

Once The Foolish Wife, Now His Eternal Obsession

Chapter 51:

Margaret hesitated as understanding dawned. It wasn't that Andrew didn't want to go into Cathryn's room—it was that Cathryn wouldn't let him.

Margaret slapped her own forehead. "This is all my fault. I really messed up."

Andrew's eyes narrowed. "What did you do?"

Margaret fidgeted, the words sticking in her throat.

His patience was already frayed. "Out with it, Margaret!"

She recoiled at the sharpness in his tone, then blurted everything out in a rush. "Because I barged in last time, you and Mrs. Brooks got interrupted. I felt terrible, so I tried to make things better. These past few days, I've been cooking dishes... you know, the kind that are supposed to boost a man's drive."

A muscle ticked in Andrew's jaw. He'd already been on edge for days, his mind stuck in a fog of restless craving. Instead of easing it, Margaret had been stoking the fire. No wonder he couldn't focus on work.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, exasperated. "If you're so eager to help, why don't you put that effort into Cathryn instead?"

Margaret's cheeks went red. "Understood. I'll fix it. I promise."

Andrew exhaled, his chest rising and falling.

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Margaret soon reappeared with a bucket of ice. "Is this enough, Mr. Brooks?"

"Get rid of it," he snapped.

No amount of ice was going to put out this kind of fire. If he wanted relief, he'd have to handle it himself.

Andrew quietly turned the lock on his bedroom door, picked up his tablet, and began scrolling through videos, intent on learning the secrets of a woman's body.

After he'd spent enough time absorbing the basics, he moved on to tutorials about intimacy—how a man and woman connected, physically and emotionally, in every possible way.

He learned with surprising speed, his mind and body moving in step as he explored what he wanted.

By the time the heat finally ebbed, a faint smugness settled over him, as if he'd mastered a new language. Next time, he swore, he would make Cathryn lose herself completely.

Only after that final release did he sink into a deep, unshakable sleep.

When he opened his eyes the next morning, Cathryn was already gone.

Andrew found Gavin outside. "Where did Cathryn go?"

Gavin answered, "She left early. Took a cab to Grandcrest Tower and told me not to follow."

Andrew's brow creased. "What's happening at Grandcrest Tower today?"

“There’s a charity auction,” Gavin said. “The Grant family’s hosting. They’re putting royal antiques and classic paintings on the block.”

Andrew nodded. So that was what the million was for. Cathryn must have been planning to bid.

“Bring the car around. We’re going to the auction.” Andrew’s decision came instantly. He needed to see, with his own eyes, what mattered enough for Cathryn to go to such lengths.

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Chapter 52:

Meanwhile, Cathryn had already mapped out the day's strategy in her mind. She knew Jordyn and Vanessa would be circling, waiting for a spectacle. If she arrived in the Brooks family's car, it would only invite attention and drama. Better to take a taxi and slip in quietly.

But the moment she stepped onto the curb, Jordyn and Vanessa materialized, arms linked like a human barricade.

Jordyn glanced at the cab and gave a slow, mocking smile. "Looks like your days of flaunting the employer's luxury ride are over. Couldn't borrow your chauffeur boyfriend's car this time, huh?"

A real socialite would never be caught dead arriving in a cab. Vanessa tittered, covering her mouth. "Cathryn really dumped being Mrs. Watson for a driver?"

Jordyn's grin widened. "A driver's one thing. Want to guess how old he is?"

Vanessa leaned in, feigning suspense. "Don't tell me. Forty?"

Jordyn snorted. "You wish. I've seen him around—sixty, at least."

Vanessa's eyes went comically wide. "Twenty-two years old and married to a man who could be her grandfather? Is this a romance or an adoption?"

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Jordyn shot Cathryn a disdainful smirk. "No money, no family, tossed out by the Watsons, and the Moores cut her loose. She should be grateful anyone wants her at all."

Vanessa sneered, raking Cathryn with a contemptuous glance. "Penniless, married to a relic, and still has the nerve to show up at an auction. What are you hoping for—hand-me-downs?"

