

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 361:

Cathryn didn't spare her another word. She turned and slid back into the waiting cab.

The car had barely rolled a block before Cathryn's chest tightened again, suffocating her. She leaned forward. "Stop here. I will walk."

The night air bit cool against her skin as she wandered on.

She had only gone a short distance when a plain sedan slowed beside her. The window glided down, and a familiar voice cut through the silence. "Cathryn, hop in."

She blinked, startled to see him. "Harley? What on earth are you doing here?"

"Sophie was worried about you," Harley replied, his tone gentle but laced with concern. "She asked me to check in. I didn't expect to run into you in a place like this."

Home was still a distance away, and the evening chill was creeping in, so Cathryn slipped into the passenger seat without protest.

“Sorry about the ride,” Harley murmured with a sheepish grin. “The car is a little rough around the edges.”

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Cathryn’s lips curved into a small, amused smile. “It’s a car, not a ballroom. As long as it moves, it’s perfect.”

She fumbled for the seatbelt latch, fingers brushing empty air.

“Here—allow me.” Harley leaned closer, his arm crossing in front of her as he drew the belt across her body and snapped it into place.

From a distance, Elaine’s eyes narrowed at the intimate tableau framed by the car window. She raised her phone, the screen’s glow catching her face as she snapped a quick photo and, without hesitation, sent it straight to Andrew.

In the photo, Harley leaned so close to Cathryn that the angle made it look as though their lips were about to meet—a moment suspended between intimacy and scandal.

Elaine's mouth curved into a sly smile. Would Andrew still adore Cathryn if he believed she had strayed?

Within minutes of receiving the suggestive picture, Andrew had his car roaring toward Sophie's apartment.

Downstairs, he ran into Sophie returning from shopping, a paper bag tucked under her arm. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. "Mr. Brooks?" she blurted, startled.

Andrew leaned against his car, his expression carved from stone. A small pile of cigarette butts lay scattered at his feet—a silent testament to how long he had been waiting.

Flustered, Sophie had never imagined Andrew's interest in her ran so deep that he would linger downstairs for her, day after day.

His gaze slid past her shoulder. "You're alone?" His voice was low, edged with steel.

Sophie nodded quickly. "Cathryn is with my brother."

Andrew's expression darkened.

Since he was already here, Sophie gathered her courage and ventured, “Why don’t you come upstairs, Mr. Brooks?”

“No need.” He ground his cigarette beneath his heel and slid into the driver’s seat without another word.

A heartbeat later, his car vanished at the mouth of the complex, taillights flaring like twin embers.

Only then did Sophie’s pulse slow. What had possessed her to invite him up? They were not even officially together. He had left looking cold—perhaps thinking she was some careless, eager woman.

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And her apartment—barely five hundred square feet, every corner plain and cramped. A man like him, raised in luxury, stepping into that? It was absurd.

“Idiot,” she muttered, wishing she could slap herself for being so impulsive. Every time she saw Andrew’s devastatingly handsome face, her intelligence fled her body.

She glanced down at the perfume bottle still in her hand—the one she had bought with him in mind—and swore under her breath. She had forgotten to give it to him earlier. Tomorrow, she decided, she would slip it into his office at work and leave it on his desk.

A while later, Harley pulled his car to the curb. He had been quiet the entire drive back, but now his knuckles whitened around the steering wheel.

“Sophie told me you’re thinking of divorce,” he blurted.

Cathryn gave a small nod.

Harley caught her hand, his eyes bright with something like hope. “Then may I pursue you?”

Cathryn gently withdrew her hand, her voice calm. "Harley, you might not know, but I was married before."

He blinked. "You mean..."

"This is already my second marriage," she said quietly, and without further explanation, she stepped out of the car. The past was a wound she refused to reopen.

When Cathryn returned home, Sophie teased her with a playful grin. "Once you're single again, could you at least give Harley a chance?"

Cathryn exhaled. "If I marry again, Sophie, it would be my third time. He deserves a first love, not someone carrying so much history."

