

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 241:

Zoe reached across the table and gripped Jordyn's hand tightly. "Listen to me. Spend more time at the hospital with your father. Earn his trust. Convince him to transfer all his wealth to you."

Jordyn brushed a strand of hair behind her ear with deliberate languor. "What's the hurry? All the money is still in Dad's hands. And you said yourself, Cathryn might not even be his biological daughter. If that's true, then as his only bloodline, everything will fall to me eventually."

"Shut your mouth," Zoe snapped before she could stop herself.

"That story about Cathryn not being Richard's child—I invented it. A lie. To turn him against her and keep you on the throne. The truth is, you—"

"What about me?" Jordyn cut in sharply, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

Zoe froze, her gaze skittering away. "Nothing," she murmured too quickly.

Jordyn twirled a lock of hair around her finger, a cold, humorless laugh curling from her lips. “Cathryn looks nothing like Dad. My guess? She’s Bettina’s bastard child with Adrian.”

Zoe’s fingers tightened against her palm. The suspicion had crossed her mind years ago. Back then, desperate to drive Bettina and Cathryn out of the Moore household, she had secretly stolen a strand of Adrian’s hair and tested it against Cathryn’s. The results had crushed that theory—no relation whatsoever.

Later, Zoe had attempted to test Cathryn’s DNA against Richard’s, but Richard had caught her in the act.

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“You are insulting me!” he had thundered, eyes blazing. “If word of this gets out, what do you think people will say about me?”

“The truth can withstand scrutiny,” Zoe had argued, her voice trembling with conviction. “What harm is there in a simple test?”

His eyes had been bloodshot as he roared, “If you insist on a paternity test, test both girls!”

It had been anger talking, but it had shaken Zoe to the marrow. She wanted Cathryn stripped of her status, but not at the risk of exposing Jordyn's paternity. She had abandoned the plan, but her whispers had done their work: Richard had grown cold to Cathryn and had even raised his whip against her—exactly as Zoe intended.

Jordyn tilted her head, a sly glint in her eyes. "How about I just sneak a strand of Dad's hair and test it against Cathryn's?"

"No." Zoe's frown deepened into hard lines. "I tried that once, and your father nearly exploded."

"I am Dad's real daughter," Jordyn mused aloud. "If I use my hair instead of his, the test will still show whether Cathryn is legitimate."

"Absolutely not!" Zoe snapped, her voice cracking sharp enough to make Jordyn flinch.

"Never mention paternity tests again," Zoe ordered.

"Alright," Jordyn muttered, her lips tightening into a reluctant pout. But the question gnawed at her. If the results proved she and Cathryn were sisters, nothing would...

...change. If they didn't, Cathryn would lose her claim to the Moore inheritance. Why was her mother so afraid of the truth?

This time, Jordyn decided she would not obey. She remembered Cathryn's toothbrush still at Liam's place. Quietly, she snipped a strand of her own hair and tucked it away, her mind already plotting a DNA test.

Jordyn surmised that now Richard had inherited Bettina's assets, she would stand as the sole heir of the Moore family if Cathryn turned out not to be his daughter. Her eyes gleamed at the thought. With Richard's fortune in her grasp and her position as Mrs. Watson, she would not just be wealthy—she would be one of the most powerful women in Olekgan. Perhaps, she mused, even powerful enough to stand as Andrew's equal.

Jordyn threw her head back and laughed heartily.

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But Zoe's chest tightened, her mind a storm of schemes. "I need to step out for a moment," she said. If Cathryn had truly tied herself to Andrew, then she was a threat—one that had to be removed before she could wield the Brooks family's influence like a blade against the Watsons and the Moores.

Zoe's pulse quickened with each step as she slipped into the city's forgotten quarter. The sixth floor groaned beneath her heels as she stopped before a battered door and rapped three times.

The peephole darkened. A pair of suspicious eyes, shadowed beneath a thick beard, studied her before the door creaked open. Zoe cast a wary glance over her shoulder, then slid inside and shut the door fast.

The man wasted no time. He seized her waist and tried to tug her toward the bed. "What brings you here?"

Zoe shoved at his chest, her voice edged with steel. "Keep your hands to yourself. Don't paw at me the instant we meet."

He scowled, bitterness twisting his mouth. "You strut around the Moore estate, warming Richard's bed, while I rot in this hole. And you can't let me touch you?"

