

## Chapter 123 A Faded Friendship

Chris studied Levi's profile intently, a sarcastic chuckle escaping his lips. "Mr. Hoffman, you're still as stubborn as ever."

Levi picked up on the sarcasm, his eyes flickering as he turned to Chris.

He wasn't naive; he recognized the edge in Chris's words.

Fifteen years earlier, they had been inseparable friends. The Hoffman and Howard families had stood together as allies since their grandfathers' era, but the grudges of the previous generation had created a divide, severing their bond entirely.

Despite this, Levi knew that Chris understood him better than anyone else, even more than his own family did.

Chris didn't buy the "reason" Levi had provided. If anyone was least inclined to take over the family business and follow their plans, it was Levi.

There had to be a powerful reason behind his decision.

Levi stared at Chris for a while before abruptly asking, "Is there someone you're trying to protect?"

Chris's eyes flickered, and the image of Kimberly's radiant smile flashed in his mind. After a brief pause, he responded, "Of course."

"Me too." A smile broke across Levi's face as he thought of someone, softening his stern expression. He then shifted his focus to the host on stage, his demeanor transforming into one of warmth. "So it's clear why I'm taking over the Hoffman Group."

This was the first time Chris had witnessed this side of Levi since their fallout. Known for his volatile temper and reckless nature, Levi was now discussing someone to protect, which felt completely out of character.

Chris fell silent for a long moment, his earlier suspicions crystallizing into a sense of dread.

Narrowing his eyes, he spoke in a low, cold voice. "You're not talking about Kimberly, are you?"

The unexpected mention of her name made Levi's heart race. He glanced at Chris, a wild intensity flashing in his eyes, his lips curling into a slight smile.

"What do you think?"

Chris's expression hardened, and he sat up straighter, crossing his long legs.

He had no interest in making guesses. Without meeting Levi's gaze, Chris said coldly, "She doesn't need your protection. You should keep your distance from her and stop indulging your self-righteous fantasies." His words were blunt and resolute.

The tension between them became thick, sharply contrasting with the surrounding atmosphere.

Levi's expression darkened, and he let out a chilling laugh. "You're not her, so how can you be so sure she doesn't need my protection?"

"Of course I know," Chris replied with a steady, expressionless tone. "She already has me."

Levi chuckled, as if Chris had shared the most absurd joke, his shoulders shaking and sending shivers through the guests around them. What was he up to now?

"What's so funny?" Chris asked, turning to Levi with a sharp gaze, clearly irritated.

"Your ignorance!" Levi shot back, lifting his chin defiantly.

A mocking smile spread across his face. "Chris, I can't believe you have the gall to say such things. Relationships aren't always logical. Whether she needs me or not is not for you to determine, and you have no right to keep us apart! Ultimately, it's her choice who she wants."

He tilted his head, his smile both innocent and cruel. "I honestly don't get where your confidence comes from."

At that, Chris's calm demeanor faltered. He narrowed his eyes, anger simmering just beneath the surface.

"Of course, it's the confidence she gives me!" He leaned in closer to Levi's ear and whispered with a smile, "Have you two ever shared a kiss?"

Levi's pupils contracted, but before he could respond, Chris continued to provoke him. "It seems not. That's a shame. Her lips are softer and

sweeter than marshmallows ... As far as I know, that was her first kiss—and mine too."

Fury surged within Levi, and he glared at Chris, grabbing him by the collar. "You're shameless!"

Those words ignited Levi's rage.

Chris just smiled, seizing Levi's wrist and effortlessly pulling his hand away, casually adjusting his clothes. "Getting a little worked up, are we?"

Levi's eyes blazed with anger, but he refused to admit it, gritting his teeth. "I'm not worked up." He suspected Chris was trying to provoke him on purpose and sneered, "You claim to have kissed her, but where's your proof?"

Chris found the question amusing and shrugged casually. "Where do you expect me to get proof for something like that? But if you really want evidence, I can take a picture next time."

"You!" Levi's eyes went bloodshot, and in a fit of rage, he lost control of his strength, snapping the armrest of the chair between them with a loud crack!

The guests around them were stunned into silence.

Was this the strength of an ordinary man?

The guests behind them felt a wave of terror wash over them, as if they were caught in a nightmare.

Should they even be hearing this?

Their legs turned to jelly, their bodies shaking with fear!

They worried that these two might suddenly turn their attention to them and lash out.

Chris and Levi's status and influence were unparalleled in the entire venue. The commotion they created drew the eyes of everyone present.

Even Decian, who was seated far away, noticed the tense atmosphere between them and raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Are Chris and Levi at it again?" he asked.

Kimberly, resting with her eyes closed nearby, fluttered her eyelashes slightly and replied with an indifferent tone, "Are you here to bid or to

watch them argue?"

She seemed entirely unfazed by the situation.

Declan turned to the woman beside him, his tone curious. "Aren't you pretty close with those two? Could they be arguing because of you?"

Kimberly opened her eyes, annoyance flashing across her face. "Are you out of your mind?"

She couldn't believe Declan was blaming her for their conflict, especially from such a distance.

Unable to suppress a cold laugh, Kimberly said, "Everyone knows they can't stand each other and always end up fighting. It's ridiculous for the organizers to put them in the same space. Isn't it expected that they would argue? Why are you making such a big deal out of it?"