

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 31:

Held in place by his steady touch, she could only lie there while his fingertips traced the ridges of her scars.

Every brush over the raised tissue made her flinch. The potion burned at first, then cooled, leaving behind a slow, soothing relief that loosened the tightness in her chest. A soft, startled sound slipped from her throat before she could stop it.

That faint whimper pierced Andrew, coiling tight in his chest. His body went rigid, his breathing roughening.

“Mmm... it feels good...” The words escaped on a sigh, unguarded. The chill of the medicine sank into her raw skin like sudden rain after a drought, easing the constant burn that had haunted her for years.

That single, thoughtless word—good—nearly snapped Andrew’s last thread of restraint.

Restraint was the one thing Andrew believed he had mastered, but the longer his hands lingered—potion slick on Cathryn’s skin—the more it betrayed him.

Cathryn shifted, stirring just enough that the curve of her breast pressed against her arm.

The faint outline caught Andrew's eye before he could stop himself. He snapped his gaze away as if burned, heat racing through his veins.

The silence broke when she lifted her head, her voice soft. "Is Andrew your brother?"

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His hand stilled mid-stroke.

Cathryn tilted her head, watching him closely. "He was the one who saved me today."

"I see." The words came out distracted, his mind still snagged on the delicate sweep of her skin, the soft rise of her chest.

"Could you introduce me to him?" she ventured, her eyes wide and earnest.

Whatever warmth had been in him drained, replaced by something cold and sharp. “Why do you want to meet him?”

Cathryn turned her face slightly, hiding the edge that flashed through her gaze. “He’s done so much for me. I want to thank him face-to-face.”

But gratitude was only half the truth. What she really wanted was a chance to strike a deal with Andrew over the program she had painstakingly crafted over several years. She needed an ally powerful enough to help her reclaim her mother’s assets—and annihilate the Moore and Watson families. The man in front of her had influence, but compared to Andrew, he was little more than a shadow. Still, one introduction could rewrite her entire future.

“It was nothing,” Andrew said coolly. “To him, just a passing moment. Forget about it.”

“But what feels trivial to him is life-changing for me,” she said softly, refusing to back down. “If you could just—”

“No.” His answer was sharp, leaving no room for hope.

Cathryn gave a rueful smile. It seemed this man and Andrew weren’t on good terms after all. And it made sense—one was the acknowledged heir, the other an illegitimate son left out in the cold. Same surname, worlds apart in standing. Brotherly affection was hardly something to expect.

Andrew pulled Cathryn's nightdress back over her shoulder, covering the curve of her skin. "Five days from now, you will divorce Liam. Then you and I will go register our marriage."

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Her lashes trembled, mist clouding her eyes. "There's something I have to do first."

At last, the endless gray skies split open and let the sun through.

Clutching Bettina's urn to her chest, Cathryn slid into the passenger seat of Andrew's car. "You really didn't need to come with me," she said quietly, her fingers tracing the urn's cool ceramic.

Cathryn had decided to lay Bettina to rest far from the city, in a quiet village nearly two hundred kilometers away. Bettina had once taken her there—a village tucked among low green hills, its air sharp and clean, its days unhurried.

The Moore family's attempt to seize her mother's ashes and lock them in their mausoleum only made Cathryn more determined not to let Bettina be bound to their world. She dismissed the thought of burying her in a pristine city graveyard. Bettina's final resting place would be far from greed and ambition—somewhere untouched by deceit and plotting.

Cathryn remembered Bettina as a woman forever shadowed by melancholy, never once looking at Richard with the kind of affection the rumors had painted.

Only during a single visit to that secluded village had Cathryn seen her mother truly smile—radiant, unguarded, breathtaking enough to carve itself into Cathryn's memory.

Cathryn had never understood why a woman raised amid wealth and etiquette found peace in such a simple place. The reasons didn't matter. In the end, the only thing that carried weight was Bettina's love for it. This was where Cathryn wanted her to rest.

"We signed a contract to stay married for one year. That alone makes it my duty to be here," Andrew remarked, his tone soft.

“Thank you,” Cathryn replied, her voice steady. His consideration and kindness deserved to be met in kind—even if one day they would go their separate ways.

Guided by memory, Cathryn traced her way back to the village. No paved road led there, only dusty tracks winding between low hills. The few scattered homes looked untouched by time, as if the years had simply passed them by.

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Cathryn followed the path Bettina had once taken her along, climbing the mountain they had conquered together.

Memories surfaced of being barely five, her small hand clasped in her mother’s as they reached the summit. Bettina’s eyes had shone with a rare light when she bent down and whispered, “This is where you were born, Cathryn.”

At the time, Cathryn had been too young to understand, clinging instead to what everyone told her—that her birthplace had been Olekgan Hospital.

“The view is breathtaking,” Andrew murmured, awe threading into his voice.

Standing on the ridge, the valley sprawled beneath them—lush and rolling, veiled in drifting mist that glowed under the sunlight, as though they were looking into another world.

Cathryn chose a sturdy tree, broke the soil with deliberate care, and set the urn into the earth. She lingered, her palm pressed to the fresh mound, her throat tight. “Rest easy, Mom. No one will bother you here,” she murmured, then bowed.

Andrew stood silently beside her, bowing his head in solemn respect.

When Cathryn straightened, her eyes lifted to the restless clouds and the shifting light sweeping across the valley below. Her voice softened to a near plea. “If the day ever comes when I accidentally meet my end, could you lay me here?”

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A faint furrow creased Andrew's brow, as if her words had pierced straight through him.

A sharp, brittle chuckle escaped her. "Forget it. A year from now, we'll go our separate ways. You'll have no reason to come looking for my body, let alone bury me."

He studied her slight figure framed against the endless sky, mountains standing like silent sentinels behind her. The words surged in his chest: Not while I'm here. You won't die before me. He wasn't a man who dealt in sentiment, but she would soon bear his surname. The least he owed her was that vow.

He had once been baffled by why his grandmother had chosen her for him. Now he saw it clearly—of all people, Cathryn fit him best.

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"Come on," he said at last, reaching for her hand. "It's time we headed down."

Cathryn hesitated, her fingers brushing the mound of earth. "Let me stay with her a little longer."

Without warning, he bent and swept her into his arms. “Stay any longer and you’ll miss the courthouse’s working hours.”

Today was the day she and Liam would finalize their divorce.

Before they headed to the courthouse, Andrew stopped at a quiet boutique and chose a white fitted dress for Cathryn—simple yet elegant, carrying a quiet dignity that caught the light.