“If I don’t keep you stashed away in this place, what do you think will happen when Richard finds out? He’ll come for both of us, and Jordyn can kiss her fancy life goodbye,” Zoe hissed.

The man let out a harsh laugh. “Easy for you to say, since you and Jordyn sit on piles of cash while I rot in this hellhole. No sun, no decent food—just moldy takeout and this disgusting mattress.”

Her jaw tightened. “You ought to remember who cleared your debts, Vince. Without me and Jordyn, those loan sharks would have turned you into fish bait a long time ago.”

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Vince Garrity released her and collapsed onto the filthy sofa, stretching out with a groan. “I’m broke again. Send over another hundred grand.”

Zoe stared in disbelief. “I wired you a hundred thousand just last week. What, did you set it on fire?”

He picked at his teeth and shot her a lopsided grin. “You think a hundred grand goes far in this dump? And isn’t your husband rich? Moving that kind of cash is pocket change for you.”

Her eyes swept across the dirty room, nostrils flaring at the stench of rotting food and overflowing trash. In the corner, something caught her eye. She nudged a discarded

condom wrapper with her shoe and glared. “You’ve been bringing women here, haven’t you?”

Vince yawned. “Don’t be so dramatic. Just a couple of hookers to kill the boredom.”

Zoe’s lips pressed into a tight line. “That’s not what the money I gave you was for, Vince. It’s not meant for you to waste on prostitutes.”

Vince stood and stalked toward her, his hand closing around her throat with a sudden, ugly grip. “And my woman isn’t for another man to screw, either.”

A cold tremor slid down Zoe’s spine. Once, she had belonged to Vince—until visions of luxury and social standing had made her walk away and marry Richard. She had tossed Vince aside like a worn-out jacket and embraced her new life as Mrs. Moore.

But fate had played a cruel hand. On her wedding night, she’d realized she was pregnant, with no clue who the real father was. Ten anxious months later, Jordyn had come into the world.

The first thing Zoe did after leaving the hospital was swipe a few strands of hair from both Jordyn and Richard. She ran the paternity test herself. The results crushed her—Richard wasn’t Jordyn’s father.

She’d planned to take that secret to her grave, but Vince had ruined everything by showing up at the worst possible moment.

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Turns out someone at the clinic had recognized Zoe. The lab tech was Vince's old friend and had slipped him a copy of the test. Vince hadn't wasted any time—he tested his own DNA against Jordyn's. The outcome was undeniable.

Since then, Vince had held all the power over Zoe.

“Someone just ran a new paternity test for Jordyn and Richard,” Vince said, his eyes glinting.

All the color drained from Zoe's face. "Who?"

He shrugged. "No names left. Whoever did it covered their tracks."

Suddenly, Zoe remembered Jordyn's offhand remark about Cathryn inviting her out for coffee, the fight that followed, and Cathryn yanking out a handful of Jordyn's hair. It had to be Cathryn.

Zoe's eyes blazed with fury. She had to eliminate Cathryn.

"Would you look at yourself? Shaking like a leaf," Vince teased, a laugh rolling off his tongue.

Zoe's glare could have cut glass. "If Richard finds out that Jordyn isn't really his, we're both as good as dead. And you're just standing there, joking about it?"

Vince's hand slid boldly over her ass. "Do you honestly think I'd just sit back? I already made the switch. Richard's hair is out, and mine is in. Wherever they send that DNA, it'll come back saying Jordyn's his. So calm down."

Only then did Zoe finally unclench her fists. "Vince, you know I've always been in love with you." She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him close. "You were

drowning in gambling debts, with collectors breathing down your neck. I married Richard for the sake of our daughter's future."

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But Vince had changed over the years, and love no longer mattered to him. All he cared about now was easy cash. Zoe's marriage to Richard meant endless money for him to spend.

"Poor old Richard," Vince taunted. "He's spent twenty years raising someone else's kid, and he hasn't got the slightest idea."

A sharp smile flickered on Zoe's lips. "If he ever discovered he'd been beating his own flesh and blood and spoiling another man's daughter like she was a treasure, it'd kill him on the spot."

Vince licked his lips with anticipation. "Once Richard's out of the picture, everything he owns will be ours. I'll take you and Jordyn and vanish for good."

Zoe's expression turned cold. "There's something you need to take care of for me."

"What's that?" Vince asked.

“I want Cathryn gone.” Zoe’s voice was cold, unyielding. “Jordyn has to be the only Moore left standing.”