"But he likes you," Sophie countered.

"That doesn't change anything," Cathryn murmured. "Right now, I want to focus on work. Relationships are the last thing on my mind."

What Cathryn truly wanted was far more important: to earn enough to reclaim everything that had been stolen from her mother—the antique paintings scattered through auction houses, the Moore estate stripped from her name, the assets Richard had seized without shame.

And the more she thought about it, the clearer it became—most of those assets had ended up with Andrew.

A cold knot tightened in her chest. Was it coincidence, or had Andrew coveted her mother's legacy all along?

Taking any of it back would be no small feat. She would need an enormous amount of money.

The next morning, Sophie arrived at the office early. Under the guise of delivering documents to the CEO's office, she discreetly placed the bottle of wild rose perfume on Andrew's desk.

When Andrew walked in, his gaze landed on it immediately. He lifted the bottle and inhaled.

Rose—Cathryn's favorite.

His heart skipped a beat. Had she discovered who he really was?

Andrew summoned his assistant. “Who came into my office?”

The new assistant, still unfamiliar with most of the staff, hesitated. “I believe it was someone from the administrative department. A young woman.”

A faint smile tugged at Andrew’s lips. Was it really Cathryn? Was she making the first move? He never wore perfume, but he would make an exception for her.

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He misted the scent over his suit jacket, the fragrance clinging to him like a memory.

That morning's shareholders' meeting was one of the rare occasions when everyone attended in person. Executives and major investors were already gathered when Andrew walked in—and immediately, the soft floral scent drifted in with him.

Sophie, assigned to serve coffee, paused as she stepped through the doors. The familiar wild-rose fragrance wrapped around her like a whisper—the very perfume she had chosen.

Alan chuckled, nudging the director beside him. "I've never seen Mr. Brooks wear perfume before. This is a first."

The director smiled knowingly. "It seems Mr. Brooks has someone special."

"Perhaps a gift from that special someone," Alan teased.

Andrew, usually composed and distant, leaned back in his chair with a faint, satisfied smile—and did not deny it.

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Sophie balanced the coffee pot in her hands, her chest fluttering with a quiet thrill. She moved toward Andrew with measured grace, pouring the dark liquid into his cup with steady hands. From the corner of her eye, she searched for a flicker of acknowledgment—the tilt of his gaze, anything that might tether his attention to her.

But Andrew did not lift his head. His focus remained fixed elsewhere, his indifference wrapping around her like a cold draft.

The attendees, emboldened by Andrew's uncharacteristically pleasant demeanor, began to probe with smiles that were far too curious.

“So there really is someone special, Mr. Brooks? Might we ask which distinguished family she hails from?”

The question landed like a weight in Sophie's chest. Her upbringing was a wound she had never managed to close. In moments like this, it seemed to split open again, whispering that she would never truly belong at Andrew's side.

Andrew's reply came with an easy laugh, rich and unshaken. “When I care for someone,” he said, his voice smooth yet resolute, “their background is of no consequence to me.”

In that moment, Sophie's heart lifted, soaring like a bird breaking free of its cage. He was not just remarkable—he was extraordinary.

Sophie moved around the conference table with practiced grace, topping off each cup before stepping back into her corner, hands folded neatly.

While Andrew discussed quarterly reports with his team, she couldn't help stealing glances at the sharp line of his shoulders. Winning his interest felt like winning the world.

When the meeting wrapped up, Andrew pushed back his chair and strode toward the door. At the corner, he turned too quickly and bumped into Sophie.

Flustered, Sophie flushed crimson. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Brooks."

With everyone else already gone, the room had fallen silent—leaving only the two of them and the faint hum of the air conditioner. For once, there was no one to interrupt, no excuse to step away.

She lowered her gaze, fingers twisting together, her pulse thrumming with anticipation of what he might say to her. They'd been dancing around their feelings for days. He'd accepted her gift and admitted she was his special one in front of the meeting attendees.

The moment of laying their feelings open hung between them, charged and fragile.

Sophie waited, breath caught, certain he was finally about to say the words she'd longed to hear.