The Maybach pulled up in front of the courthouse, coming to a stop with effortless grace.

Andrew reached for the door handle, intending to get out and accompany Cathryn, but she slid on her sunglasses and said coolly, “I’ll go in alone to take care of the divorce paperwork with Liam.”

Andrew nodded. Cathryn stepped out of the car.

Liam was leaning against the courthouse entrance, lazily smoking to pass the time. The moment he lifted his head, his body went rigid.

A figure stepped into view—elegant and dazzling. A white bodycon dress hugged every curve as if it had been tailored to her body alone. Her narrow waist drew the eye in a

clean, graceful line. She tilted her head slightly, the dark lenses of her sunglasses catching the light, her delicate features framed with precision. Her lips—soft, painted a dangerous red—looked made to tempt.

Liam stared, forgetting the cigarette still clamped between his lips. That face, that figure—flawless.

As the distance between them closed, a subtle, fresh fragrance drifted over, and Liam's blood thrummed hot in his veins. He swallowed hard, sliding the cigarette from his lips into his fingers.

Jordyn's scar had long since drained him of desire—just looking at her was enough to twist his stomach with disgust. A month without release had pushed him to the brink. But this breathtaking woman standing in front of him... she made every shred of restraint splinter. He wanted to grab her, taste her, forget everything else.

Behind the dark lenses, Cathryn saw the hunger in Liam's eyes, the way he all but devoured her with his stare. A low, derisive sound slipped from her throat. For the past three years, Liam and his mother had kept her firmly under their thumb, never once allowing her to shine. He had never truly seen her. Yet on the very day their marriage was ending, suddenly she had his full attention.

The cigarette between his fingers smoldered as Liam gawked at her, and when she stopped in front of him, a thrill of arrogant excitement shot through him. Surely she wanted his attention.

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He pulled out his phone, a crooked grin spreading across his face. “Hey, gorgeous. How about giving me your number?”

Watching him act like a worthless mutt, Cathryn’s thoughts twisted with silent contempt. How laughably pathetic. Lust had swallowed him whole. Desire had long since withered the moment Jordyn’s scar appeared, leaving him prowling for new prey. Some men never changed—once a cheater, always a cheater.

A flicker at the edge of her vision drew Cathryn’s attention. Jordyn was heading their way. Fine—she would let Jordyn feel what it was like to have her man stolen right out from under her nose.

Cathryn let her gaze drift down to her stilettos, the picture of indifference.

Liam caught on instantly. With exaggerated gallantry, he crouched and whipped off his suit jacket, using it to polish the tips of her heels. “It’s my honor to shine your shoes, miss.”

The moment Jordyn saw Liam on his knees for another woman, rage swallowed her. She stormed forward, her voice slicing through the air. “Liam!”

Liam glanced up, irritation flickering darkly in his eyes.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jordyn snapped.

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Liam straightened, smoothing his jacket while lying with infuriating calm. “Having a business conversation with this lady.”

Jordyn’s glare cut to the chic woman beside him, her chest tightening under the bite of jealousy.

Cathryn's mouth curved into a small, wicked smile. She took out her phone and tipped it toward Liam, the screen glowing with a number. "Didn't you ask for this?"

"You wouldn't dare!" Jordyn's voice cracked like a whip as she shot daggers at Liam.

Without sparing Jordyn a glance, Liam's grin turned lewd as he tapped the digits into his phone. "Just for business. Don't make a fuss."

Jordyn's fury and bitterness spiked. She itched to tear this woman apart right then and there.

But the moment Liam hit save, his entire body went still. A notification flashed across the screen: "This number is already in your contacts."

Frowning, he tapped it. A familiar message thread opened instantly. The last message glared up at him, sent only minutes ago. "Move your ass to the courthouse now. I'm done waiting—no more stalling."

Slowly, Cathryn slid off her sunglasses, a cool, mocking curve at her lips. "Not divorced yet, and you already don't even recognize me—your own wife?"

Liam's phone slipped from his hand and hit the floor with a sharp clatter. Shock tore through him, his eyes widening as if he'd been struck.

Cathryn? How the hell could it be her?

His gaze swept her from head to toe—silky skin, the elegant line of her waist, long flawless legs that seemed to go on forever. How was she this breathtaking?

“You slut—you’re still trying to seduce Liam!” Jordyn spat, her face twisted with rage.

Draped in a shapeless black dress, her scarred neck hidden, Jordyn looked ghostly pale, drained of all vitality.

Standing beside Kathryn—glowing in a crisp white dress—Jordyn looked even more pitiful, like a shadow that had lost its light.

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Humiliation scorched through Jordyn, leaving her rigid with fury. Cathryn had chosen today—the day of the divorce—to dress like this, as if flaunting her determination to take Liam back.

Liam's eyes clung to Cathryn as if glued there, unable to look away. He traced every line of her silhouette as though he'd been starved of the sight for years.

Cathryn's lashes fluttered as she lowered her gaze, her voice the perfect picture of heartbreak. "Now that things have come to this point, I've thought it through—since you two are so in love, I'll step aside."

Liam's expression faltered. How the fuck had he been so blind? Jordyn was nothing compared to Cathryn—Cathryn was ten times more beautiful, a hundred times more captivating. And yet he'd wasted three whole years with Jordyn, never once touching his own wife. Regret hit so violently he wanted to smash his fist into his own face.

Cathryn's lips curved in a cold, contemptuous smile as she slid her sunglasses back on. "Let's go. We have paperwork to finish."

It felt as if the floor had swallowed Liam's feet, keeping him from moving. Cathryn still bore his last name. Once the divorce was finalized, she would slip out of his world completely.

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But Jordyn yanked his arm and dragged him inside before he could protest.

While the clerks processed the divorce documents, Cathryn slipped away to the restroom. When she came back, Liam was already in the doorway, blocking her path.

She brushed past him with frosty composure. "No need to rush me. I'm doing exactly what's required to end this."

His hand shot out, closing around her wrist. "Those stunts you pulled at Zoe's birthday and at your mother's funeral—I know why. Jealousy toward Jordyn consumed you, desperate to keep me."

Cathryn spun back, frowning at him, disbelief flashing in her eyes. The sheer arrogance of this rotten bastard.

Liam's mouth curled into a smug half-smile. "If you want to stay married, I can grant you that."

With an edge of ice in her tone, Cathryn reminded him, “That’s not what you said a month ago. You swore you’d never regret submitting the divorce application.”

Liam’s confident smile faltered, freezing on his face.