Vince gave a quick nod. “Consider it done.” Getting rid of one woman wouldn’t be hard.

“Cathryn’s clever. You can’t leave any traces behind,” Zoe warned.

Vince’s mouth curled into a sly grin. “You want it to look like an accident? Maybe a car wreck? A fall from somewhere high? Or staged as a murder after rape?”

Zoe shot him a fierce warning. “Don’t get any funny ideas. You can’t get laid with Cathryn.”

Vince clicked his tongue. “She’s Richard’s daughter. What can’t I do? Richard slept with my woman, so I’ll have his daughter. Call it even.”

“Vince!” Zoe snapped, her eyes full of warning. If Cathryn truly was Andrew’s wife and Vince left a single clue after raping her, they’d both be doomed.

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Vince just shrugged, calm as ever. “Understood. I’ll make sure no one suspects a thing when Cathryn’s gone.”

Zoe exhaled, finally letting her nerves relax. “When Jordyn gets her hands on Richard’s assets, we’ll never have to worry about money again.”

Vince gave a derisive laugh. “Honestly, you missed your chance. If you’d poisoned him back then, we could’ve been kicking back on a beach somewhere by now.”

With an irritated look, Zoe retorted, “Let’s say you managed to kill Richard and all the Moore fortune was dumped in your lap—how long do you think it would last? You’d waste every cent in record time.”

Vince rolled his eyes. “So what? Richard’s loaded, isn’t he?”

Zoe's voice turned icy. "He's not rolling in cash anymore. After he made enemies with the Brooks family, his assets were frozen. All he's hanging onto is the Moore family estate."

Vince tensed. "So what's the plan now?"

"We stick to what I told you," Zoe replied coolly. "For the time being, take Cathryn out of the picture. Once that's done, I'll make sure Richard slowly passes everything to Jordyn."

Vince gave a brief nod. "Consider it handled."

"Don't forget," Zoe warned, her gaze cold. "This needs to go off without a hitch. Quick, clean, no loose ends."

Vince flashed a sleazy grin as he stepped closer. "As long as you keep me happy, I'll make sure Cathryn disappears—no traces, no mess."

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Revulsion twisted Zoe's stomach. She'd grown sick of Vince ages ago, but she tolerated him and had sex with him. For now, he was still useful.

Meanwhile, in the living room at Crownspire Villa, Cathryn turned to Damien. “Did the results come back yet for Jordyn and Richard’s paternity test?”

Andrew gave a quick nod. “Yeah. It’s in.”

Instantly on edge, Cathryn sprang to her feet. “So? What’s the verdict?”

With a gentle pull, Andrew made her sit on his lap. “One lab result isn’t enough. I had Ethan send it to another lab for confirmation.”

Doubt flickered in her eyes; she’d never heard of a paternity test result coming back as uncertain. “So Jordyn really is Richard’s daughter?” she asked, her voice low.

Running his fingers through her hair, Andrew answered, “I already told you. A single result doesn’t mean anything.”

A bitter smile touched Cathryn’s lips. “No, that’s not it. You just didn’t like the answer you got, so you’re fishing for a different one.”

A hard glint flashed in Andrew’s eyes. “Zoe’s private life is a mess. That much is fact.”

Cathryn replied, her voice barely above a whisper, “Messy, yes, but it won’t topple her. She gave Richard a daughter, and that alone makes him treat her differently.”

Pulling her closer, Andrew spoke quietly. “You don’t need to stress. There are always ways forward. The Moore Trading accounts are frozen, Watson Tech’s stock launch is on hold—everything’s shifting in our direction.”

Cathryn only frowned. “This won’t last. If Jordyn and Liam somehow latch onto Andrew or get in good with the Brooks Group, they’ll recover in no time.”

A dry laugh escaped Andrew. “Take it easy. They’ll never get near him.”

Cathryn searched his face, uncertain. “And you’re so sure because?”

From what she knew, Andrew and Damien were anything but close—one the legitimate heir, the other an illegitimate rival. Natural enemies.

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His tone was cold as ice. “Trust me. Andrew has standards. He wouldn’t touch their kind with a ten-foot pole.”

Cathryn let out a weary sigh. “People will do anything for money. If the payoff is big enough, even a killer can be a business partner.”

What truly mattered to her now was getting to Andrew before Liam and Jordyn—handing him the code and closing the deal before anyone else could interfere.

