

Shadows 191

Chapter 191 Slaps " You ! " Daphne was fuming . This shameless girl - just because she was younger and came from the streets , always fighting and arguing , she dared to bully her , a refined noblewoman who hated such crude behavior . Blair, oh , Blair ... how could you bring back a daughter like this ? You must've completely lost your mind ! " Mrs. Bell ! " Hurried footsteps echoed down the hall . It was Nelson Donoghue , the vice principal . " Why are you here all of a sudden ... Ah ! Your face ! What happened ? " Nelson froze when he saw Daphne's swollen , disheveled look .

The Bells were one of Orica University's biggest sponsors . DY Group's headquarters were right here in Slosa . As the city's top university , Orica had already received ten billion in donations from the Bells . And just recently , Jude , the head of DY , suddenly donated another five billion . Fifteen billion in total . That kind of money was rare to find anywhere in the world . So , the last thing Nelson could do was offend them . " It was her ! That woman dared to hit me ! " Daphne screamed , pointing a trembling finger at Tilda . " I want her expelled ! I'll sue her !

Call the police , right now ! " " Oh ? You sure about that ? " Tilda crossed her arms , a cold smile tugging at her lips . " Daphne , don't forget how Russell acted when he tried to sue me and how he looked after he lost . Don't forget what happened to the Jenson Group after that . " You want to take me to court ? Go ahead . I'll fight you to the end . Worst case , I'll ask Andy to give me a hand . " She tilted her head , drawing out her words on purpose . " For him , it's nothing but a small case . For you , though ...

" Just as she expected , Daphne's face turned darker and darker . Damn it ! How could she forget ? Somehow , that trash Tilda had managed to connect with Andy Saville , the star lawyer . With Andy backing her , even the worst lawsuits could be flipped around . Finished If this really went to court , even if Daphne barely won , it would not matter , as offending Andy would be suicide . The rest of the Bells would tear her apart , and Jude definitely would not let her off easy either . Whether she pushed forward or backed down , Daphne was stuck in a dead end .

Seeing Daphne trapped like that , Nelson did not even dare to breathe too loudly . Tilda's identity was just too complicated . Not only was she the Jensons ' real daughter who had been missing for 19 years , but she had also gone head- to - head with Russell in court and won . That lawsuit alone tanked Jenson Group's stock price and caused chaos everywhere . On top of that , Professor Linscott had even recommended Tilda for the National College Art Competition , where she might actually win the championship . No matter how you looked at it , Nelson could not afford to offend either side .

All he could hope for was that they stopped fighting - at least not on campus . Otherwise , he would be the one stuck in the middle . Daphne took a deep breath , forcing her voice to sound softer . " Tilda , I have something to tell you . " " Sorry , my time's way too precious to waste on trash . " Tilda grabbed Una's hand and turned to leave . " Let's go . " " Okay ! " Una even shot Daphne a mocking look and stuck her tongue out , making Daphne's anger boil over . Yet , she could not say a word .. She could only watch as Tilda and Una walked away .

Nelson secretly sighed in relief that the fight had not gone further . He was just about to comfort Daphne when ... Smack ! Smack ! Daphne , raging with nowhere to vent , turned and slapped him . Twice . That took the edge off her anger a little , and she stormed off . Nelson was confused . He felt wronged and on the verge of tears . Did she even know how much it hurts a man's pride to be slapped like that ? Especially twice ? Still , at least the storm had passed quickly .

That was something Meanwhile , Daphne pulled out her phone to make a call . She did not dare call Ryan - he would just scold her . So , she dialed Preston instead . " Son , what do we do about this ? Tilda's gotten too powerful . I can't touch her anymore . If we don't stop her soon , your sister's life will be ruined and our family's reputation will take a huge hit . " Our branch of the family can't afford to be everyone's laughingstock . 214 Their branch was already weak in the family line . Ryan was not strong enough because he's just a Bell by name .

Daphne had only managed to marry him by sheer luck , basically marrying way above her league , Her family was nothing compared to the Bells . However , the fourth branch had Jude , a once - in - a - century genius . Now , the fourth branch had taken control of the whole family , and even Abram doted on Jude ; its basically handing him all the real power .