Cathryn yanked her hand from his grip, pulled out a sanitizing wipe, and scrubbed her skin clean before tossing it into the trash. “Cut the nonsense, Liam. Let’s get the divorce over with today.”

Liam’s gaze lingered on her, regret tightening in his chest. Three years married to a stunner, and he hadn’t slept with her even once—choosing instead a woman like Jordyn. He slapped himself across the face, the sound cracking through the air. “I’ve been such a fool,” he muttered under his breath.

Before long, their names were called at the clerk’s desk.

Cathryn stepped up and handed over the required documents. Liam’s fingers clamped around them, refusing to let go, his knuckles whitening.

Jordyn tried to pry them free, but he tightened his grip, stubborn as ever.

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The clerk watched the standoff, irritation plain on her face. She slid Cathryn's documents back across the desk. "If you haven't made up your minds, come back when you're ready."

Both Cathryn and Jordyn answered at once. "We're ready."

The clerk's gaze flicked between them, clearly thrown. Then she looked at Jordyn and asked Cathryn, "And who's—"

A sly smile curved at Cathryn's lips. "My sister—and soon, she'll be marrying my soon-to-be ex-husband."

The clerk's face hardened. She glared at Liam and Jordyn. "I've seen plenty of messes in this office, but you two really take the prize."

Cathryn stood, snatched the documents from Liam's grip, and handed them to the clerk. The clerk wasted no time stamping the decree and sliding it across the counter. She winked at Cathryn. "Don't cry over garbage, sweetheart. There's always a better man waiting."

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Cathryn accepted the paperwork without blinking. "Thanks."

Jordyn snatched the decree from the clerk with a sour expression, then forced a bright smile at Liam. "Come on, let's get our marriage registered right now!"

Liam didn't move. He stared at the decree, regret shadowing his features. None of this would have happened if it weren't for Jordyn. Without her, he never would have let Cathryn go.

He tucked the decree into his pocket and shook his head. "We'll talk about marriage later."

Jordyn gaped at him, stunned. They had agreed—divorce Cathryn first, then register their marriage right after. Why was he hesitating now? It had to be because of Cathryn. Dressed like that, trying to win him back.

Anger flared as Jordyn jabbed a finger at Cathryn. “Look at you—parading around in public dressed like a tramp. Shameless.”

But there was nothing revealing about Cathryn’s outfit—no plunging neckline, no short skirt. It was her natural beauty and effortless grace that drew every stare.

Jordyn’s baseless accusation only made her look petty and insecure.

A calm, deep voice cut through the tension. “My woman’s outfit hardly strikes me as inappropriate. If anything, it enhances her charm. Who are you to pass such groundless judgment?”

Andrew strode over with a presence that made everyone turn. Broad-shouldered and lean, his face all clean lines and quiet strength, he moved with the kind of control and confidence that filled the room.

He didn’t hesitate. He went straight to Cathryn and wrapped her in his arms, holding her close.

Cathryn rested against him, a gentle, unbothered smile playing at her lips.

Together, they looked like something pulled from a gallery—so perfectly matched that the entire room seemed to pause, jealousy flickering in every glance.

Jordyn's eyes widened, stunned. She had never seen a man so handsome—so striking he barely seemed real, as if he'd stepped straight out of her wildest fantasies. Next to him, Liam looked shorter by half a head, his looks paling beyond compare.

Jordyn's world spun, but it was nothing compared to the devastation in Liam's eyes. Cathryn, who had spent the last three years trapped inside the Watson home, now stood in the arms of a man like this? It didn't add up. A sinking feeling dragged Liam's mind back to the Maybach that had come for her once before.

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Regret coiled in Liam's stomach, sour and relentless. Cathryn had been his. The thought of another man holding her so soon made him want to scream. And the worst part—she was still untouched. If people found out, what would they say about him? Would the whispers start, people questioning his manhood?

Sweat prickled at Liam's hairline, and a knot of anger and shame tightened inside him.

Andrew leaned closer, his words meant only for Cathryn. "Shall we get our registration done?"

Cathryn nodded, calm and steady.

Jordyn could barely process what she was hearing. This devastatingly handsome man wanted to marry Cathryn? Out of all the women in the world—why Cathryn?

Planting herself in Andrew's path, Jordyn demanded, "Do you have any idea she just got her divorce decree?"

Andrew's gaze on Cathryn was gentle. "I'm well aware. That's exactly why I'm here. A woman like her won't stay on the market for long, and I won't let the chance slip by."

Fury twisted Jordyn's features. Liam didn't want to marry her now, yet Cathryn stepped out of a failed marriage and straight into the arms of a man who made Liam look ordinary. How was Jordyn supposed to live with that?

In a sudden, reckless surge, Jordyn lunged and grabbed Cathryn's dress, yanking hard at the collar from behind. "Don't let her looks fool you! Underneath, she's nothing but damaged goods. Her back is covered in scars that would make anyone sick—"

The fabric tore, baring Cathryn's back for everyone to see.

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A nasty smirk tugged at Jordyn's lips as she swept her gaze across the crowd, waiting for their reactions instead of looking at Cathryn's back. She'd seen those scars before—a network of old wounds etched into Cathryn's skin. No man could look at them and still want her. Once this handsome man saw them, he'd drop the idea of marrying Cathryn instantly.

Jordyn's smug expression shattered the moment she finally looked.

Instead of scars, Cathryn's back was pristine—smooth and unblemished, nothing but flawless skin.

Jordyn's voice shook as she stared in disbelief. "No... that can't be!"

She lunged again, reaching to rake her nails across Cathryn's skin, desperate to prove what she remembered.

Andrew's gaze turned ice-cold. He knocked Jordyn's hand away and pulled Cathryn into a protective embrace. "Keep your hands off her," he said, his voice deadly calm.

Murmurs of outrage rolled through the crowd.

"Did that rude woman really just try to strip that stunner in public? Utterly low."

"And she's the one passing judgment on that stunner's outfit. She should judge herself—she's obviously jealous, must hate that the stunner's beauty is undeniable."

Eyes blazing, Jordyn stabbed a finger toward Cathryn and shouted at the crowd, "She must have applied some concealer! I know what I saw—her back is covered in scars! You're all being fooled!"

A voice from the crowd...

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...shut her down. “We’ve got eyes, you know. Nobody here is seeing what you’re claiming.”

The girl in the white dress stood tall, her skin radiant under the lights, not a single mark in sight.

Andrew shrugged off his suit jacket and draped it gently over Cathryn’s shoulders, shielding her from the gawkers. Then he stepped forward, closing in on Jordyn, and lifted his hand.

Jordyn flinched, cowering as she braced for a slap.