A vibration cut through the moment as Andrew’s phone lit up with an incoming call from his hacker.

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“I’ll get you a glass of water,” Cathryn offered, sliding off his lap so he could have some privacy.

As soon as she stepped away, Andrew accepted the call.

“Mr. Brooks,” the hacker said, “on the footage, Jordyn’s phone only had part of the code on display, but it’s enough—we’re certain it’s Kestrel’s work.”

Andrew’s jaw tightened. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. “You mean Jordyn really is Kestrel?”

“That’s right,” the hacker replied. “We tracked Kestrel’s device to that café, and security footage caught Jordyn’s screen with the code. There’s no room for doubt—Jordyn really is Kestrel.”

With a heavy breath, Andrew rubbed his forehead. Could it be possible? Was Jordyn actually Kestrel?

Years ago, he had visited a secretive organization. On the rooftop, he’d seen a girl. She hardly spoke, her face always unreadable, and she would spend hours scratching random patterns into the weathered walls. He watched her from a distance, never saying a word.

Then one day, she simply disappeared—leaving nothing behind.

No child ever left that organization with a traceable past. Every one of them vanished, their true selves swallowed up as if they'd never existed. That girl had been no different, a single drop lost in an endless ocean.

Sometime later, Andrew stumbled upon a line of code circulating through the hacker community—something so revolutionary it set the entire tech world on edge. And in a flash, he remembered: it was the exact same sequence that girl had been scribbling on the wall. From then on, he became obsessed with finding the one behind it—Kestrel.

On the surface, Andrew claimed he was after Kestrel's code to give him an edge over Cara. Deep down, though, he wanted to find the girl he'd never forgotten.

Whenever he looked at Jordyn, Andrew couldn't see even a hint of resemblance to that girl from years ago. Granted, the girl had been barely ten at the time, but facial features couldn't have changed so completely. If anything, it was Cathryn whose face bore a faint resemblance.

Yet that made no sense. Cathryn struggled even to read, let alone write complex code. Someone like her would never have caught the organization's eye.

The organization's recruits were handpicked from all corners of the globe—child prodigies with off-the-charts intelligence, each scoring well above 180 on IQ tests. Cathryn simply didn't fit that mold.

Just then, Cathryn returned with a glass of water and offered it to Damien.

Andrew accepted the glass, his eyes fixed on her. “When you ran into Jordyn at the café that day—did anyone stand out to you?” he asked.

Cathryn tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

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Andrew hesitated, searching for the right words. “Someone quiet. Refined. A girl about your age—maybe graceful, even pretty.”

Cathryn's lips curved into a playful smirk. "That sounds suspiciously like me."

The tease caught him off guard. For a moment, he simply stared—because she wasn't wrong. Sitting there in silence, Cathryn was the very image of quiet beauty. He reached over and tousled her hair with a tenderness he rarely let anyone see. "You're right. You're the prettiest girl."

He decided then and there—he would never bring up anything about Kestrel with Cathryn again. She was lighthearted and innocent, and he would keep her that way: shielded, cherished, untouched by the cruelty of enemies he alone would face.

Andrew cleared his throat, forcing a lighter tone. "I was planning to wait for the good news about you joining Brooks Group, but something's come up—I've been sent on a business trip for a few days."

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Cathryn straightened, her expression shifting from playful to solemn. "That's a good sign. They trust you. Don't disappoint them."

Her faith in him drew a faint smile. "I won't. And when I come back, we'll be colleagues."

She let out a wistful sigh. “Colleagues? Please. My résumé looks like it’s been through a paper shredder. No way their HR team lets me past the first filter.”

She knew she needed another way into the Brooks Group.

Andrew only chuckled to himself. His wife wanted a place at Brooks Group, and no HR screening on earth could stop it. Still, he kept her identity quiet. If Cara ever caught wind of it, Cathryn would become her target. Better to let Cathryn slip in quietly, with Ethan arranging something light and easy for her. What mattered most was her happiness.

Ethan, reliable as ever, didn’t hesitate. After Andrew’s call, he rang the HR director immediately. “I’ve forwarded you a résumé. Handle it discreetly.”

Rules at Brooks Group were ironclad—executives were forbidden from meddling in recruitment—but Ethan knew how to move without leaving shadows. He never once mentioned Andrew’s name.

With Cara’s spies lurking in every corner, caution was survival.

