

Chapter 3

I snapped out of my thoughts and exhaled a long, heavy breath. The memories from my past life clung to my mind and refused to fade.

Back then, I had foolishly longed for some shred of motherly love from Mom. But now, I knew better. I would never make that mistake again.

I had already moved out that very night and rented a new place. For extra caution, I'd also gotten a new phone number.

If I was not mistaken, Jake would be getting chased by loan sharks any day now.

Jake had always been aimless. After getting into a fight with a classmate, he had dropped out of high school. For years after, he had lazed around at home and relied on Mom to take care of him.

Dad had died years ago in a factory accident, and after much fuss, Mom had managed to get a hefty settlement from the company.

That money should have been enough for her and Jake to live modestly for most of their lives. However, Jake had never been the type to sit still.

He'd fallen into gambling, and soon enough, he'd drained the family's savings account dry. Too scared to tell Mom, he'd borrowed over 100 grand from loan sharks, hoping to win big and make it all back.

Naturally, he'd lost it all. He had been hiding out ever since, too afraid to go home. It wasn't until the debt collectors had shown up at our door that Mom had learned the truth.

With the savings gone and the only thing of value left being our old house, Mom had turned all her hopes toward me.

There was no way I could come up with over 100 grand in such a short amount of time. So Mom had devised her grand plan—marry me off as quickly as possible and use the wedding gifts to pay off Jake's debts.

With someone like Willem in the picture, there was no way she'd let him go. In my past life, she had hounded me to get married, and in the end, I had caved under the pressure and agreed to the marriage.

But this time, I wasn't going to be so weak. I swallowed down the bitterness welling up inside me.

A few days passed uneventfully, and I went about my life, going to work as usual.

Mom didn't know where I worked. The only thing she ever cared about was whether I sent her money on time every month.

Yet, she surprised me this time. She had somehow tracked down my office address and had been camping outside the building for most of the day.

I bet she must've panicked a few days earlier when she couldn't reach me on my old number and discovered I'd moved out.

That day, I hadn't stayed late at work. As I exited the side door, I caught a glimpse of her in the lobby, arguing with security.

The guard was trying to keep her from coming inside, but she was shouting something, her words too muffled to make out.

I knew she was here to cause trouble. Not wanting to get caught up in the chaos, I tried to slip away. But before I could make it far, someone shot out from the corner and grabbed my wrist.

It was Jake.

His eye was swollen and bruised, and he looked exhausted, like he hadn't slept in days. Things clearly hadn't been going well for him.

The moment he latched onto me, his face lit up with excitement, and he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Mom! Zara's over here!"

Immediately, Mom broke free from the security guard's grip and rushed toward me to grab me by the shirt.

Jake's shout drew quite a crowd. As more and more people gathered, Mom, now teary-eyed and sniffing, put on quite the show.

"You're in your 20s now, Zara! You're not getting any younger. I'm telling you to get married early for your own good!" she cried out as though she were the most selfless mother on earth.

"The man I found for you has everything. Marry him, and you'll live in comfort!"

I laughed bitterly inside. Every word she uttered sounded ironic.

When I didn't respond, she launched into her usual tirade.

"I worked my fingers to the bone all these years to pay for your college education. Do you know how much money I've spent on you? Our family's savings are nearly gone because of you!"

I almost laughed out loud incredulously. We'd been living on government subsidy for as long as I could remember, and I had never paid a cent in school fees.