Chapter 192 I'll Only Ever Love Kyla Jude basically had the Bells in the palm of his hand . King of Slosa - those words were not just talk . Finished Luckily , after the family split , they barely ran into him outside of big events . So , things stayed peaceful . Jude also did not go out of his way to crush the elders as long as they did not try anything sneaky . Daphne and Ryan would sometimes still act like " elders " in front of Jude , just to save face , but deep down , they knew he did not take them seriously at all .

They could not risk giving him any dirt to use against them . Meanwhile , Preston was at the airport , looking dead serious . He had just returned from working at DY Group's Sirango branch , where he had spent months landing deals worth billions . He was feeling proud , thinking his talent was finally being recognized , that this was just the beginning of his rise . In fact , he was even ambitious enough to challenge Jude , the current head of DY Group . If he could perform better than Jude , their grandfather would surely notice .

Maybe then , the position of power could switch to their branch of the family . In the family , only the strongest person ruled - it was as simple as that . And if Preston could also win over Kyla , that would seal the deal . A marriage with the Jensons meant not only gaining their support but also winning the girl he adored . However , his dumb sister had to cause trouble again . " I get it , Mom . Don't stress . Once I'm back in Slosa , I'll deal with this Tilda myself . " The mess had already started , so it had to be cleaned up .

He had seen women like Tilda a hundred times before - in bars and clubs , girls from poor backgrounds trying to snag a rich husband . He knew exactly how to handle them . crazy about " Son ... if I could , I really wouldn't want you getting involved . Tilda's still your fiancée . She's crazy you . " The whole reason she went back to the Jensons under a fake name was to honor that engagement , to marry into our family and rise from rags to riches . " I'm afraid she'll cling to you so tightly that you won't be able to shake her off later ... " " It's fine , Mom . I know what I'm doing .

I'll only ever love Kyla . Other women don't matter to me at all ! " Just thinking about Kyla - so pure , sweet , and beautiful , like a delicate flower - made Preston's eyes soften . Daphne finally relaxed . " Good . I'll say this now - I only accept Kyla as my daughter - in - law . If you mess around with some other woman and make a fool of yourself , I won't forgive you ! " She trusted Kyla completely - she had practically watched her grow up . Kyla was capable , kind , and reliable .

And since she was her best friend's adopted daughter , that marriage would basically make the families even closer . " I know , Mom . Anyway , my plane's boarding . I've gotta go . " " Okay . " After hanging up , Daphne tightened her grip on her phone . 63 Ryan had already snuck off to Hetsa to find their Rebecca. That foolish girl had caused a huge mess and did not even dare show her face . Today's humiliation could not reach Ryan's ears . If he finds out , he would probably beat Rebecca half to death considering his temper . Daphne had to find another way to retrieve that video .

Ideally , she did not want Preston anywhere near Tilda . He was their only chance to take back control of the family from Jude , and his future was bright . He could not be dragged down by some country girl dreaming of marrying rich . Thinking of that , Daphne pulled out her phone and called her best friend , Blair . Tilda , of course , knew none of this . And even if she did , she would've just laughed at how foolish Daphne was . After class , Tilda went back to her apartment and joined a video call with Lab Seven . On the screen , Rick was treating Dane with acupuncture and medicine .

" Tilda , the situation isn't looking great , " Rick said with a sigh . " He's been holding on this long , so there should've been at least a little improvement . But Professor Kerrigan still hasn't said a word . The

strange thing is , all his test results show he's perfectly healthy ." Of course , Rick only admitted this privately to Tilda . In front of Dane , he stayed upbeat and encouraging . A patient's emotions were everything - once they fell into despair or rejection , even treatable conditions could become hopeless . Keep going , Dr. Day . Let's give it another month .

If there's still no progress I'll think of another way . " Tilda was not giving up . This was her senior's trauma , and now it had become hers too . No matter how much time it took , she would find a way to heal him . If she quit now , then everything would truly be over .