Victor Hughes, a veteran in HR, understood the unspoken message immediately. Orders from Ethan carried the weight of the CEO’s seal.

“Understood. What role are we considering?” Victor asked.

“Something in line with her education. Nothing flashy,” Ethan replied, his tone careful.

Overt favoritism drew suspicion, and Ethan was too seasoned for that.

Victor wasted no time. Five new résumés had arrived. Four belonged to glittering graduates with impeccable records. The fifth, however, was almost blank—name, age, and a string of “None”s. Under normal circumstances, he would have deleted it instantly. Now, he hesitated. What if this was the one?

Victor beckoned his deputy. “Alan, look at this. If we were to keep it, where on earth would we even place her?”

Alan Pierce took one glance before letting out a mocking laugh. “What is this, your mistress?”

Victor’s glare silenced him.

Alan shrugged. “With credentials like that, she’s not even qualified to mop the floors here.”

Victor drummed his fingers against the desk, thoughtful. “Hire all five. No interviews. As for this one—Cathryn Moore—assign her to janitorial work.”

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He didn't know which candidate Ethan had meant, but at least this way he was following orders and placing them all.

Alan drafted the offer letters, muttering under his breath, "Cathryn Moore, twenty-two, joining as a cleaner. What is she after? Hoping to seduce Mr. Brooks?"

Alan had seen such women before. The Grant family had smuggled Vanessa into the tech department under similar pretenses, and she spent her days prowling near the thirty-eighth floor, hoping for a glimpse of Andrew.

Since Andrew's rumored return, Alan had caught Vanessa more than once trying the private executive elevator. Her intentions were glaringly obvious.

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"Don't jump to conclusions," Victor warned. If Cathryn truly had the CEO's favor, her background would be far more formidable than a blank résumé suggested. She wouldn't need to claw her way upward.

That evening, an email landed in Cathryn's inbox—an official offer from Brooks Group. She was so stunned she had to read it twice.

Brooks Group had actually hired her.

A squeal escaped her before she could stop it. She grabbed her phone and dialed Damien at once.

"Damien, I got in!"

His voice warmed instantly. "Well done, sweetheart."

“But wait...” She frowned, puzzled. “Brooks Group hiring needs four rounds of interviews. How did I get the job outright? You didn’t pull strings for me, did you?”

Andrew chuckled low, the sound rich with amusement. “Nepotism is strictly forbidden. Even if you begged, I wouldn’t dare.”

Cathryn’s laugh was half disbelief, half delight. “Then I must be absurdly lucky.” Her threadbare résumé had somehow landed her inside one of the most competitive companies in the city.

“The Group just expanded its technical division,” Andrew said smoothly. “They’re short on staff. Hiring standards are looser at the moment.”

She exhaled in relief, accepting the explanation. “Seems I caught a lucky break.”

Andrew’s tone gentled. “What position did they give you?”

Cathryn’s résumé was an embarrassment in itself. Even the “Desired Position” field had been filled in with a blunt “None.” She had practically thrown herself at Brooks Group’s mercy, leaving them to decide where to place her.

She hadn't bothered to study the offer letter, either. The job title was meaningless. All that mattered was stepping inside Brooks Group—staying within Andrew's orbit.

"We'll know on Monday," Cathryn said quietly.

Andrew's voice warmed on the other end of the line. "When I get back, we'll celebrate properly."

When the call ended, Cathryn summoned Margaret. She needed to pick out a set of office clothes.

Yet the moment she stepped past the gates, she became a target.

Yosef guided the Maybach onto the road, carrying Cathryn and Margaret toward Olekhan Mall. They had barely cleared the estate when a sharp jolt rattled the car—a rear-end collision.

Yosef climbed out to inspect the damage, only to be met with the other driver's hostility. The man stormed forward, voice raised, fists twitching at his sides.

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“Mrs. Brooks, please wait for a bit,” Yosef instructed firmly. “I’ve already requested another car to come.”

Cathryn shook her head, stepping onto the pavement. “No need. You handle this. Margaret and I will catch a taxi.”

“Mrs. Brooks, it’s late. Please wait for the car to come,” Yosef urged.

She gave him a small smile. “Don’t worry. Nothing will happen to—”

The other driver lashed out, and Yosef was pulled into the mess. With no choice, he ordered Margaret to guard Cathryn closely before turning back to deal with the furious man.

Margaret flagged down a taxi at the roadside and got in with Cathryn, headed for Olekgan Mall.