Without so much as a glance at either of them, Cathryn strode straight past and headed for the entrance, unbothered.

Vanessa's voice cut through the marble-floored lobby like a blade. "Cathryn, do you think this auction is open to anyone off the street? Do you even have an invitation?" Her tone dripped with mockery, the kind that left a sting long after it landed.

Cathryn didn't slow. Her heels clicked against the polished stone as she crossed the atrium toward the gilt-framed doors of Grandcrest Tower.

"Stop her," Vanessa snapped, jabbing a manicured finger at the nearest guard.

The guard stepped in like a barrier. “Invitation, please.”

Cathryn halted mid-stride, the color draining from her face. She hadn’t known an invitation was required.

Behind her came the soft perfume and sharper laughter of Vanessa and Jordyn closing in.

Vanessa lifted her freshly painted nails, letting them gleam under the lobby lights as if they were trophies. “Cathryn,” she said, honeyed but cutting, “this is my grandfather’s event. No invitation, no entry.”

With a rustle of silk and a sharp click of heels, she and Jordyn swept past the guard.

Cathryn’s fingers tightened around her phone. She had no choice but to call Gavin.

He answered on the second ring, his voice a calm anchor against her rising panic. “Mrs. Brooks, please hand your phone to the security guard and let me speak to him,” he instructed.

Cathryn obeyed, placing the device in the guard’s hand as if she were passing him a weapon.

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Chapter 53:

“This is Mrs. Brooks,” Gavin’s steady voice said through the receiver. “Mr. Andrew Brooks’s wife. He has her invitation with him. He will arrive shortly.”

The guard stiffened, as if an electric current had jolted through him. His eyes widened—shock flashing across his face. Andrew Brooks, the elusive head of the Brooks Group, back in the country? Married? And his wife standing right here?

He snapped into deference at once, bowing low and sweeping an arm toward the doors. “Mrs. Brooks, please—this way.”

Cathryn offered a tentative smile, the title still foreign on her tongue. “Mrs. Brooks.” It sounded too grand, like a dress borrowed from someone else’s wardrobe. But if it opened doors, she would wear it without hesitation.

Straightening her shoulders, Cathryn stepped past the velvet rope and into the auction hall.

From across the room, she caught sight of Vanessa and Jordyn. Their faces darkened like storm clouds the moment they saw her.

“Who let her in?” Vanessa hissed. “I’m going to have Grandpa fire him.”

Jordyn’s nails grazed Vanessa’s arm in a mock-soothing gesture, but her eyes gleamed with malice. “She doesn’t have a cent,” she murmured, her voice sugar over venom. “So what if she’s here? Let her sit and watch her mother’s painting get sold off.”

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Vanessa’s mouth curved into a cold smile. “Fair. If she needs to be reminded of her place, I’ll make sure she is.”

Cathryn slid into a chair at the edge of the room, her pulse thundering in her ears. A black-gloved attendant handed her a glossy catalog.

As she flipped through the pages, her breath snagged in her throat.

Page after page listed the heirlooms she'd brought into the Watson household—her mother's treasures, her own childhood memories. It could only be Liam. He had stripped the house bare, funneled the spoils to Jordyn, and Jordyn had delivered them straight into the Grant family's hands.

Cathryn's nails bit into her palms as her gaze locked on Jordyn's back across the hall. Liam and Jordyn had gone too far.

Jordyn glided over, a smile of derision playing on her lips. "Recognize any of these pieces, Cathryn?" she asked, as if savoring a private joke.

Cathryn lifted her head, jaw set. "This is theft."

Jordyn's laughter rang out, sharp as glass. "Don't be ridiculous. Those were marital assets—joint property between you and Liam. He had every right to dispose of them. And he gave them to me willingly."

She spoke like someone lingering over each stolen prize: the Moore family name, Richard's affection, Liam's loyalty, Cathryn's inheritance—trophies lined up neatly on a shelf.

No matter how clever Cathryn had been, in Jordyn's eyes she was finished—stripped bare and left with nothing.

Cathryn's fists tightened until her knuckles ached. Her voice dropped into a low, steady vow. "Everything you've stolen from me, I will take back, one by one. And you will pay dearly for it."

