutal scars across Cathryn's back were Richard's and Zoe's tokens of cruelty. Jordyn had only felt the merciless whip once. That single lash had been more mercy than she deserved.

Afraid a swab would scrape too roughly, Andrew avoided using one on Cathryn's ruined skin. Instead, he coated his fingertips and touched her back with patient, almost tender care.

Each cool stroke sent a wave of electricity rippling through Cathryn. She tensed, unable to stop her body's reaction.

Andrew's voice dropped to a near hiss as he caught her by the waist to keep her from wriggling. "Listen up. This is the last bottle of Dr. Clarke's potion. Spill a drop, and those scars will mark you forever."

Cathryn went still, pressing her face into the pillow's softness. When she spoke, her voice came out muffled. "If the lights hadn't been out that night, you wouldn't have touched me, would you?"

She could never bear to look at those scars. Every shower meant avoiding the mirror, pretending the ruined skin wasn't hers. In her own mind, those marks made her body something hideous, unworthy of affection. And this man was everything she wasn't. He was born to privilege, the kind with beautiful women lining up for the chance to be near him. Why would someone like him ever want her? That night had been nothing more than an accident—she had knocked on the wrong door, and he had been just drunk enough not to turn her away.

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Chapter 30:

Andrew's fingers stilled mid-motion. He had expected her scars to be bad, but seeing them in the light had shaken him to his core. Her back was a map of suffering, each welt crossing another until they seemed endless, grotesque.

Karl had told him she'd been beaten by Richard for no reason since she was five. The whipping had continued until the day she married. How on earth had she survived it all?

Though suspicion had been his first instinct, pity was slowly overtaking it. She hadn't come seeking favors or leverage—only a way to survive. Without him, Richard and Zoe would have stripped her down to nothing, leaving her with nothing but scars.

Sensing the shift in his mood, Cathryn stiffened and pushed herself upright, one hand pressed to her chest. She snatched the vial from his grip. “I’ll have Margaret help me. You don’t need to trouble yourself, Mr. Brooks.”

Yanking her clothes back up over her shoulders, she all but shoved him toward the door, desperate to drive him away. She had always known the truth—no man could truly desire a woman marked like her. Jordyn had proved it, and she was no exception.

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Cathryn slumped onto the bed facedown, waiting for Margaret to come.

The hinges gave a soft groan as the door creaked open. Footsteps crossed the threshold—someone had entered. Keeping her eyes closed, Cathryn murmured, “Margaret, the potion is on the table. Please help me with the scars.”

A sudden warmth pressed against her back, and with it, a man’s deep voice brushed her ear. “These scars aren’t ugly. They’re proof of your resilience.”

Cathryn flinched hard, her eyes flying open. That warmth—he had kissed her.

Heart racing, she scrambled upright, breath unsteady. “Why did you come back?”

Andrew's gaze locked onto her, intense and unreadable. "Why would you think I wouldn't touch you just because of those scars?"

Heat flooded her cheeks. She turned her face away and muttered, "Every man is cut from the same cloth. Jordyn bore just one scar, and even that was too much for Liam to tolerate."

Andrew seized her without warning, hauling her hard against his chest. "I'm nothing like Liam. Don't you dare compare me to him."

His scent wrapped around her—dizzying, filling her lungs until she could barely breathe.

Andrew bent closer, inhaling the faint fragrance of her hair. "Now I finally see why my grandma chose you for me."

At their core, they were both survivors. They had both been wounded by betrayal, sabotage, and scheming—and yet they still had the fortitude and determination to push through every obstacle and keep moving forward.

Cathryn's gaze sharpened, the haze in her eyes clearing.

He still hadn't realized she wasn't the woman his grandmother had chosen for him.

“It’s late already, Mr. Brooks. You should rest.” Slipping free of his arms, she pulled her clothes back into place.

To him, her retreat looked like nothing more than timid shyness. “We should finish applying the potion first.”

His voice was calm but unyielding as he guided her back down onto the bed with gentle pressure and eased her collar lower.

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