But Andrew had something else in mind.

He seized her by the collar and yanked, ripping her neckline wide open.

A shocked gasp swept the room as everyone stared at the jagged scar slashing across Jordyn's neck and shoulder—harsh and ugly, now fully exposed for all to see.

A murmur rippled through the room, disdainful glances sharpening on Jordyn.

“So she's the one with a scar.”

“It all makes sense now—she's jealous of another woman's looks. She's a total head case.”

“Who knows what kind of trouble she got mixed up in to end up with a scar like that?”

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Jordyn's composure shattered. She clutched at her dress, let out a wild cry, and tried to bury herself in Liam's arms.

But Liam recoiled, shoving her away. His face tightened with embarrassment and disappointment. He hadn't touched Jordyn in weeks. She had promised him Adrian's remedies would make her scar fade soon. He had believed her blindly—only to discover she'd lied.

Regret churned inside him. He never should have divorced Cathryn.

Liam's voice barely held together. "Cathryn..." he called, regret carved deep into his eyes.

Cathryn didn't spare him a glance. She slipped her arm around Andrew's waist, her smile calm and effortless. "Let's head out and get our marriage registered."

Andrew nodded and held her close as they made their way together to the nearby city hall.

While the clerk laid out the paperwork, Cathryn's thoughts raced. She was finally going to learn the name of the man she was about to call her husband. She and Andrew stood side by side as the forms were slid across the counter.

Cathryn picked up the pen, her movements steady and controlled, her expression cool—as if she were signing a business contract.

The last time she had signed marriage papers, Liam had been the one standing beside her. Back then, she had worn a smile full of excitement and anticipation, convinced she was stepping into a life of happiness. Instead, that day had opened the door to tragedy.

Now another man stood at her side, and the cruel twist of fate didn't escape her. She didn't even know his full name, yet here they were, about to be legally bound to each other.

Andrew remained unreadable as stone, his expression fixed and unyielding.

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The clerk shifted uneasily, eyes darting between them. Couples usually walked in brimming with excitement, whispering and laughing, but these two carried the air of strangers parting ways. Together, they looked flawless—she as radiant as a star...

...on screen, and he was tall enough to turn heads—but neither of them allowed the faintest spark of joy to show.

After a few strokes of their pens, the clerk pressed the seal and slid the marriage certificate across the polished desk.

Cathryn's gaze went straight to his name the moment the certificate was in her hands.

Damien Brooks.

She searched the archives of her memory and found nothing. The Brooks family tree held no such man. He had to be an illegitimate son, tucked away in secrecy, never meant to surface.

The clerk forced a practiced smile. "Congratulations. I wish you both a long and happy marriage."

The words rang hollow, almost mocking.

Cathryn swallowed her response and only shook her head in silence. The contract allowed only a year. Any promise of forever had been written out from the start.

Cathryn and Andrew left city hall and walked back to the car waiting at the courthouse entrance.

There, Jordyn clung to Liam's arm like a lifeline, her voice breaking as she cried, "Liam, my scars can still be fixed. Look at Cathryn—hers have already disappeared."

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Liam's expression didn't soften. His lips stayed tight, his eyes colder than glass.

Desperation sharpened Jordyn's tone as she played her final card. "My teacher, Kestrel, swore he'd give me the well-crafted program soon—if you marry me."

A flicker of surprise crossed Liam's face. "You've been in touch with Kestrel?"

Jordyn lifted her chin and nodded.

Andrew's stride faltered at the mention of Kestrel. Jordyn knew Kestrel?

Cathryn stilled too, her grip tightening around the phone in her hand. She sincerely hoped Liam and Jordyn would be tied together for good, sparing the rest of the world their mess.

And if Jordyn married into the Watson family, she would be shackled by the same chains that had once strangled Cathryn. That felt like justice. Cathryn would see to it that Jordyn married Liam and sealed her fate.

Resolve flashed through Cathryn's eyes as she slid her thumb across her phone screen and unlocked it.

Abruptly, Jordyn's voice shot up with excitement. "Liam, Kestrel just logged in!"

Snatching the phone from her hand, Liam's breath caught. On the screen, Kestrel's avatar glowed bright. "You're serious... You really have a close connection with Kestrel!"

His arm wrapped around Jordyn, his eyes lit with genuine thrill.

Andrew's phone vibrated in his pocket. Karl's voice came through the line. "Mr. Brooks, Kestrel just came online."

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Andrew lowered his voice. “Where is Kestrel now?”

“Around Olekgan courthouse.”

Andrew’s gaze sharpened. His eyes flicked toward the courthouse and swept the area. Closing time was near; only a few people lingered.

“The signal hasn’t moved,” Karl added.

Andrew scanned again. Everyone was moving—except one.

Jordyn.

The realization struck, and a shadow crossed Andrew's face. Could Jordyn really be Kestrel? The thought seemed absurd. She looked too shallow, too naive. How could someone like her be the mind behind a program that shook the world?

Andrew stepped aside, lowering his voice into the phone. "Dig into Jordyn Hussain. Start with her academic history."

Meanwhile, Liam pulled Jordyn into his arms, ready to head for city hall. "We're getting married today."

He might loathe touching her now, but Watson Tech's future weighed heavier than his disgust. To resurrect the company, he needed Kestrel's brilliance. And marrying Jordyn was his way in. Binding himself to her meant anchoring himself to Kestrel.

Jordyn spotted Cathryn standing alone and couldn't resist taunting her. "That man with the perfect face—you must've paid him to put on a show. You're bitter I took Liam from you, so you hired a handsome guy to act with you just to make yourself feel better."

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Cathryn rolled her eyes, saying nothing.

Then Cathryn's phone buzzed—Andrew's name flashed across the screen. His voice was steady. "I've got business to handle. Go wait for me in the car."

"Fine," Cathryn replied, but her gaze followed Jordyn and Liam as they hurried toward city hall to register their marriage, their pace frantic. She stayed rooted to the spot for a moment longer, then strolled leisurely toward the car, a satisfied smirk tugging at her lips.

Moments later, Jordyn emerged from city hall with Liam, waving their fresh marriage certificates like a prize. They walked ahead hand in hand—until something down the curb snagged their attention.

Gavin—the elderly driver from before—was already there, holding the car door open for Cathryn.

Looping her arm through Liam's, Jordyn closed the distance in a quick rush, then slowed to a smug strut. "I knew it. That pretty man was just some actor you paid for. Once the act was done, he vanished. And look at you now—divorced, discarded. No wealthy man would ever want you. So you've settled for this old driver instead."