Chapter 193 When Will I Become Someone That Close to You ? Tilda , just do your best . I'll send today's data over to you ," Rick said . Thank you , Dr. Day , " Tilda replied before ending the call . She opened the files Rick had sent - Dane's medical results . Her eyes darkened . Finished Every single reading was perfectly normal . Too normal . Could it really be that this genetic issue was impossible to fix ? No. That could not be . Dane had spoken as a child . Now , he only managed to speak in front of their master . There had to be some kind of trigger .

Something that could bring his voice back . But what ? Tilda racked her brain , trying to recall every little detail from her time with Dane , every word she had asked him . The effort left her head pounding . She pressed her temples , frustrated . No matter how hard she thought , she could not find that " trigger . " Breathe . Calm down . She could not rush this . Her master and Dane had been searching for years and still had not found a solution . Hitting a dead end was normal . If it were easy , their master would not have been so worried .

Taking a deep breath , Tilda forced herself to relax . Maybe if she kept going , things would change . Finding the answer would take time . Then , an idea struck her . She messaged Andy , briefly explaining Dane's condition . " Andy , can you help me look into this ? See if there are any leads at all . " If there was anyone she could trust completely , it was Andy . " What a strange illness . Sure , I'll ask around quietly , but don't get your hopes up , " Andy replied , offering her a little reassurance . " I got it . Thank you , Andy , " Tilda wrote back . She understood his meaning .

The government had already tried everything to cure someone like Dane , a rare talent . Yet they found nothing . Andy might not find anything either . Still , having one more path was better than none . After that , Tilda opened her messages with Jude . She bit her lip , hesitating . For Dane's sake , she finally typed everything out and told him about the situation . " I'll help . Wait for my update , " Jude replied almost instantly . Just like that , her heart felt a little lighter ..

37 Finished These past few days , Jude had been messaging her often , just some funny little stories and pictures of scenery . Normally , the old Tilda would have found that boring and ignored him But now ... It did not feel so bad . In fact , she kind of liked it . Maybe because it was Jude . She could not deny it anymore - her feelings for him were starting to change " Thank you , Jude . When are you coming back ? " she asked . " Soon , " he replied . Then added , " What , missing me already ? " Tilda rolled her eyes and typed back , " I just remembered I still owe you that meal .

I hate owing favors . It makes me feel uncomfortable . Jude smirked when he saw that . If paying him back meant she would stop thinking about him , maybe he should let her owe him a little longer . Of course , he could not admit that out loud . If anyone else knew what was going through his head , they would never believe it - the cold , untouchable head of DY Group acting like a lovesick guy , overthinking every word . " About Dane , " Jude messaged again , " as far as I know , Cetherland already tried countless methods . None of them worked . " " I know , " Tilda replied .

" I talked to Captain about it at the base . I don't expect miracles . But he's my senior and my closest family member in this world . Even if there's only one tiny chance , I'll do everything I can . " Then I'll give it everything too , " Jude answered without hesitation . Right after sending that , Jude picked up his landline and called Vassal . He handed the matter over completely , giving him full access to his intelligence network . Not even the smallest lead could be ignored .

Vassal did not understand why this was so important , but as Jude's servant , he knew better than to ask questions . Orders were orders . After Vassal left , Jude pondered . " My closest family member , huh ? " A flicker of jealousy rippled in his usually calm , dark eyes . Tilda , when will I become someone that close to you ? The next day , Tilda arrived right on time for the final round of the National College Art Competition in Cetherland . She stepped out of a Porsche Cayenne , wearing sunglasses , loose black striped track pants , short black boots , and a windbreaker .

Her long hair spilled over her shoulders like a waterfall , and her lips curved in a subtle smile .

Chapter 194 National College Art Competition Her free - spirited confidence and perfect figure dazzled everyone the moment she stepped out of the Cayenne . Heads turned . Men could not help staring . No wonder - Tilda steering the Porsche one - handedly was just too cool . Simon was already waiting at the entrance . " Professor Linscott . " " Tilda . " She walked up to him , sliding her sunglasses off . " I'm not late , am I ? " " Of course not - you're right on time . Let's go in . " Tilda opened her mouth to reply , but a familiar , teasing voice cut her off " Well , well .. Tilda .