Jordyn tipped her head back and laughed, rich and careless, drawing curious glances from nearby bidders. "And with what? You're penniless. Or are you living off that middle-aged chauffeur you married?"

The air between them turned colder, heavier. Jordyn's arrogance reeked of victory—thick with the certainty that Cathryn had no path left to rise.

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Chapter 54:

For the first time since marrying into the Brooks dynasty, a faint flicker of gratitude rose in Cathryn's chest toward her husband. Love was irrelevant now; what mattered was the power of the surname he bore, and the weight it carried in a room like this.

A derisive smirk curved Jordyn's mouth. "The last two times, you just got lucky," she said, her voice low but cutting. "My mother and I underestimated you. That won't happen again." She leaned in, the smile on her lips a blade wrapped in silk. "The Moore family may have taken a hit, but once Douglas splits the auction proceeds with the Moores, they're not going under."

Cathryn's gaze cooled, her eyes darkening like storm clouds. She didn't bother to answer.

She knew it. Of course Douglas had no intention of handing a cent to charity. The auction was a smokescreen—an elegant, glittering front for lining his own pockets. It reeked of fraud, and everyone in their circle knew it, though no one dared say it out loud.

Jordyn had been spoiled since birth, raised by Richard and Zoe to believe rules were for other people. Entitlement clung to her like expensive perfume; she'd never learned restraint, much less the boundaries of the law.

Cathryn was already assembling a plan in the quiet recesses of her mind. Rather than waste breath arguing with Jordyn, she turned slightly in her chair, exhaled slowly, and let silence settle between them as she fixed her attention on the velvet-draped stage.

She thought of her mother's collection—every brushstroke, every frame, every memory bound to it. She wanted it all back, but with only ten million, she would have to choose.

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Midnight Lilies.

That one mattered most. The rest could wait.

She had studied the list of interested buyers until it blurred, memorizing every name and every estimated ceiling. She was confident she could win it for under ten million—if nothing went wrong.

Sliding her phone from her clutch, Cathryn typed a message to Andrew: "Don't forget the ten million."

The transfer arrived almost instantly.

She stared at the notification a moment longer than necessary, then typed back: “Thank you.”

Jordyn bent closer, her breath warm against Cathryn’s ear. She whispered, “I’ll make sure to drive the bidding up. At least your mother’s collection will fetch a proper price.”

Cathryn’s stomach tightened, dread coiling slow and cold. If Jordyn started playing games with the bids, her ten million might not be enough. She regretted it now—regretted refusing the fifty-million check Andrew had pressed into her hand the night before.

Upstairs, in a private suite, Andrew had just taken his seat when his phone lit up with Cathryn’s message: “Thank you.” His gaze drifted to the hall below until he found her in the corner. A slow smile curved his mouth.

The auction opened with a procession of smaller lots, each announced in the auctioneer’s velvet baritone.

Cathryn sat perfectly still, spine straight, waiting.

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Chapter 55:

When, at last, the auctioneer called for Midnight Lilies, she drew a deeper breath and leaned forward, paddle poised.

The bids climbed fast—sharp, staccato numbers volleying across the room. When it hit five million, Cathryn raised her paddle with measured calm and entered the fight.

Upstairs, Andrew leaned forward, the faintest crease forming between his brows. So this was why she had come. He flicked a glance at Karl. “Find out who owned that painting before,” he said quietly.

Karl slipped out and returned within minutes, voice lowered. “The traceable record shows it was in the collection of Raymond Fuller. He later gifted it to Bettina Moore—your wife’s mother. It’s now in Douglas Grant’s hands.”

Andrew's expression sharpened, something unreadable flickering in his eyes.

So the painting had belonged to Cathryn's mother.

The ten million Cathryn had asked for wasn't for herself at all. It was to reclaim what should never have been taken.

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Raymond had once called the shots for the Fuller family, but those days were long gone. Years earlier, they had packed up and moved their operations abroad, leaving the chaos of Antaford behind.

Andrew didn't bother dwelling on their departure.