But Andrew only adjusted his cufflinks, smoothed his suit jacket, and walked past her without a word.

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Sophie's eyes followed his retreating figure until the words slipped out before she could stop them. "Mr. Brooks."

He halted and turned, his gaze steady, his tone clipped. "What is it?"

Under the weight of his cool composure, she forced a small smile. “Your perfume smells wonderful, Mr. Brooks.”

He offered a polite nod. “Thank you.” Then, without another glance, he stepped into his private elevator.

A faint crease lined her brow as Sophie frowned. That was it? That was all he had to say?

In her daydreams, she’d pictured countless versions of this moment—alone with him at last, the air charged with unspoken feelings. Never once had she imagined their conversation ending with those two words.

What did he see her as? A colleague—nothing more?

Confusion swirled in her chest as the elevator doors slid shut.

Inside, Andrew adjusted his collar, catching a faint trace of fragrance lingering in the air—wild roses. The scent was genuinely pleasant.

A quiet smile tugged at his lips. Since Cathryn had discovered who he truly was—and had even gone so far as to buy him a gift—he wouldn’t ignore her gesture.

That morning, he'd arranged for movers to relocate everything to Azure Vista, the most exclusive neighborhood in Olekgan. His previous residence might have been grand, but it had always felt cold and empty. Now that he and Cathryn were married, he wanted a home that felt alive. Azure Vista was the place he'd chosen for their future together. The house was fully furnished and waiting, only missing its lady.

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When the elevator opened on the tenth-floor executive suite, Andrew walked out, every movement crisp and deliberate.

Cathryn happened to be in the break room, filling her cup with water, her back to the doorway.

Without warning, Andrew moved in from behind, trapping her between his body and the wall.

A wave of crisp perfume hit her senses before she registered the man's shadow looming over her. Her pulse spiked, and instinct took over—she pivoted and swung her leg in a sharp kick.

He caught her knee effortlessly, his voice low and familiar. "Cathryn, it's me."

Cathryn froze as recognition hit. Her head snapped up, eyes widening in disbelief. "Have you lost your mind? This is the office."

A low chuckle rumbled from his chest. “Doesn’t that make it even more thrilling?”

Her brow furrowed. “The company strictly forbids office romances.”

His lips curved into a teasing smirk. “That can change now.” After all, he was the one who set the rules.

Suspicion flickered across her face as she inhaled. “Since when did you start wearing perfume?”

A brief confusion crossed his eyes. Wasn’t this the very scent she’d chosen for him?

Cathryn gave a sharp, derisive sniff. “Ever since Elaine showed up, your taste has gone downhill. Don’t tell me she picked this out for you?”

His brows drew together as he lowered his head, inhaling the fragrance clinging to his collar. Wild rose—her favorite. If it wasn’t from her, then who?

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“Let go of me,” she hissed, pressing her palms to his chest. “If Andrew finds out, I’ll be out of a job for sure.”

His chest tightened as realization dawned—Cathryn hadn’t recognized who he truly was, and she hadn’t gifted him the perfume. He’d overthought it.

Leaning close, he brushed a tender kiss over her lips. “Cathryn, come home with me.”

Just then, footsteps echoed down the hall. Minnie Ellis and Leona Gomez stepped out of the office and caught sight of the pair in the break room. Their eyes widened with glee as they exchanged hushed words.

“Well, well—someone’s getting cozy in there!”

“Wait—that’s Cathryn!”

“Who’s the guy? From behind, he looks like a real catch. Which department is he from?”

“Cathryn’s only been here a few days and she’s already cozying up to a colleague? That innocent face is pure deception. What a shameless flirt.”

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Their whispers grew louder, rippling down the corridor. At Brooks Group, where office romances were strictly forbidden, even a rumor like this could cost someone their job. Cathryn had no way out this time.

Spotting Minnie and Leona at the doorway, Cathryn froze—then ducked into Damien’s arms, pressing her face against his chest to hide.