What a coincidence running into you here . She turned and saw Alfie approaching , tall and sharp in a deep red tailored suit . Finished At nearly 6'3 " , he made the designer cut look like it had been created just for him . His short , neat hair and gray eyes glimmered with a sharpness that made people wary . He

was the kind of man who drew attention no matter where he went , like a rose with thorns . Women knew they would get hurt if they touched it , but still couldn't help lean closer . Tilda's voice was cool . " What are you doing here ?

" Alfie leaned closer , lowering his voice so only the two of them could hear . " The Woodward Group is sponsoring this competition . My dad sent me to check things out . What about you ? Don't tell me you're competing ? " He put on a fake look of surprise . But of course , he already knew . As a sponsor , he had seen the finalist list long ago . A name like " Tilda " stood out like a firefly in the dark - impossible to hide . The moment he saw it , he volunteered to attend . Otherwise , he would never waste time on something as boring as a college art competition .

Professor Linscott blinked curiously . " Tilda , you two are ... friends ? " Before she could answer , Alfie flashed a grin . Of course . Friends . " He gave Tilda a sidelong look , silently begging . C'mon , we've met a few times . I treated you pretty well at Sky Dining . Don't ruin my cover here . Tilda's lips twitched . " Oh , I see . " Professor Linscott's eyes flicked between them , the corners of his mouth curling like he had figured something out .

" So Tilda's boyfriend came to cheer her on at the finals - welcome , welcome ! " Son , your girlfriend's a rare painting talent . This national championship is basically hers already . " Cough , cough , cough ! Alfie nearly choked on air . " Professor , you've got it wrong ! I'm not her boyfriend . We're just friends . Really , just friends ! " " Oh , not official yet ? That's fine . You two look great together . Tilda's in college , so dating's perfectly normal ... " No , no , no ! I have zero romantic intentions toward Tilda ! Please , Professor , don't say that .

If people hear , I'll get myself killed ! " He was not exaggerating . If Jude heard anyone mistook him for Tilda's boyfriend , he would be beaten to a pulp , brotherhood or not . This was the first time Jude had shown feelings for someone , and he was already doing shocking , out - of- character things for her . Alfie had noticed . He was not about to become collateral damage . " Alright , that's enough , " Tilda cut in , massaging her temple . " Let's just go inside . " She did not bother clarifying further . Not when she had just seen the calculating gleam in Alfie's eyes .

Let him stew in fear for a while - served him right . The three of them headed into the venue . Not long after , a fiery red Ferrari pulled up outside . Preston stepped out , then walked around to the passenger side and opened the door with exaggerated gallantry . Out came Kyla , dressed in a pure white dress , looking every bit the delicate princess . " Preston , I'm so happy you invited me . But ... Finished Her voice was soft , hesitant . " I didn't have a piece chosen for the competition . It's Tilda who made it in .

If I go in , she'll just laugh at me . Maybe ... maybe we should leave . " She looked timid , fragile - like Tilda had schemed her way into stealing the competition slot that should have been Kyla's . Of course , this was exactly how Kyla always played it with Preston , disguising her scheming as something innocent . She had whispered enough of this act into his ear while he was abroad that he had nearly lost his temper countless times at Tilda . By the time he flew back to Cetherland , Preston had already sworn he would set things right - help Kyla reclaim her honor and make Tilda pay .

Chapter 195 Her Confidence " Kyla , don't worry . That damn Tilda must've used some cheap tricks to charm Professor Linscott and steal your spot . I won't let her get away with it . That slot was rightfully yours ! " Preston's voice hardened . " Honestly , I wouldn't be surprised if she seduced him . How else would the professor hand over your spot so decisively ? " Luckily , the Bells are sponsoring this event too . I've got an invitation and a say in the judging . Don't worry , I'll make sure Tilda pays .

" He had brought Kyla here for one purpose - to make her sit in the front row and watch Tilda crash and burn . And also , to avenge his sister Rebecca . He wanted Tilda to finally realize she had picked the wrong person to mess with . " Preston , don't be like this . Tilda already hates me enough . This is all my fault . " If it weren't for me being in the family , with Dad and the others favoring me ... after all , Tilda was missing for so many years and finally came back , of course , she'd feel jealous . " Things shouldn't have turned out like this .