Karl added, "That painting ended up in Jordyn's hands, courtesy of Liam. She sold it to Douglas for next to nothing."

A shadow of contempt flickered in Andrew's eyes. Liam had sold off his wife's cherished art just to keep his mistress happy—nothing short of disgraceful. His voice stayed even. "Let me guess. Most of Douglas's auction pieces probably came to him the same way, didn't they?"

Karl gave a quiet nod. “Some have already sold. There are still at least a dozen more up for bidding.”

Andrew’s gaze drifted downstairs. Cathryn’s slender figure sat tucked away in a corner, her expression unreadable from this distance. With only ten million to her name, she would be lucky to secure her mother’s Midnight Lilies—and nothing more. But if there was something his woman wanted, he had already decided: she would have it.

Andrew spoke quietly, not needing to raise his voice. “Purchase every single item that belonged to Bettina, no matter the cost.”

“Understood,” Karl replied.

On the auction floor, Midnight Lilies was already driving the numbers up—eight million and climbing.

Cathryn lifted her paddle, voice clear. “Eight and a half million.”

A rival bidder called out at once, “Nine million.”

Nerves prickled across Cathryn’s skin as she realized she was down to her last million.

Jordyn, seated nearby, gave a dry, mocking laugh. “Cathryn, you don’t even have eight hundred and fifty thousand left. And you’re bold enough to bid eight and a half million?”

Vanessa sneered. “Let her enjoy it. The auction’s free to join—she’s just here for the spectacle.”

Cathryn ignored the taunts, eyes locked on her rival across the aisle. She didn’t blink. “Nine and a half million,” she said, paddle steady in her grip.

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Chapter 56:

The rival hesitated for a heartbeat before answering, “Nine point eight million.”

Cathryn's mouth went dry, suspicion prickling across her skin. This had Jordyn's fingerprints all over it—someone had been paid to keep raising the stakes and force her hand. Drawing in a shaky breath, she forced the number out. "Ten million."

Any higher, and she would be backed into a corner, left with no choice but to ask Andrew for help. After rejecting his fifty-million check the night before, that idea tasted like ash in her mouth. She prayed silently that her opponent would stop.

At last, the rival's resolve cracked. He set his paddle aside.

Relief surged so hard it almost buckled Kathryn's knees. If nothing went wrong now, Midnight Lilies—her mother's masterpiece—could finally come home.

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The auctioneer raised his gavel. "Ten million, going once—ten million, going twice—"

From the private rooms above, a new voice cut through the hall. "Fifteen million."

The crowd gasped, shock rippling outward. Those rooms were sacred ground—only the city's true power players sat up there, and no one could place the voice.

High above, Andrew idly spun the ring on his finger, a hint of mischief tugging at his lips. He knew perfectly well that if Cathryn secured the painting for ten million, she would never come to him for more money. But pushing her just a little further might change everything.

Down below, Cathryn shot up, disbelief flashing across her face. The painting had been within reach—so close she could almost feel it. And now, just like that, it was slipping away. Who could possibly want it more than her?

The auctioneer turned his gaze toward Cathryn, voice steady. “Ma’am, we’re now at fifteen million. Would you like to place a new bid?”

Cathryn didn’t hesitate. She tapped out a quick message to Andrew: “Mr. Brooks, could you front me another ten million?”

Dignity was a luxury she could worry about later. All that mattered now was bringing her mother’s painting back.

Andrew’s reply came instantly. “Anything you need.”

Relief washed through her. She lifted her paddle without hesitation. “Sixteen million.”

Jordyn and Vanessa exchanged a look, struggling to hide their amusement. They clearly expected Cathryn to crash and burn.

From upstairs came the next bid, slicing through the tension with chilling calm. “Twenty million.”

Cathryn’s heart nearly stopped. Whoever was in that room had jumped four million in one swoop, boxing her in with no room to maneuver.

A low hum spread through the crowd. Everyone in the hall knew Midnight Lilies couldn’t possibly be worth twenty million. The price was outrageous.

The auctioneer turned to Cathryn again. “We have twenty million on the table. Will you continue?”