Andrew’s hand smoothed over her hair in a steady, calming motion. “Relax.”

Jaw tight with frustration, Cathryn ground her teeth together. “Easy for you to say. You won’t get the sack if someone sees us like this.”

A quiet laugh slipped from his lips. “No one would dare fire you.” Especially when the company might one day bear her name.

A stern voice rang down the hall. “Why aren’t you two working? What’s the holdup here?”

Alan had just wrapped up a meeting and was walking the floor when he noticed two employees gossiping at the break room doorway, drinks in hand, clearly idle. His expression darkened.

Minnie and Leona seized the chance, pointing into the break room. “Mr. Brooks banned office romances, and someone’s blatantly ignoring his rule!”

Bursting into the break room, Alan’s eyes landed on a tall man and a woman tangled together, as though nothing could pull them apart. His brows shot up as he huffed, “How bold of you to be this inseparable at work.” The couple actually dared to defy the CEO’s orders.

Minnie and Leona exchanged smug smiles before slipping back to their desks, already savoring the storm about to hit.

Cathryn stood on the brink of inevitable ruin.

Rumors whispered through the halls, seeded by Martin Doyle from HR, claiming Cathryn had never seen the inside of a classroom, had never held a real job, and had only slipped into the company through connections.

Minnie and Leona—proud Olekgan University graduates who had clawed their way into their positions—despised people like that more than anything. And with Vanessa fanning the flames, insisting Cathryn had joined the company just to seduce Andrew, climb into his bed, and eventually worm her way into his family, their disdain had curdled into loathing.

To Minnie and Leona, Cathryn was nothing but a nobody reaching for the stars. If anyone deserved to become Andrew’s wife, it was them. A woman like Cathryn was hardly worthy of Andrew’s attention. And now that Cathryn had been caught getting far too close to a male colleague, her fate was sealed. Dismissal was certain.

Minnie and Leona wasted no time texting Martin. “Get Cathryn’s termination papers ready.”

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Inside the break room, Alan stood by the doorway, his brow carved into a thunderous line as his eyes fell on the pair locked in a lingering embrace. “How long do you plan on holding each other like that?” he demanded.

Cathryn squirmed in Damien’s arms, her voice a strained whisper. “It’s Mr. Pierce. Let me go.”

Andrew’s hand slid gently through her hair, his expression infuriatingly calm. “No need to be afraid of him.”

Cathryn’s jaw tightened. Heat surged into her cheeks as she sank her teeth into his arm in frustration. “You may not be afraid, but I am.”

He only chuckled, the sound low and indulgent. “Then stop being afraid.”

Instead of letting go, he pulled her tighter against him. Days had passed since she’d allowed him this closeness. He had hungered for it, and now that she was in his arms again, he couldn’t resist.

“Just let me hold you a little longer,” he murmured, resting his chin atop her head, eyes closing as if he meant to savor every second.

Alan’s patience snapped. He stormed forward, seized Andrew by the shoulder, and barked, “What department do you think you belong to? You’ve got some nerve—”

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Andrew turned, meeting Alan’s fury with a single, level look.

Alan froze. His fingers slackened on instinct. His throat went dry. “Mr. Broo—”

Andrew’s eyes sharpened, a blade’s edge in their warning. “Is there a problem?”

Alan lowered his head at once. “N-no... None at all.”

Andrew tightened his hold on Cathryn, pressing her head to his chest to shield her face. His glare cut through Alan with a silent message.

Alan understood the unspoken order. He bolted from the break room, pulse pounding. So the rumors were true—Andrew had a woman. And not just any woman, but one of their own employees.

Earlier in the meeting, Alan had caught sight of a girl serving coffee, cheeks flushed, her gaze fixed on Andrew as if bewitched. He'd assumed she was the lucky one dating him. But clearly, the lucky one was someone else.

Martin came barreling up the stairs at that very moment, colliding with Alan.

“What’s the rush?” Alan snapped, narrowing his eyes.