I should've died back then and never been brought back to the family , or none of this would've happened . Tilda wouldn't have degraded herself so badly - even giving up her innocence just to embarrass me ... " The self - blame , the tears , and the delicate act melted Preston's heart on the spot . His chest tightened . painfully just hearing her cry . " Kyla , stop . Don't cry out here where people can see . " He pulled her into his arms , his voice gentle but filled with fire . " You're so kind and innocent - I won't allow that vile woman to bully you .

I'll make things right for you , no matter what . " Behind his soft tone , his eyes burned with rage . If Tilda were standing in front of him right now , Preston swore he would burn her to ashes . No one could make the woman he loved cry and get away with it . Meanwhile , Tilda had no clue about the little performance Preston and Kyla were putting on outside . If she did , she might have regretted missing such a good show . Inside , she sat with Professor Linscott and Alfie , who leaned over with a grin . " Tilda , want to hear something interesting ? It's about Jude . " She shot him a look .

" Can you not sound so weird when you talk ? " " Fine , fine , " Alfie smirked . " So , this competition isn't just sponsored by my family . The Bells threw in money too . Normally , for something on a college level ,

a family like that would just send some random rep to show face . But today ... ST 13:08 Mon , Sep 8 M e
He paused for effect . " It's Preston . Fresh back from Sirango . " He had asked for a spot way back then .
Isn't this strange ? " Findshed He tapped his chin . " And if I'm not mistaken , Preston's mother is Daphne
, right ?

Didn't you clash with her before at Sky Dining ? She's close with your family too . No way this isn't
targeted at you . " Alfie studied Tilda's reaction carefully . He wanted to see how Tilda would react after
hearing this news . After all , she was the woman Jude had his eyes on . He was curious just how much
brilliance Tilda was hiding , to make a man of Jude's stature hold her in the palm of his hand , afraid she
might slip away . News like this - surely Tilda must have known about it in advance . But instead of
bristling , Tilda only gave a dismissive snort .

" Oh , so Preston came back just to deal with me ? How boring . Wasting his time like this . Honestly ,
aside from Jude , the Bells are already circling the drain . Nothing to worry about . " Her tone was so
casual , like she was not talking about one of the most powerful families in the country whose name
alone could shake the business world . Alfie blinked , then broke into a grin . Maybe he finally
understood what Jude saw in her . Her confidence was not because of Jude's backing - it was her own .

It came from the strength she had earned herself , a self - assurance so deep she could laugh at a family
like the Bells . After all , she was the one who could make Andy , the most sought - after lawyer in the
country , drop everything and fly in just because she asked . Clearly , Tilda had layers no one had even
begun to uncover . What Alfie did not know was what she had already done to the Bells ' second branch
. V She slapped Daphne so many times that her face swelled up like a pig's head . With just a few sharp
words , she forced Daphne into silence , too scared to fight back .

She even made Rebecca kneel , bark like a dog , and lick shoes on video.

Chapter 196 Offering More Than Just Her Body And then there were all the things she had already done
to the Jensions . If Alfie knew about those , even he would have been floored and blurted out , " Damn ! "
At this point , she was really no different from Jude . Living like she did not care about life or death ,
never backing down from a fight . And on top of that , she had the strength to knock every enemy flat . "
I don't know if you've planned things out already , " Alfie said , " but I talked with some of the people
under me .

At least half of them won't bow to power - they'll actually vote for whichever painting they think
deserves it . " The only thing is , there is also an online voting round . I didn't make any moves there , so
you'll have to handle that yourself . " It was , after all , a good chance to see how capable Tilda really was
. So Alfie did not interfere too much . " No need , " Tilda replied calmly . " You sure ? Preston's definitely

here to target you . His best shot at rigging things is through online voting . This was a national - level competition .

The judges on site were not just from the Bells and Woodwards , the big - name sponsors , They were also some of the most famous old painters in the country . Guys like that had pride and backbone . Even if Preston tried to win them over , it would not come cheaply . The easiest way to cheat was through the newly added online voting . Even if those votes did not count as much , numbers had power , and they would add up . With the Bells and Woodwards sponsoring , this competition's publicity had blown up more than ever before .