In Jordyn's eyes, the old driver had no wealth of his own—just his employer's uniform and his employer's car. Still, he had offered Cathryn kindness and dignity when she needed it most.

Liam's gaze flicked over Gavin's graying hair and lined face, and his mood lifted. That was more like it. He'd known it. Cathryn would never have anyone better than him.

Maybe—just maybe—there was still room for him to take her back.

Hearing Jordyn's words, Gavin's expression darkened, fury tightening his jaw.

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Cathryn, on the other hand, remained composed. “Ignore her. She always spouts nonsense without thinking.”

Jordyn lifted her foot, ready to lash out with a sharp kick at the Maybach’s gleaming door.

Liam caught her in alarm. “Are you out of your mind? We can’t afford to offend the owner of a million-dollar luxury car. A single scratch could cost more than you make in a year.”

Her face paling, Jordyn yanked her foot back, though her anger didn’t ease. “Showing off with someone else’s car like it’s hers... Cathryn really has no shame.”

Liam’s eyes flicked to Jordyn’s neck. “Can you really erase that scar?”

Her answer came without hesitation. “Dr. Clarke’s treatment is miraculous. Just look at Cathryn. Her back was once ruined with scars, and now it’s flawless.”

“I heard each of Dr. Clarke’s remedies is only made once,” Liam muttered.

“That’s nonsense,” Jordyn scoffed. “Cathryn smashed the scar-fading potion in the hospital last time, yet look at her now—not a single mark remains.”

Liam gave a thoughtful nod. “You’re right. That’s hard to argue with.”

The thought of Cathryn’s perfect skin fed Jordyn’s jealousy, but it also sparked hope. If scars that severe could vanish, then hers could too. Now that she wore the title of Mrs. Watson, she believed nothing was beyond her reach. With Liam’s name and wealth behind her, Dr. Clarke would have no choice but to yield and produce the scar-fading potion for her.

A short while after Jordyn and Liam departed, Andrew slipped quietly into the Maybach.

Cathryn turned to him at once. “Could you tell me how I can reach Dr. Clarke?”

Cathryn was at a loss. Adrian might have been her mother’s friend, but he was elusive—no phone, no fixed residence, no routine. He drifted in and out of her life like a phantom, always appearing on his own terms. Yet Damien had managed to obtain Adrian’s scar-fading potion twice. He had to know a way. She...

...wanted to warn Adrian: under no circumstances could the scar-fading potion fall into Jordyn’s hands.

Andrew’s tone was even. “My grandmother reached out to Dr. Clarke both times. If you need Dr. Clarke’s contacts, I’ll ask her.”

Cathryn shook her head firmly. “That won’t be necessary.” If Amanda got involved, the truth—that Cathryn had taken another woman’s place in marrying this man—would come out.

Andrew acknowledged it with an absent nod.

Cathryn studied him closely. “Something’s bothering you. What is it?”

He hesitated before asking, “Jordyn studied abroad, didn’t she? Was she a top student there?”

Karl’s investigation painted Jordyn’s past as pristine: a prestigious university overseas, a software engineering degree, credentials too polished to be a coincidence.

But Andrew wasn’t convinced. Jordyn never struck him as someone capable of writing sophisticated code, yet on paper her background lined up too neatly.

Cathryn let out a derisive laugh. “Heh. Richard donated five million dollars to secure a spot in that school for her.”

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 42:

Richard had never allowed Cathryn a proper education, yet he threw away a fortune to ship the unaccomplished Jordyn abroad and polish her credentials.

If not for the shadowy organization that had noticed Cathryn's brilliance in childhood and trained her in secret, she would have grown up illiterate.

Andrew's brow lifted. So Jordyn hadn't been Kestrel after all. Kestrel was a once-in-a-generation prodigy. Jordyn didn't fit the bill.

Cathryn caught the flicker in his eyes. "What's on your mind?"

His mouth curved with faint amusement. “Nothing serious. Just chasing down a lead on someone. For a second, I wondered if Jordyn was connected to that person.”

“Who is it you’re looking for?”

“You wouldn’t know them. It’s work-related,” he said, letting the matter drop. Cathryn had never been formally schooled; she likely hadn’t even heard of Kestrel. He saw no point in explaining.

Cathryn grinned. “I once thought you were just some spoiled trust-fund kid. Turns out you actually work.”

In her mind, most illegitimate children were tossed...

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...scraps of allowance and left to idle on the margins, never entrusted with anything real.

Andrew tilted his head. “So that’s how you see me?”

Her cheeks warmed, and she gave a sheepish smile. “We hardly knew each other before. Maybe we could get better acquainted moving forward.”

He nodded, his tone deliberate, threaded with something deeper. “I’d like that.”

Cathryn thought she sensed a hidden meaning in his words, but she couldn’t quite grasp it. It wasn’t until night settled in that the weight behind them finally sank in.

After dinner, Margaret brought a plate of fresh fruit into the living room, urging Cathryn to eat.

Cathryn padded in quietly, dressed in a nightgown, the soft fabric brushing her legs.

Andrew lounged on the sofa with a magazine, but the moment his eyes lifted to her, the image of her flawless, unmarked back flared in his mind. His body went rigid. He swallowed, unsteady. The scars that had once marred her skin were gone, leaving her almost impossibly perfect—a beauty that seemed to invite touch.

Oblivious, Cathryn bent with casual grace and reached for a strawberry. Her head tipped slightly, exposing the elegant line of her neck and the faintest glimpse of cleavage beneath the loose nightdress.

Andrew’s breath caught, his body tightening as he shifted.

Still unaware, Cathryn sat beside him with quiet ease, plucking fruit from the plate, savoring each bite at an unhurried pace.

A delicate fragrance drifted from her, slipping into his senses and refusing to let go. Heat stirred low in his chest. He reached for his glass and drained the water as if it could douse the fire crawling beneath his skin.

From the corner of his vision, he caught her lips—soft and red—parting around a strawberry. A bead of juice lingered, and her tongue flicked out to catch it.

Andrew's eyes darkened. For one dangerous heartbeat, he wanted nothing more than to crush his mouth against hers.

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 43:

Before he could move, she rose—then faltered. Her body tipped forward, and she tumbled straight into his arms.

He reacted on instinct, tossing the magazine aside. His arm locked around her waist, her warmth searing through the thin fabric.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurted, breathless. “I just lost my footing.”

She scrambled to straighten, her hand searching blindly for support—until it landed on his crotch.

They both froze.