Cathryn’s hands shook as she typed out another plea. “Mr. Brooks, can I have another ten million?”

Andrew’s reply was instant and blunt. “You’ll have all the money you want, as long as you keep your end of the bargain.”

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Chapter 57:

One night was the price for ten million. Thirty million meant three nights.

Cathryn felt the world tilt beneath her feet. Last night, she'd convinced herself she still had a measure of control. Now Andrew had flipped the script. She was his to claim, and there was nowhere left to run.

After a shaky breath, she forced the words out. "Deal."

A moment later, her phone buzzed—twenty million transferred in, just like that.

Cathryn didn't hesitate. She raised her paddle high. "Twenty-five million."

Every head in the room whipped around to stare at her. Who was this woman, bold enough to risk such an outrageous sum on a single Louis Marquet painting?

From above came a new call, crisp and final. “Thirty million.”

The hall erupted in whispers and gasps. Someone up there was throwing down fortunes, willing to burn through an extra twenty million just to claim Midnight Lilies.

Cathryn’s jaw clenched. Whoever was in that room seemed to know her every move—matching her, then leapfrogging her, blocking every path to victory. Her finger hovered over her phone. Should she keep pressing her luck, piling debt on top of debt?

The auctioneer leaned in, eyes sharp. “Ma’am, would you like to continue?”

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Before Cathryn could respond, Andrew’s message popped up. “Shall I lend you more?”

Her heart skipped. Was he here—somewhere above her, watching?

She scanned the crowd, searching for his face in the sea of strangers, but he was nowhere to be found. A sigh slipped out. She shook her head and typed back, “No, that’s enough.”

The truth landed hard. Whoever was bidding from that room would pay whatever it took—they would never let her win.

Andrew saw her message and gave a faint, surprised smile. So she was done fighting.

The auctioneer’s voice rose above the chatter. “Congratulations to our anonymous bidder in the private room. Midnight Lilies has a new home tonight.”

Applause swept through the hall, loud and relentless. Cathryn sat motionless, her heart heavy as stone, drowning in a celebration that meant nothing to her at all.

Jordyn and Vanessa watched the auction like predators scenting blood. They looked positively gleeful, as though every hammer fall were a personal victory.

“I knew it. Cathryn was only playing at it,” Vanessa drawled, one manicured hand resting lazily on the rail. Her eyes flicked to Cathryn with deliberate malice. “Two and a half million? What an absolute joke.”

Jordyn stepped closer until her perfume and presence crowded Cathryn’s space. Her smile shone with cruelty. “Your mother’s favorite painting—gone into someone else’s hands. It must be killing you inside, isn’t it? You’ll never see it again for the rest of your life.”

For a heartbeat, the din of the room receded. Cathryn's eyes hardened like ice. She kept her voice low and steady, even as her nails bit into her palm. "Jordyn, people always pay for what they do."

Jordyn covered her mouth with a tinkling laugh, mock-shocked. "You mean karma?" She tilted her head, letting a lock of hair slide over her shoulder. "You're still hoping I'll suffer because of this scar on my neck and chest? Sorry to disappoint you. My mother has already tracked down Dr. Clarke. He'll be coming to Olekgan himself to treat me."

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Chapter 58:

The words struck Cathryn like a pinprick under the skin. Adrian—Zoe had actually secured his help? A flicker of disbelief crossed her face before she could stop it.

“Instead of praying for punishment to fall on me,” Jordyn continued, her lips curling into a sneer, “maybe worry about your mother’s collection.”

Cathryn’s throat tightened. With Midnight Lilies gone, she couldn’t bear to sit there and watch the rest of her mother’s treasures get parceled out to strangers. She rose from her chair, every movement measured—dignity she refused to surrender.

Behind her, Jordyn and Vanessa linked arms like schoolgirls and laughed. “No invitation, crashing the party, making a fool of yourself. Cathryn, you’ve humiliated yourself enough for one night.”

The hum of conversation dimmed as footsteps descended the staircase. Ethan came into view from the second floor, his dark suit catching the chandelier’s light. Under the gaze of the entire room, he walked straight to Cathryn and gave a short, impeccable bow.