“Word is Cathryn from Admin got caught cozying up to a male colleague in the break room,” Martin panted, excitement flickering across his face. “She dared to break Mr. Brooks’s rule. I’m heading up now to dismiss her personally.”

Alan’s blood ran cold. So that was her name—Cathryn. The woman Andrew had just been holding.

Martin straightened, smug with his purpose. “Mr. Pierce, I’ll report back once she’s out.”

He turned toward Admin, eager to seal Cathryn’s fate.

Alan grabbed Martin by the collar before he could take another step. “The one getting dismissed will be you.”

Martin blinked, then forced a shaky laugh. “Stop pulling my leg.”

Alan’s jaw tightened. “Do you have any idea whose woman Cathryn is?”

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Martin faltered. “Wait... She really has ties with Mr. Owens?” Victor had mentioned something before—that Ethan had vouched for Cathryn. The transfer from Janitorial to Admin had Ethan’s fingerprints all over it.

Alan smacked Martin across the back of the head. “Idiot. She belongs to Mr. Brooks.”

Martin’s face went slack. “Mr. Brooks’s woman?”

Alan jerked his chin toward the break room.

Realization struck. Martin went pale as a sheet. “The man cozying up inside with her is our CEO?”

Alan cuffed him again, his voice low and dangerous. “Watch your mouth.” Martin slapped a hand over his lips.

“March in there with dismissal papers, and you’ll be the one clearing out your desk,” Alan hissed.

The blood drained from Martin’s face. He clutched Alan’s arm as if it were a lifeline. “You saved me, Mr. Pierce. Truly—I owe you.” Without Alan’s warning, Martin would have walked straight into disaster, insulting the CEO to his face and ending his career in an instant.

“Then repay me by vanishing,” Alan barked, shoving Martin toward the elevator.

Martin stumbled inside and immediately unlocked his phone to block Minnie and Leona. Those two had nearly destroyed him; never again would he let them drag him into their schemes.

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Inside the break room, Cathryn peeked out nervously. “They’re gone?”

“Gone,” Andrew confirmed.

Her frown deepened. She thumped his chest in frustration. “You scared Mr. Pierce off, didn’t you? If he goes running to Andrew with this, I’ll be the one who suffers.”

He bent to brush a kiss across her lips, quick and defiant. “I’d like to see who dares give you a hard time.”

She shoved him back with both hands. “I have work to do. Stop showing up for no reason.”

Without waiting for a reply, she spun on her heel and disappeared into the office.

Minnie and Leona folded their arms across their chests like conspirators awaiting an execution. The moment Cathryn returned, they exchanged a sly glance, twin sneers curling at their lips.

“Your things are already packed. Go straight to HR and hand in your resignation.”

Cathryn’s gaze drifted toward them with languid indifference, as though their theatrics bored her. “Who said I’m resigning?”

Minnie shot upright from her chair, mockery flashing in her eyes. “You were caught draped all over a male colleague by Mr. Pierce himself. Even if you have someone pulling strings for you, they can’t save you. No one dares go against Mr. Brooks’s orders.”

Without a flicker of alarm, Cathryn set her belongings back on the desk one item at a time, then lowered herself into her seat.

Minnie’s face darkened, fury bubbling beneath her skin. “I was doing you a kindness by suggesting you resign quietly,” she snapped. “Since you don’t know what’s good for you, don’t blame me for being ruthless.”

Minnie whipped out her phone and dialed Martin, her lips twitching with anticipation—only to freeze when the call failed. Again. And again. The line was dead. She’d been blocked.

A hush fell over the office just as the Admin Director, Howard, strode in, his polished shoes clicking sharply against the floor. His gaze swept the room like a searchlight.

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Minnie and Leona exchanged another glance, this one bright with triumph. Surely, this was it. He had come to personally deliver Cathryn's dismissal.

Howard jabbed a finger toward Minnie and Leona. "There's a file. You two take it to Eastbrook."

Displeasure tightened Minnie's features as a frown slipped onto her face. "Shouldn't a newcomer like Cathryn handle errands like this?"

His eyes narrowed to slits as he shot back, "So now you're giving me orders?"