The cab hummed along, Margaret filling the silence with idle chatter. But as the minutes passed, the scenery outside grew unfamiliar—quiet streets swallowing the bright city glow.

When Cathryn turned to answer, she found Margaret slumped, breathing evenly in an unnatural sleep.

A chill whispered down Cathryn's spine. She glanced out the window. Darkness pressed against the glass—heavy and wrong. This was not the bustling road to Olekgan Mall. Her instincts sharpened like blades.

“Where are we now?” she asked, her voice cool.

From behind the wheel, Vince—disguised as a driver—replied smoothly, “Roadworks near the mall. We're on a detour.”

Cathryn's fingers curled tightly around her phone, ready to call for help.

But the cab veered farther from civilization, into the bleak outskirts where the night swallowed everything.

Vince's confidence swelled with the emptiness around them. He caught her reflection in the mirror—delicate features, luminous eyes that glimmered like shards of starlight—and desire twisted cruelly in his gut. He reasoned that she was going to die anyway. Why not let him have fun with her first?

The car jolted to a stop.

Cathryn's pulse leapt. She grabbed the door handle—locked. She glanced at her phone. No signal.

Vince slid out of the driver's seat and crawled into the back, the hunger in his eyes unmistakable.

"I sent your license plate to a friend the moment I got in," Kathryn warned evenly, masking her racing heartbeat. "They're already tracking you."

He smirked. The plates were false, the wilderness silent. He reached for her.

Her body reacted before thought. Training long buried surged to life. Her leg snapped out with precision, driving him back.

He lunged again, fingers closing around her ankle, yanking her forward with brute force.

Her eyes flicked to the mirror—headlights slicing through the darkness in the distance. “My people are here,” she said steadily.

Vince froze. His head whipped toward the lights, doubt flickering across his face. With a curse, he shoved both Cathryn and Margaret out of the car and slammed his foot on the accelerator.

Margaret stirred groggily, her voice a murmur. “What... what happened?”

Cathryn steadied her, a protective hand on her shoulder. “The driver drugged you. He tried to assault me.”

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Margaret's eyes flew open in horror. "Mrs. Brooks, are you hurt?"

Cathryn's gaze lingered on the taxi's receding taillights. "I'm fine."

The car that had cast its beam of salvation swept past them without pausing, disappearing down the road and leaving the night heavier than before.

Margaret kept staring after the retreating lights until they dissolved into the darkness like embers fading from a fire. "Was that car summoned by you?" she asked, her voice brittle.

Cathryn shook her head, a faint tremor hidden in the movement. "Just a stranger passing through."

She had only narrowly escaped; the flash of those headlights had been her saving grace, scattering the man who had lunged for her like a jackal startled off its prey.

Margaret fumbled for her phone, fingers unsteady as she called the estate's security, then hovered over the keypad for 911.

"Stop." Cathryn's voice cut like glass—sharp and low. "He was just a driver with bad ideas. Call the police and Damien will hear—he'll worry."

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Margaret's eyes blazed. "And if it was your stepmother and her darling daughter who sent that driver?"

"That makes the police even more useless," Cathryn replied, the coolness in her tone at odds with the cold fury in her eyes. "The man was only a pawn. Break one, and they'll simply move another into place. As long as Zoe and Jordyn breathe, peace won't be within reach."

Margaret clenched her jaw until it ached. "Unbelievable. They still won't leave you alone."

Silence folded over them.

Cathryn's mind raced. In Zoe and Jordyn's eyes, she was finished—a dethroned princess, stripped of power and money, no longer a threat. Why keep hounding her? And Jordyn, Richard's own blood, should have been enough to anchor Zoe's sense of security.

A weary sigh escaped Kathryn's lips. If Jordyn were not truly Richard's daughter and he ever uncovered the truth, it would burn him alive with rage. Yet Zoe, tarnished though her past had been, had played the part of the faithful wife flawlessly.

Across town, Vince thumbed his phone with a scowl and dialed. "Botched it," he muttered.

On the other end, the polished veneer of a society matron shattered. Zoe's voice came back as a snarl, stripped of all refinement. "Incompetent fool! Who was it that swore nothing could go wrong?"

Vince was usually quick to bite back at Zoe, but tonight he absorbed her curses in silence, like a man doing penance. If she ever discovered his failure had come from a moment of weakness—his hunger for Kathryn's beauty—Zoe would flay him alive.