“Ms. Moore, my employer would like to see you.”

Vanessa’s breath caught. “Mr. Owens?” she whispered, her voice stripped of its earlier scorn.

Of course Vanessa recognized Ethan—she worked at Brooks Group.

But Ethan didn't spare her so much as a glance. He gestured for Cathryn to follow, then turned on his heel.

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A ripple of whispers swept through the crowd like wind through tall grass. So the man upstairs was Andrew Brooks, the president of Brooks Group. The rumors of his return were true.

Jordyn's brows drew together. "Is that man really Mr. Brooks's secretary?"

Vanessa nodded, her face suddenly tight. "I see him all the time at headquarters. He works directly for Mr. Brooks."

"Then how on earth does Cathryn know him?" Jordyn's voice lost some of its confidence.

At Bettina's funeral, Ethan's story had been simple: Cathryn fainted at the hotel, and Andrew offered her a room to rest in. That was all. So why would Andrew summon Cathryn now, in front of everyone?

Vanessa felt an even sharper sting of unease than Jordyn as she watched Cathryn ascend the stairs behind Ethan. She'd been smitten with Andrew for years, maneuvering her way

into Brooks Group through her grandfather's connections for a single chance to stand near him—to imagine herself as his spouse.

Rumor had it Andrew had been disfigured, but once, during a fleeting video call, she'd glimpsed his real face—sharply chiseled, strikingly handsome, eyes carrying a warmth that could undo anyone. That glimpse had haunted her nights ever since, more compelling than any movie star. Yet now, the first woman he asked to see upon returning to the country was Cathryn.

On the staircase, Cathryn followed Ethan in silence, aware of every pair of eyes tracking her upward. Her pulse thudded in her ears. “May I ask what Mr. Brooks wants with me?” she murmured.

Ethan only smiled—a closed, professional smile that offered nothing.

At the second-floor landing, he led her to a heavy door and pushed it open. A muted hush waited beyond, the air cooler and faintly perfumed with cedar and expensive whiskey.

Cathryn stepped inside. Her eyes sought Andrew instinctively.

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Chapter 59:

A tall frosted-glass partition bisected the private room. Light spilled from behind it, casting two silhouettes—one seated, one standing.

Even blurred by the frosted glass, the man in the chair lounged with effortless command—broad-shouldered, composed, long legs crossed. Authority and wealth radiated from him like heat from a fire.

Cathryn drew a steadying breath. “Hello, Mr. Brooks,” she said politely.

The seated man didn’t answer. Instead, the standing figure spoke, his voice lowered and deliberate, as though masking its true timbre. “Ms. Moore,” he said, “you seem to care deeply for this painting—Midnight Lilies?”

Cathryn had always considered herself hard to shock, yet this felt almost theatrical—absurd, even. She knew Andrew only by name, a shadow glimpsed once through Ethan’s brief introduction. Nothing about him or his circle had ever brushed against her life. Why, then, this elaborate performance, as if she’d stumbled into the closing act of a play she’d never auditioned for?

“It was my mother’s favorite,” she said at last, keeping her voice steady, as though each word might shatter if she spoke too quickly. “She cherished it for twenty years before it was stolen away. I only wanted to bring it back.”

The quiet hum of the room pressed around her like a velvet curtain. In that hush, footsteps broke through—Ethan appeared in the doorway, the painting balanced carefully in his hands.

As he passed, Cathryn’s breath caught. “May I see it once more?” The request came out almost like a plea—soft, but unyielding.

Ethan halted. A flicker of something unreadable crossed his face before he turned the painting toward her.

Cathryn stepped closer, her eyes drinking in the riot of lilies—petals tumbling over one another in a frenzy of color. Her fingertips hovered above the canvas, but she didn’t touch.

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“My mother always said lilies carry the meaning of lasting remembrance,” she murmured, as though confiding in the flowers rather than the men watching her.

People had whispered that Bettina had severed ties with her family just to marry Richard—a choice that still echoed through Cathryn’s life like a distant tolling bell. Richard had been right there all along... so who had her mother been yearning for, in secret? The question gnawed at her even now. Her mother was gone; the answers had died with her.