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She instantly ducked her head. "No. I wouldn't dare."

With a flick of his wrist, Howard tossed the file onto their desk. "No taxis. You'll walk."

A sharp gasp tore from Leona's throat. "Eastbrook's fifty kilometers away! Even if we walked until our feet bled, we'd never make it."

Outside, the midday sun scorched the pavement.

Howard's tone carried a frost that never thawed. "Then bleed. If I find out you take a taxi, both of you are fired on the spot."

Their rage simmered beneath the surface, but neither dared argue. They grabbed the file and stumbled out in their high heels. As they passed Cathryn, they shot her a glare brimming with resentment, certain this punishment traced back to her.

Moments later, Sophie trudged into the office, shoulders slumped and eyes dull with exhaustion.

Cathryn glanced up, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

Sophie pressed her palms to her cheeks. “I don’t think Mr. Brooks likes me.”

The way he looked at her—calm, detached, without a hint of warmth—gnawed at her. She couldn’t understand it. If he felt nothing, why had he shown up around her apartment so often? Why would he wait downstairs? Why would he accept the perfume she’d given him instead of turning it away?

Cathryn reached out, her voice gentle. “He’s the CEO—his pride won’t let him make the first move. If anything’s going to happen, you’ll have to take that first step.”

Sophie blinked, surprised. “You think... I should tell him how I feel?”

“Go on, give it a shot,” Cathryn urged softly.

After a moment's thought, Sophie nodded. It did make sense. A man of his status would never bow his head to a lowly staffer. If she wanted clarity, she had to take that step herself.

Still, doubt tugged at her. "But why would someone like him ever fall for me?"

Warmth spread through Cathryn's gaze, brightening her face. "Because you're confident, bright, and kind—qualities any man would admire."

Flustered, Sophie lowered her gaze, twisting her fingers together. "I suppose I'm not terrible... but with his background, can we really belong in the same world?"

Cathryn gave her shoulder a reassuring pat. "Love can get through anything."

Sophie nodded with determination. She'd always been the type to chase what she wanted. She liked Andrew. Whether it worked out or not, she had to give it a shot.

"Then what am I supposed to do?" Sophie asked, her brows drawn tight.

A flicker of contemplation crossed Cathryn's face. "Step up and make the first move. Tell him how you feel, and take him out yourself."

A wave of nerves rippled through Sophie. “What if he doesn’t feel the same way?”

The bitter truth of falling for someone was that doubt never stopped gnawing at the heart.

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“Do you have his number?” Cathryn asked.

Sophie shook her head. “Just his corporate chat account. His assistant usually handles it.”

“Then message him there,” Cathryn insisted. “If he answers, that’s your sign he’s interested.”

Hope flickered across Sophie’s face. “You’re right. And if he ignores it, I’ll know it was all in my head.” At least a message would spare her the sting of a face-to-face rejection.

With that fragile courage, Sophie opened the company messenger and began typing.

Meanwhile, Andrew strode into his office and immediately pulled up the surveillance feed. The screen showed Sophie entering his office early that morning, placing a small perfume bottle on his desk.

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So the gift had come from her?

A line formed between his brows as the question turned over in his mind—why on earth would she gift him perfume?

Suspicion edged in again; he had long wondered about Sophie’s background. Could she be Kestrel?

With his eyes shut, he summoned the rooftop silhouette—slender, self-possessed, a quiet, solitary force, nothing like Sophie’s bright, chatty warmth.

While Andrew was still lost in thought, a notification chimed on his screen—an incoming message from the Admin department. His assistant typically handled the flood of employee notes, yet he decided to check this particular message personally.

The message came from Sophie. “Mr. Brooks, I’d like to treat you to dinner. Do you have time tomorrow?”

His fingers drummed lightly on the desk, his expression unreadable. Sophie had been going out of her way to please him again and again.

That morning, at the doorway of the conference room, she’d hovered uncertainly, as if she wanted to say something but lost her nerve at the last moment.