Tons of people were already waiting by their computers , ready to watch the livestream . " As long as the audience isn't blind , they won't make the wrong choice , " Tilda said . " Fake votes ? So what . Real strength can't be hidden by fake numbers . " Her lips curved into a confident smile . If anyone said talent could not beat money , it only meant their talent was not dazzling enough . Not that money was too strong . Seeing that calm certainty in her , Alfie's eyes lit up with interest . " Then I'll wait and see , Tilda .

" Let's find out where your confidence comes from . The judging began . The five paintings that had made it through all the rounds from across the country were displayed on stage , each tagged with a number - 1 , 2 , 3 , 4 , and 5 - for voting , Tilda's painting was number 5 . " It's starting , it's starting ! " Simon said excitedly , eager to see the moment Tilda was crowned champion and announced as the one qualified to enter the world - class competition . He had already studied the other four paintings .

They were solid works , the best of ordinary students , and deserved to be here . Yet , compared to a true genius , compared to Tilda , the gap was so obvious it was almost cruel . Sure enough , when the judges turned their eyes to Tilda's painting , they froze . For a long while , nobody said a word . The guests in the audience , and even the online viewers watching the stream , all fell silent the moment they saw it . Up in the second - floor VIP box , Kyla clenched her teeth so hard she nearly cracked them .

She wanted to lash out , but with Preston sitting right next to her , she could not . Truthfully , if Tilda had not joined , Kyla's skills were more than enough to make the finals . As for winning the national title , maybe not - but with luck , she could have gotten the champion or runner- up title . Yet , compared to Tilda's work , her painting looked pitiful . The other four pieces were not even in the same league . This had to be the biggest gap in skill any national college art competition had ever seen . How could ants ever challenge the sky ? And Kyla knew it .

She knew exactly how breathtaking , how real , and how soul - shaking Tilda's art was . That was why the jealousy was eating her alive . It was Tilda ! The real daughter of the Jensons ! And she was stomping on the one thing Kyla was most proud of her talent . If it had been anyone else , Kyla might have swallowed the loss . Yet , to lose to Tilda , the girl she had once kicked out of the Jensons ? Now even the family's love and favor , which used to be hers , were shifting to Tilda . Unforgivable .

Preston narrowed his eyes , a dangerous glint flashing in them . He had not expected Tilda's painting to be actually pretty good . For a moment , even he had gotten lost in it . Looks like Tilda was offering more than just her body.

Chapter 197

Tilda was obviously talented . Finished Or else , there was no way she could have survived all those elimination rounds and actually made it to the national finals . Preston had just flown back from a long trip in Sirango . He barely had time to unpack before he was dragged straight into this competition . And thanks to all the little whispers from Kyla and Daphne , he already had it set in his mind that Tilda was not a real artist , just some girl willing to trade her body for opportunities , He did not even bother giving Tilda's finalist piece a second look .

To Preston , Kyla was always going to be number one , Her beauty , her sweetness , the way she acted so pure and fragile - it was everything . Yeah , he knew he was biased , but who cares ? When you love someone , you'll choose their side every time . " Preston , Tilda's painting looks incredible . I mean , with a piece like that , how can she not win first place ? " Kyla whispered , forcing a shaky little smile , like she was seconds from crying . " She's the real deal , after all . She's got Mom and Dad's talent . Me ? I'm just the replacement . My paintings . can't even compare to hers ...

" " Kyla , don't say that . " Preston immediately cut her off . " Your work is the best in my eyes . No one could ever take your place . " Then , his voice hardened . " And besides , Tilda ? She's the type who'd hook up with her professor just to steal a spot in the competition . For all we know , she didn't even paint that piece herself - maybe she got someone else to do it and slapped her name on it . Deep down , Preston knew that sounded crazy . National competitions had way too many checks to pull something like that off .

However , to keep Kyla from crying , he had no problem tossing shade at Tilda . " Don't worry , Kyla . Whatever shady tricks Tilda tries to pull , I'll make sure she never takes that trophy . " Preston's eyes burned with anger . " That championship belongs to you - and only you . She doesn't deserve it , not

now , not ever ! " The judging finally kicked off . One by one , the ten judges scribbled down their choices on slips of paper .. Bribes All the slips went into a box , and some staff behind the stage started counting them up .