Andrew’s breath hitched. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Cathryn’s eyes went wide as realization hit, and heat rushed to her cheeks. “Sorry, I—I didn’t mean to...”

His voice dropped, low and rough with want. “Still want to deny your seducing attempts?”

Flustered, Cathryn wrenched herself upright, smoothing her nightdress with trembling hands before darting back toward her bedroom.

Andrew lifted his hand, breathing in the faint trace of her scent left on his fingertips. A slow smile curved his lips. If she took even one more step toward him, he wouldn’t hold back.

She was maddeningly good at setting him on fire—then running, leaving him to smolder.

He arched a brow, curiosity fully piqued. He was eager to see just how far she was willing to take this game.

Andrew withdrew into the study, burying himself in spreadsheets in the hope of dousing the heat raging inside him.

Meanwhile, Cathryn retreated to her bedroom, fully absorbed in a variety show playing on the screen. There was no way she was leaving this room—not with Andrew likely to throw accusations about her “seducing” him every time their paths crossed.

The show was pure chaos. Contestants yelled and howled as they stumbled barefoot across a gauntlet of Lego bricks, their cries and laughter tangling into a noisy mess.

From his desk in the study, Andrew caught snippets of the racket drifting from Cathryn's room. He called for Margaret. "What's going on with Cathryn?"

Margaret's cheeks flushed. "I'll go check..."

Noticing her reaction, he stopped her with a flick of his hand. A thought sparked—half suspicion, half disbelief. "Forget it. Let her be."

His jaw tightened. Was Cathryn seriously in there watching porn? So much for her innocent act. Maybe she wasn't as shy as she pretended.

Unable to focus, Andrew abandoned his work and headed for his own room. He had never planned to share more than a name with her—just a wife on paper, a shield to stop Cara from sending more questionable women his way. Yet the longer they lived under the same roof, the more he found himself wrestling with a desire he couldn't suppress. Her scent, the way she moved, the way she existed so close to him—it all gnawed at his self-control. Maybe this was what people meant by an irresistible pull.

Meanwhile, Cathryn had turned off the variety show and put on a yoga routine instead.

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 44:

Sweat trickled down her back as she followed the instructor's voice. The old scars would have stung by now, but Adrian's miracle cure had left her skin smooth and free. She felt as if she were living in a new body. She had to admit it—the scar-fading potion worked like magic. Years of shame and discomfort had been wiped away in the short time since she'd used it.

She bent and stretched through each pose, breath turning ragged, muscles trembling with effort.

Every gasp, every shaky exhale carried through the thin walls—straight into the room next door.

Andrew's bedroom.

Andrew had never realized how much sound carried through this house—tonight, every whimper and sigh from her room seemed to pour straight into his ears. Her breathing was uneven, quick; soft moans barely stifled, testing the last edges of his patience.

What on earth was she doing in there?

First he'd suspected she was watching porn... and now, was she actually—

His mind ran wild, conjuring images of her sprawled across the bed, arching with pleasure, lips parted in abandon. If her signals had been subtle before, now she was practically calling him in with open arms.

Andrew couldn't contain himself anymore. She was his wife now. In the eyes of the law, she belonged to him. If she wanted him that badly, he wasn't about to hold back.

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He sprang off the bed, stalked down the hallway, and shoved her door open without warning.

Cathryn looked up, cheeks flushed, skin damp with sweat.

But instead of finding her tangled in sheets, Andrew saw her stretched out on a yoga mat, her laptop open, streaming an instructor's calm voice. She was doing yoga—nothing like what he'd imagined.

His voice came out low and hoarse. "What was that noise just now? All that yelling?"

Still catching her breath, she answered, "It was a variety show. The losers had to walk across Lego bricks barefoot."

Embarrassment washed over him. He'd let his mind run wild over nothing. Yet the memory of her falling into his arms earlier, her hand landing on his crotch, wouldn't leave him alone. He couldn't shake the feeling she was toying with him on purpose.

Cathryn sat in snug workout clothes, every curve on display, her waist exposed, her face flushed from exertion. The air seemed to buzz with her scent.

Andrew closed the door behind him. His eyes darkened as his self-control slipped, and he stepped toward her.

Cathryn's nerves spiked. "What... what are you going to do? Why did you close the door behind you?"

He held her gaze. “You prefer it open?”

Her face turned even redder. His answer twisted her words into something far bolder than she’d meant. “I... no, that’s not what I meant...” she sputtered, waving her hands in frantic denial.

But every frantic movement only made her chest rise and fall faster, drawing his attention in ways she probably didn’t even realize.

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 45:

Andrew's thoughts blurred as desire flooded his senses. He caught her by the waist and hauled her close until her hips met his.

"I want to do it."

Cathryn's eyes flew wide in shock. "Mr. Brooks, we're in a contract marriage. Our agreement didn't include intimacy."

A wicked grin curved his lips. "It didn't say we couldn't, either."

She tried to protest, but he cut her off, his voice rough. "Clause two. If you have a child, that child belongs to the Brooks family. So tell me—how do you plan to have a child without having sex?"

His closeness was overwhelming, his heat closing in until she could barely think. She pressed her hands weakly against his chest, words tangling on her tongue.

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"You've been tempting me again and again," Andrew murmured, heat simmering in his tone. "Well, you finally got your wish."

He scooped her up and laid her on the bed.

Cathryn glared, bristling at the way he twisted everything. She refused to take blame she didn't deserve. "Then I've changed my mind. I don't want to play anymore. Let me go."

She wriggled, trying to break free.

His grip tightened at her waist, pinning her in place, his eyes dark and intent.

Her cheeks burned, her breathing turning ragged. To Andrew, the look on her face was pure temptation—enough to shatter every rule he'd ever made for himself. He loosened his collar, looming over her. "We're way past the point of pretending, Cathryn. Don't pretend to push me away now."

Just then, a knock at the door cut through the charged silence.

Margaret's voice floated in softly from the hallway. "Mrs. Brooks, have you happened to see Mr. Brooks?"

Margaret was making her rounds, ready to lock up, but she hadn't seen Andrew. Worried she might accidentally leave him outside, she'd come to ask Cathryn.

Cathryn's mind jolted. "He... he stopped by to get something from my room. He's just... mmm—"

Before she could finish, Andrew's hand clamped over her mouth.

But it was already too late.

Margaret's voice wavered from the hallway, every syllable tangled in apology. "I'm so sorry... I didn't mean to walk in on you, really. I'm sorry!"

Margaret had worked here for over a month and had gotten used to Andrew and Kathryn barely sharing the same air, let alone a bedroom. The last thing she'd expected was to interrupt something like this.