A sharp gleam flickered in his eyes. Could it be she was finally about to reveal that she was Kestrel?

Without a second’s hesitation, he typed a single word in reply. “Yes.”

Over in Admin, Sophie nearly jumped out of her seat, clutching Cathryn’s arm in excitement. “He answered me—he said yes!”

Cathryn's lips curved into a smile. "See? You keep doubting yourself for nothing. He obviously likes you. It couldn't be clearer."

Sophie bobbed her head eagerly. "Come shopping with me tonight, please? I need the perfect outfit for the date."

Cathryn agreed with a nod. Just as she did, her phone buzzed—Damien's name flashing across the screen.

"Are you free tonight? I want to take you somewhere."

Cathryn's expression cooled as she typed back. "I'm busy."

Peeking over, Sophie arched a brow. "That jerk of a husband again?"

With a small tilt of her head, Kathryn nodded. "Already cozying up at home with his new love, and he still tries to mess around with me."

Fury sparked across Sophie's face. Snatching Kathryn's phone, she typed furiously. "You two-timing jerk—stay the hell away from her!"

Before Cathryn could stop her, Sophie hit send and powered off the device.

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“You can’t let a scumbag like that get even a drop of sympathy,” Sophie huffed, crossing her arms.

“It’s over,” Cathryn murmured, her tone calm but weary. “I just want to move on.”

But Sophie's mind was already spinning with plans. Pulling out her own phone, she sent a quick message to her brother. "Come pick us up tonight, okay? Cathryn and I." She wanted to carve out a chance for him and Cathryn to be alone.

Meanwhile, Andrew glared at the insult flashing across his screen, anger knotting in his chest. It could only be Sophie.

So Cathryn had actually shared their private messages with her friend? He'd never understand how women could treat each others' boundaries like suggestions—somehow, they always managed to blur every line.

Andrew hurled his phone onto the table, the sharp clatter echoing his frustration. If Sophie hadn't taken Cathryn in, he would never have let her slip by so easily.

That afternoon, before work ended, a courier arrived at Cathryn's desk. She tore open the package to find a bulging file folder—the very one Andrew had told Margaret to pass along before she left the house.

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Without even glancing inside, Cathryn slid it into a drawer. She had no energy to care.

In his office, Andrew leaned over the glowing surveillance screen, eyes narrowing as he watched Cathryn and Sophie stroll hand in hand out of the Brooks Group building. They climbed into a modest car.

Andrew's jaw hardened when he zoomed in. Harley was behind the wheel. Harley—the man who had once dated Cathryn.

Rage flared hot in his chest, his fists curling until his knuckles blanched. Cathryn had turned him away, only to ride off with another man? Did she not see Harley's intentions, or was she deliberately feeding them?

Cathryn had barely touched the rear door handle when Sophie yanked open the passenger door and playfully shoved her inside.

Harley grinned and greeted Cathryn. "We meet again."

Through the rearview mirror, Cathryn caught Sophie's sly little smirk. One glance at the unmistakable mischief glinting in Sophie's eyes, and Cathryn knew Sophie had planned something—likely trying to patch her up with Harley again.

"Sophie wants to shop for clothes," Harley said lightly. "I thought I'd take you both to the mall."

As the car rolled on, Sophie leaned over the seat, her curiosity bubbling over. "So, Cathryn, what does your husband do?"

“He works in an office,” Cathryn replied evenly.

Sophie’s brows arched. “And where do you live? Somewhere in the city?”

Cathryn shook her head. “About half an hour’s drive away. It’s not exactly convenient.”

The Crownspire Villa offered mountain air and lakeside views, but its distance from the city center made daily life a small ordeal.

Sophie’s smile turned secretive. She tossed Harley a glance that said more than words ever could. A suburban home, no luxury cars, no glittering status—it painted a modest picture.

Harley exhaled slowly, a weight lifting off his shoulders. He had once mistaken the quiet elegance of Cathryn’s husband for the polish of old money. But no—just an ordinary man with ordinary roots.

“And his parents?” Sophie pressed.

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