A pressure bloomed behind Cathryn’s sternum. She blinked rapidly, but tears welled anyway, softening the edges of the lilies into a watery haze.

From behind the carved partition, a voice spoke at last—smooth, measured, and unmistakably familiar. “It seems you’re deeply attached to this painting, Ms. Moore.”

The sound struck her like a spark to dry tinder. Cathryn’s head snapped up. The timbre, the cadence—so much like Damien’s. Her nominal husband had always spoken with that same restrained warmth, a hint of irony coiled beneath it. If she hadn’t known the man was Andrew, she might have sworn it was Damien sitting there.

But then again, Andrew and Damien were brothers; the resemblance shouldn’t have surprised her—though it unsettled her all the same.

Cathryn swiped at her cheeks, quick and almost furtive. Heat crept up her neck at the thought of being seen so exposed. “Forgive me, Mr. Brooks,” she said softly. “Seeing it just reminded me of my late mother.”

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Chapter 60:

Andrew shifted, rising slightly in his seat as his profile emerged from the shadow. He made a small, dismissive gesture toward Ethan. “I don’t care for taking what others cherish,” he said. “Since this piece means so much to you, I’ll give it to you.”

For a heartbeat, Cathryn forgot to breathe. “You would truly part with it, Mr. Brooks?”

A low chuckle unfurled from him, dry and knowing. “Part with it? That’s putting it rather strongly. My family already owns several works by Louis Marquet.” Most of them now hung in Cathryn’s own bedroom.

Relief—and a sudden, buoyant joy—flooded Cathryn’s chest. She fumbled for her phone, eager, almost trembling. “I happen to have thirty million on hand,” she said quickly, words tumbling out. “I can transfer it to you right now.”

Andrew didn’t answer at once. If he refused the money outright, she would grow suspicious. No one simply gifted a thirty-million-dollar painting to a stranger. Better to accept—to play the gracious collector—and leave her coffers empty. Then, when the time came, she would have no choice but to turn to him again.

The thought flickered across his face in the briefest tightening of his eyes before his lips curved into a smile. “Very well,” he said.

From the haze beyond the frosted partition, Ethan appeared, carrying the framed *Midnight Lilies*. He offered the painting to Cathryn—and, with it, slipped her a note with an account number scrawled across the paper.

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Had Cathryn thought to double-check, she might have realized it was the exact same account that had transferred her funds earlier.

Her fingers flew across her phone, too eager to send the money over, terrified Andrew might change his mind at the last second.

Moments later, Karl's screen lit up. Thirty million had been wired straight back into the account he had just drained. A slow twist of irritation crossed his face before giving way to a sharp, resigned smirk. Looks like Andrew and his wife were staging a little game of their own.

"Thank you, Mr. Brooks." Cathryn clutched the painting to her chest, tears of joy brightening her eyes. She'd climbed the stairs weighed down by dread, yet now she floated back down nearly giddy.

Once she was gone, Karl finally broke the silence. "Counting it strictly, Mr. Brooks, you're out thirty million—and Mrs. Brooks still won't see it as a favor from you."

All the gratitude belonged to Andrew, not his supposed alias, Damien.

Andrew's mouth curved faintly as his eyes lingered on Cathryn's graceful figure on the staircase. "That's not a loss. I'd call it a windfall."

Karl frowned, baffled. "So what exactly did you gain?"

Andrew turned a sharp look on him, irritation flashing in his gaze. "Do you actually expect a report from me?"

Karl's jaw snapped shut.

Andrew's gaze darkened. "Did the payments clear?"

"They did," Karl replied quickly. "The money went straight into Brightlight Charity Foundation's account."

Andrew gave a cutting laugh. "It'll only pass through there briefly. In ten minutes, the money will be tucked away in the Grants' private accounts."

Brightlight Charity Foundation's chairman was none other than Douglas himself. His so-called charity auction was nothing more than a front—an elegant way to launder and liquidate his collection while skirting taxes.

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