+120 Points at most

Chapter 3 No.3

The walk to the study felt like a funeral procession.

Elena pushed Julian's wheelchair, her hands trembling on the rubber grips. Silas, Julian's looming shadow of a bodyguard, had been barred from entering the main house by Victoria. It was just them.

Inside the study, the air was thick with the smell of old leather and judgment. Arthur Sterling sat behind a desk the size of a small car, polishing a heavy wood cane with a white cloth.

Ryan was there.

Her heart leaped. She let go of the wheelchair and took a step toward him. "Ryan! Please, you have to listen to me. I was drugged. I would never -"

Ryan took a step back. He looked at her as if she were something he had scraped off his shoe.

"Don't come near me," he sneered. "You smell like him."

The words were a physical blow. Elena stopped, her breath catching in her throat. "Ryan..."

"Mother told me everything," Ryan said, his voice flat. "You've been sneaking around with him? Behind my back? You're even cheaper than I thought."

He gestured to Julian.

Elena looked at Ryan-really looked at him-and for the first time, she didn't see the charming adventurer she thought she loved. She saw a coward standing behind his mother's skirt.

"Enough," Arthur barked. He stood up, testing the weight of the cane in his hand. "You have brought shame on this house, Julian."

Julian sat with his head bowed. "I know, Father."

"You are a waste of space," Arthur said, walking around the desk. "A broken man with broken morals."

He raised the cane.

Elena gasped. "No!"

+120 Points at most

Thwack.

The sound of the wood hitting Julian's shoulder was sickening a dull, wet thud. Julian grunted, his body jerking forward, but his hands stayed white-knuckled on the armrests. He didn't try to block it.

Arthur raised the cane for a second strike, his face purple with rage.

"Arthur, stop!" Victoria intervened sharply, stepping between them. "Not in front of her. Think of the liability."

Arthur lowered the cane slowly, breathing hard. He glared down at his son, satisfied with the single, brutal blow that had left Julian trembling.

"You are garbage," Arthur spat.

Julian slowly lifted his head. His lip was bleeding where he had bitten it. His eyes were burning with a terrifying intensity.

"I want to marry her," Julian said.

The silence in the room was absolute. Even Arthur looked stunned.

"What?" Ryan laughed incredulously. "You want my leftovers?"

Julian ignored him. He looked straight at Arthur. "The press has the photos. If you cast her out, the story is 'Sterling Fiancee Cheats with Brother.' It makes Ryan look weak. It makes the family look chaotic."

Julian paused, wiping blood from his mouth.

"But if I marry her... the story becomes a tragic romance. The lovers who couldn't help themselves. It creates a scandal, yes, but a romantic one. It protects the stock price."

Arthur narrowed his eyes. He was a businessman first, a father second. He did the math in his head.

"He's right," Arthur grunted. He looked at Ryan. "You're marrying the Chen girl anyway. This solves the problem of Elena."

"Fine," Arthur waved his hand dismissively. "Take the trash. Marry her. But you're cut off from the main accounts. And I am activating the exile clause. You get nothing but your disability stipend. And you don't step foot in this house again."

"Deal," Julian said.

He turned his chair toward Elena. His face was pale, sweat beading on his forehead from the pain, but his hand was steady as he reached out.

"Elena," he said softly. "Get me out of here."

+120 Points at most

She looked at Ryan, who was already checking his phone, bored. Then she looked at the man nursing a bruised shoulder in the chair, the man who had just taken a beating to save her from total ruin.

She took Julian's hand. It was warm.

"Okay," she whispered.

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