It felt almost like waiting for a raffle to be drawn . The results came out fast . Tilda's painting , number 5 , snagged 5 votes . Number 4 picked up 3 votes . Numbers 1 and 2 each got a single vote. Number 3 ? Zero - knocked out right away . The whole room went silent . It was obvious to anyone with working eyes that Tilda's work crushed the other four pieces . If things were fair , all ten votes should have landed on number 5 without hesitation . So how on earth did the votes split up like this ? " See that ? Preston's fingerprints are all over this . " " I can't believe it .

I lined up five judges to vote fairly , and sure enough , they chose you honestly ." Finished " But the other five ? Preston bribed them and told them to scatter their votes . Does he think people are that dumb ? " Alfie was practically shaking with rage at Preston's sloppy trick . The whole thing screamed rigged . However , Preston had already started this , so there was no way he could take it back now . He did not expect Tilda's piece to completely outshine the others .

The judges he paid off must have been sweating bullets , worried that if this blew up , their reputations would be in pieces . Still , Preston had been careful enough not to let all 10 votes pile onto one entry . By splitting them up , he made it look less suspicious , like it could be chalked up to " different tastes " or " encouraging diversity . " Yet , whispers rippled through the audience . Most people thought anyone who did not vote for number 5 had to be either clueless or corrupt . Especially Simon . This ... this doesn't make sense ! There has to be cheating involved !

He looked like he was about to blow a gasket , ready to storm up and demand the non - Tilda voters explain themselves . How much cash did they take to pull something this shady ? " Professor Linscott , please calm down . " "We can't dictate how people vote . " Meanwhile , Tilda stayed cool as ever . Her face did not change . It was like none of this mattered . Or maybe ... She already knew she would win anyway . " Ugh , Tilda , I just can't stand this unfairness ! Who cheats in a competition like this ? I'm furious !

" When this is over , I'm filing a complaint . I want names , and I want to know who dared to pull this off ! " Simon was fuming nonstop . Then , Alfie leaned closer to Tilda , lowering his voice so only she could hear " See? Preston already made his move . But judging from how calm you are , you must've had a counterplan ready , right ? " Tilda was confused . She blinked at him , basically throwing him a giant question mark . " Don't tell me , " Alfie muttered , eyes narrowing , " you seriously didn't plan anything ahead of time ? "

Chapter 198 No Plans Alfie just stared at Tilda like she had grown a second head . " You're serious ? You weren't bluffing when you said you didn't plan anything ? " " I told you already , " Tilda said flatly . " I didn't . Guess we'll just have to wait and see . She leaned her chin against her palm , looking half - asleep as she stretched and even let out a lazy yawn . Alfie was baffled . So ... she really had no plan ? Then why was she acting like she had this whole thing in the bag ? The next part was the online vote .

Since this was a national - level event , the organizers made it strict - you had to log in with your ID and phone number . No easy bot - farming like in those cheesy talent shows . Still , with enough cash , you could bend the rules . It just cost a lot more . For Preston , money was not even a problem . If blowing a mountain of cash meant crushing Tilda and winning points with Kyla , he would do it in a heartbeat . At first , the committee did not even want an online voting section . However , the Bells pushed hard , saying art needed to " adapt to the modern era " .

Letting people across the country pick their favorite would get art trending and make it accessible to more people . Their argument was airtight , so the judges gave in . To be fair , the online votes only made up a small fraction of the total score . For example , number four was trailing two votes behind number five . To make that up , they would need over 5,000 online votes . If the contest was close , maybe that would matter . However , with a huge gap like this ? Unless the audience suddenly lost their eyesight , number five was the obvious choice .. The live voting began .

Numbers ticked upward on the giant screen .

Entry five surged ahead instantly , climbing so fast it looked unstoppable . Number four trailed right behind . Entries one , two , and three barely registered - nobody even bothered looking their way . Up in the VIP box , Preston frowned . " What the heck ? Why aren't we catching up ? " He had already spent a fortune on vote - buying .