Cathryn seized the chance and shoved Andrew away, then rushed to the door. She yanked it open and said crisply, "He just came to grab something. He's leaving now."

Margaret's eyes went wide as she took in the scene. Kathryn looked flustered, and Andrew looked rumpled—shirt half untucked, his gaze still dark.

Nervous energy poured off Margaret as she fidgeted with her hands, mortified by what she'd stumbled into.

Cathryn stood by the open door, silent and unmoving, clearly waiting for Andrew to leave.

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 46:

Andrew straightened his collar with deliberate care and moved slowly into the hallway, lips parting as if to say something.

But Cathryn slammed the door in his face—so fast it nearly clipped his nose.

“Mr. Brooks... I think Mrs. Brooks is angry,” Margaret whispered, shrinking into herself.

Andrew clenched his jaw, barely holding his temper. “Did I need you to tell me that?”

Margaret wilted under his glare, guilt written all over her. Andrew had finally had a chance to be with his wife, and she’d ruined it. She would make it up to him somehow.

Left staring at the closed door, Andrew knew the night had slipped through his fingers. Still, the unspent desire inside him didn’t fade. “Bring some ice to the bathroom,” he rasped, his voice rough and strained.

It took half the night for him to finally cool down.

Cathryn, oblivious to all of it, had worn herself out with yoga before bed. She fell into a deep sleep, not stirring until morning.

When Kathryn woke up and walked to...

...the bathroom, she froze at the threshold. Water had flooded the tiles, pooling around her feet.

“Margaret, the bathroom’s leaking!”

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Margaret rushed in, took one look at the waterlogged floor, and lowered her voice. “It’s not a plumbing issue, Mrs. Brooks.”

Cathryn’s brows knitted in confusion. “Then what happened?”

Margaret’s cheeks turned scarlet. “It’s Mr. Brooks... He needed to cool off last night.”

For a split second, Cathryn just stood there. Then realization struck, and heat rushed to her face. She retreated to her bedroom, mortified.

Only now did she understand how naïve she’d been. She had assumed this marriage was nothing but paperwork: follow the contract, keep her distance, and walk away in a year with clean hands. She hadn’t considered the physical side of the arrangement.

It seemed this one-year marriage wouldn’t be as smooth or as uneventful as she’d believed. Damien was a man, after all. On paper, she was his wife. If he wanted intimacy, would she be expected to meet his needs?

But she felt nothing for him. How was she supposed to respond?

Fortunately, Damien left early that morning and didn't return until late. Cathryn had the whole day to herself, spared from the question of how to face him.

The one who ran herself ragged was Margaret. Still guilt-ridden over last night's fiasco, she spent the morning at the market, determined to make up for it with a feast.

She bought oysters, rich cuts of lamb, and a basket of fiery spices. She even splurged on a bottle of imported liquor, famous for "spicing things up in the bedroom."

By dinnertime, the table was packed.

Andrew surveyed the spread, his frown barely concealed. "Since when do we serve any of this?"

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Chapter 47:

Margaret answered with a bright smile. “You always eat so plain, Mr. Brooks. I thought something different might do you good.”

Cathryn wasn’t picky; she ate whatever was served.

Margaret uncorked the bottle with a little flourish. “This came all the way from my hometown. A friend brought it in—it’s hard to get.”

Cathryn smiled politely. “Then I’ll give it a proper try.”

Margaret poured generously into Cathryn’s glass, then into Andrew’s. After that, she vanished, leaving them alone with the meal and the tension.

Dinner passed with barely a word exchanged.

As soon as Cathryn set down her fork, she stood. “I’m finished. I’ll head back to my room.”

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She made a quick exit, locking the door behind her. It was a habit she’d neglected before, but after last night, she wasn’t about to take any chances.

Cathryn flopped onto her bed and reached for the magazine on her pillow. Skimming through the pages, she suddenly froze.

A glossy photograph caught her eye—a painting titled Midnight Lilies by Louis Marquet.

Her breath hitched. It had been her mother’s favorite artwork. Bettina always said those lilies symbolized a love that never faded, no matter the distance.

According to the article, Midnight Lilies was up for auction.

The painting had once belonged to her mother. On Cathryn’s wedding day, she had carried it into the Watson house herself, determined to keep a piece of Bettina close.

But over the years, one by one, the treasures she’d brought into the Watson house had vanished. At first, she hadn’t wanted to make a fuss, telling herself they were just things—

easily misplaced. Until the day even her mother's priceless painting, Midnight Lilies, disappeared too.

She had turned the house upside down. She'd begged the staff for answers and pored over hours of security footage, but nothing turned up. Liam had only laughed, suggesting she'd hidden it herself and was making a scene.

And now, there it was in the auction pages, photographed under bright gallery lights.

Next to it, small print read: From the collection of Douglas Grant, esteemed collector.

Douglas was Vanessa Grant's grandfather. And Vanessa—of course—was Jordyn's best friend.

In that instant, everything clicked. None of those missing pieces had ever been misplaced. Liam must have handed them to Jordyn, and Jordyn had passed them to Vanessa's grandfather.

But Douglas didn't give anything away for free. Now he was donating Midnight Lilies to charity, which meant there was more to the story.

Cathryn's fists clenched in her lap. Her mother's painting had fallen into the hands of people who saw only a price tag. She would reclaim it—whatever it took.

But the odds were brutal. Midnight Lilies was worth tens of millions, a fortune she didn't have. And the auction was tomorrow.

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 48:

Meanwhile, in the dining room, Andrew sat in silence, staring at the table for a long moment before finally rising and walking to Cathryn's door.

He couldn't explain the turmoil twisting inside him. Lately, his body felt hijacked by a constant, burning restlessness—wound tight, desperate for release. He had replayed that single night with Cathryn more times than he could count. It was the only night they'd ever shared, and it refused to let him go.

Still, it had been his first time—awkward, uncertain, and nowhere near anything he'd ever call remarkable.

Now the hunger for her had returned with full force.

And this time, he was determined to do it better.

Fingers clenched around the doorknob, Andrew pressed down, but the lock held firm.

A sharp line creased his brow. Cathryn had locked the door from within. She was drawing a boundary—shutting him out.

His knuckles whitened as his hands curled into fists. First, she had gone out of her way to tempt him, to set his blood on fire... and now she was avoiding him? Anger surged through him like flame.

Inside her room, Cathryn gnawed at her thumbnail, her mind racing through impossible ways to raise ten million dollars in a single day.