"You didn't expose yourself, did you?" Zoe hissed, her voice like a blade against glass. If Vince slipped, he wouldn't fall alone—he'd drag her straight into the abyss.

"Relax," Vince drawled, leaning into the shadows. "The cab's plates were fake. I wore a cap and a mask. It was darker than the devil's pocket. Nobody saw a thing. I never opened my mouth once."

“Stay buried. Don’t show your face until I say so,” Zoe snapped.

A grin tugged at his mouth. “I excel at hiding.”

He knew how to vanish when it mattered; no one ever managed to track him.

At the Moore residence, Zoe dropped heavily onto the sofa. Her sigh rippled through the silent room. “Still can’t get rid of Cathryn...”

Jordyn barely looked up, thumbs restless on her phone as if she were waiting for the universe to text her. Then, suddenly, a photo appeared. Her heart kicked. She opened it in haste, scrolling straight to the last line.

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Her eyes gleamed. “Mom! Cathryn isn’t Dad’s daughter!”

Zoe’s head snapped up, her gaze sharp as flint. “You have proof?”

Jordyn thrust the phone at her, breathless. “Look! The DNA report says she and I aren’t related at all!”

The world seemed to tilt. Zoe’s stomach dropped, her pupils widening.

Jordyn nearly danced with triumph. “See? You were always afraid she’d secure Dad’s assets. But this proves it! Cathryn’s just Bettina’s bastard—trash, nothing more—”

Smack!

The crack of Zoe's palm echoed through the room. Jordyn reeled, clutching her stinging cheek. Her voice trembled with disbelief. "Mom... why?"

"I told you never to test against Cathryn!" Zoe's fury scorched the air.

"But she's not Dad's!" Jordyn cried, tears gathering in her eyes. "Isn't that good news? Why are you acting like it's a curse?"

Zoe's lips quivered, secrets burning her tongue. How could she admit the truth? That Bettina hadn't been the unfaithful one—she had.

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That the bastard child wasn't Cathryn, but Jordyn. Of course the report showed no link—Jordyn wasn't Richard's by blood in the first place.

Zoe steeled herself, her voice turning cold. "If Cathryn learns the truth, she'll claw her way back to her mother's fortune. And when she does, you'll be left with nothing."

"B-but Bettina's assets are already Dad's," Jordyn sobbed, desperation spilling out. "I'm Dad's only real daughter. I should inherit everything—"

“You’re too naive,” Zoe cut her off, her brows drawn into a dark knot. “Cathryn isn’t alone. She has people behind her. Powerful people. She’ll fight, and she won’t stop until she wins.”

Jordyn gave a bitter little laugh. “More powerful than Andrew?”

Zoe’s throat tightened. For a heartbeat, she nearly confessed her suspicion that Cathryn’s strongest shield might be Andrew himself. But doubt gnawed at her. Rumors painted Andrew as a ruined man—disfigured, crippled. Yet from Jordyn’s account, Damien was devastatingly handsome. That didn’t sound like the same man.

And worse—if Jordyn learned the truth, her ambition would flare. She already wore the title of Mrs. Watson, barely manageable as it was. If Jordyn set her sights on Andrew... Zoe didn’t dare imagine. Vanessa’s shadow already loomed too close.

Without another word, Zoe snatched the phone and erased the report. “This report never existed.”

“Mom!” Jordyn’s voice cracked as tears slid hot down her cheeks.

“All my life, the rich girls spat on me, called me a mistress’s brat. While Cathryn basked as the Moore heiress, I was filth in their eyes. This—this proves them wrong! And you’d rather bury it?”

Zoe pulled Jordyn close, stroking her hair with trembling hands. Her voice softened into velvet. “Cathryn may wear the Moore name, but what did she ever have? Her food, her clothes, her toys—hand-me-down scraps fit for the servants’ children. You, Jordyn... you were always your father’s jewel. He spoiled you while Cathryn took the whip. Tell me—have you ever once gone hungry? Slept without silk over your skin?”

Jordyn’s lashes fluttered. A smile of sudden clarity broke through her tears. “So Dad despises Cathryn because he knows she’s illegitimate. That’s why he favors me, isn’t it?”

Zoe forced a brittle smile. “Perhaps.”

Jordyn had no idea the real reason Richard doted on her was because Zoe had worked tirelessly in bed to keep him satisfied—driving a wedge between him and Cathryn and securing a comfortable life for herself and her daughter.

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