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A sharp knock jolted her from her thoughts. Margaret's voice drifted through the door, warm and calm. "Mrs. Brooks, I've brought you a glass of warm milk."

Cathryn rose and cracked the door open. Before she could even blink, a tall figure pushed inside, trapping her against the wall as the door thudded shut behind him.

His clean, masculine scent hit her all at once.

Andrew loomed close, his breath hot against her cheek, his tone dropping into a husky growl. "You tease me until I'm burning up, and then shove me away. You think you can play games with me?"

Cathryn exhaled silently, weariness and exasperation tightening in her chest. That accusation—seduction—clung to her no matter how many times she tried to explain.

His head dipped lower, lips grazing the curve of her neck as his voice rumbled, thick with hunger. "Sleep with me tonight. I'll make it worth your while."

Her gaze flicked to the glossy magazine tossed carelessly on the bed, and a spark of resolve lit inside her. If he insisted on painting her as a temptress, maybe she could turn it to her advantage. Finding ten million on her own overnight was impossible.

But Damien had more money than he could count.

Besides, they were married now. And they'd already crossed lines before. If it meant one more night in his arms to get what she needed, she could endure it.

Cathryn braced a palm against his chest, nudging him back. "Fine. I'll sleep with you—but only if you agree to one condition."

His gaze darkened, hunger coiling in his eyes as if he'd sign away his soul if she asked. "Name it."

Her lashes lowered, her voice soft but steady. "Ten million."

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Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 49:

The heat in his expression snapped, replaced by a sharp, cutting fury. “What the hell do you take me for? And what do you think you are?”

The implication stung—paying her as if she were for sale. Was she really casting herself as a whore, and him as the man paying to fuck her?

Her tone stayed quiet but unyielding. “What we have is just a contract. There’s no love in it. I don’t owe you my body.”

His jaw clenched hard as he spat, “So every time you’ve dangled yourself in front of me, it was just for money?”

Cathryn forced herself to nod. “Yes.”

Andrew’s fingers clamped around her chin, tipping her face up until their eyes locked. “Ten million for an entire year with you? Not a bad bargain.”

Her fingers curled into fists. “It’s ten million for each night.”

His expression hardened, scorn curling his lips. “You really think you’re worth that much? You’ve been married before, and now you dare to ask ten million for a single night?”

Cathryn’s chest tightened. She knew how insane her terms sounded. But asking for less would only make him expect her in his bed every night—and she couldn’t stomach that.

Andrew’s hand fell away as if he’d been burned, his jaw rigid with fury. “For that price, I could buy a hundred women’s company. Why the fuck would I waste it on you?”

He yanked the door open and stalked out, his footsteps cracking down the hallway like gunshots.

Cathryn let out a shaky breath, regret twisting in her gut. Why hadn’t he even tried to negotiate? Ten million for two nights—maybe three—she might have agreed.

Back in his room, Andrew collapsed onto the bed, fury simmering under his skin. So this was her scheme—bait him with temptation, then bleed him dry once he was hooked.

He was the richest man in Olekgan, CEO of Brooks Group—and yet here he was, expected to pay to fuck his own wife.

The thought burned like acid. Humiliation scorched through him. He yanked the covers over himself, but the moment his eyes shut, her body was there—taunting him.

That night—the one and only between them—flared through his mind like a fever dream. Her arms locked around his waist. Her soft body trembling beneath him.

Twenty-eight years of living, and only then did he understand what it meant to be consumed by raw, physical bliss. And it had been Cathryn who'd shown him.

He'd poured twenty-eight years of pent-up desire into that one night—rough and merciless. The memory still clung to him: blood staining the sheets, her lip bitten until it bled.

Now, sprawled in the silence, a thought struck him—he'd been far too harsh.

He'd convinced himself she was a cheating wife, sneaking around behind her husband's back. Fueled by that belief, he'd taken her without mercy, as if punishing her could somehow justify his roughness. That night must have been nothing but misery for her. Was that why she recoiled from his touch now?

Guilt burned through him, twisting with the desire still simmering in his chest, leaving him restless and sleepless.

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 50:

Andrew got up and headed down the hall, knocking on Cathryn's door.

When she opened it, the flush in her cheeks betrayed her—she'd been on the verge of lowering her demand.

Without a word, Andrew flicked a check against her face, the crisp paper brushing her skin. "Fifty million," he said, his voice cool and clipped. "Consider the extra an advance."

Her fingers tightened around the check, heat climbing all the way to her ears. So this wasn't a one-time deal—he intended for it to happen again.

With a sharp lift of her chin, Cathryn pressed the check back into his hand. “That’s too much. I only need ten million.”

The painting she wanted to reclaim wouldn’t even cost that much.

Andrew’s eyes darkened, his expression turning grim. “Fine. Karl will transfer ten million to your account first thing tomorrow.”

He extended a hand toward her, clearly about to pull her into his arms, but she stepped out of reach. “Not until I see the money.”

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“Cathryn!” His patience finally snapped, his roar echoing down the quiet hallway.

Cathryn shrank back, her hands twisting together. “I’ll keep my word. You don’t need to worry.”

Andrew’s restraint was worn thin. “It’s not the first time. Do you really need to play coy?”

Cathryn's shoulders hunched, her voice barely audible. "Last time, it hurt. More than I expected. I just need time."

She wasn't lying. Their first night together had left her shaken, the pain lingering for days. She'd always known the first time could be uncomfortable, but nothing had prepared her for that.

But there was more she didn't say. Her body had recovered long ago. Tonight, she needed her mind sharp—she still had to study the auction list, map out every possible move, and find a way to secure her mother's painting with her bid. She had no time for intimacy. Not tonight.

Her words drained the fight out of Andrew. His voice softened, regret edging in. "I was rough with you last time. I'll be gentler now."

She shook her head, still unable to meet his eyes. "It wasn't just that. I tore, and I'm not fully healed yet."

His brow twitched. He hadn't realized how much he'd hurt her. "I wasn't exactly experienced," he admitted quietly.

She finally looked up. "Just give me two more days. I'll keep my promise."

Andrew swallowed, forcing himself to step back. "Get some rest. You'll see the money in your account tomorrow."

“Thank you, Mr. Brooks,” she said softly.

With nothing left to say, Andrew retreated to his own room.

Later, when Margaret learned about Andrew’s request for a bucket of ice in the bathroom, she was stunned. She glanced at Cathryn’s locked door, then at Andrew, who was clearly in a foul mood. “Mr. Brooks, aren’t you spending the night with Mrs. Brooks?”

Andrew’s jaw clenched as he snapped, “Do you really think I didn’t want to?”

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