At the same time , he could not go overboard - too many fake votes would scream " cheating " -but still , number four should have been closer to number five by now . Frustrated , he texted his contact . " You guys buying the votes or not ? " " We already started , boss . If we'd waited any longer , we wouldn't have had enough time to rack up numbers . " " What ? " Preston's eyes widened . " Then why hasn't number four passed number five yet ? At this rate , she's gonna win ! " MEA " Uh about that ... " came the reply . " Bad news , boss . Number five just went viral on Twitter .

People are flooding in to vote for her ! " Panicking , Preston yanked out his phone and opened TikTok . Right there at the top of the trending page , highlighted in blazing red letters - Trending . [Nationwide

College Art Contest Stuns Everyone with a Masterpiece] And of course , the star of the video was Tilda's painting - entry number five . The other four entries got shown too , including number four . But honestly ? They looked like background props compared to hers . The comment section was exploding . " Holy crap , who painted this ? My jaw dropped the second I saw it !

" " No way that's hand - painted . It looks too real ! " " Even if it was a photo , it's breathtaking . Where is this magical place ?? " Here's the contest link - National College Art Competition ! Voting's open right now ! Go vote number five if you're as amazed as I am ! "

And it was not just TikTok blowing up . Reddit threads , Twitter feeds , even YouTube - every platform was exploding with Tilda's painting . People swarmed the contest site so fast that the servers were glitching .

Preston's shady tricks did not matter anymore as raw talent was unstoppable : Number four's votes flatlined . Number five's bar shot straight up , climbing like crazy . W 2.4 " Preston , what's happening ? " Kyla's voice cracked with panic . Didn't Preston promise there was no way Tilda would win ? is f CALS S
「 F Yet here she was - not only leading but about to smash every record in sight . 6 . 42 -1 ほり " I ... 17
Preston tried to answer , but nothing came out . He just sat there , frozen , while the countdown hit zero . The results flashed across the screen .

Tilda crushed the competition with 3.65 million votes . Entry four ? Barely scraped past a hundred thousand . If the voting had stayed open longer than half an hour , nobody could have even guessed how high her votes would have gone . That was the speed of the internet . When something is that stunning , it spreads like wildfire . 84 ← 4 " Hah ! Knew it ! " someone in the crowd shouted . " Bribe the judges all you want , but you can't buy millions of real people ! " I'd love to see the faces of the judges who didn't pick her . They've gotta be kicking themselves right about now ! "

Chapter 199 Sharpest Weapon Simon leaned back with a smirk , clearly entertained by the chaos . Alfie's eyes stayed on Tilda . There was something different about the way she carried herself - her calm smile , the steady depth in her gaze , the soft glow of her pale features under the spotlight . Tilda , don't tell me this was all part of your plan ? " " Mm , kinda . I figured I could win . I just didn't think it'd be this easy . " I guess Preston's nothing special . Even with bribes , he still couldn't do a thing . " If it weren't for Jude , the Bells would've gone bankrupt ages ago .

" Pfft ! Alfie nearly spit out his drink and ended up hacking like crazy . Girl , you can't just say stuff like that ! If someone overheard , it'd be a disaster . Yet , at the same time , he finally understood - Tilda was not just bold , she was dangerous in the best way . Jude , you've really met your match . She's not a pushover - she's a storm hiding behind a smile . Still , Jude was not ordinary either . A genius like him paired with a force of nature like her ? That was a mix nobody could top . Alfie actually found himself looking forward to seeing them side by side .

It would be very entertaining . Meanwhile , up in the private box . Preston's expression was darker than a thundercloud . Kyla stayed quiet , but inside , she had already pieced everything together . Preston had tried to mess with the judges , but he could not go too far without drawing suspicion . That was why he suggested the online vote , as it was sneaky enough to look legit . Even with all the strict checks ... No ... It's because of all those strict checks that pulling it off would actually be convincing . The problem was , even after all that scheming , Tilda crushed him .

Her painting did not just win - it went viral . So much for money beats talent . This time , talent left money in the dust . Kyla's hands curled into fists , her nails digging deep into her palms until they hurt . She needed the pain to keep herself from screaming . She wanted to storm downstairs , to scream at Tilda , to throw her success in her face . How was it fair ? Tilda had been missing for 19 years , had no proper training , no upbringing . And yet , she was this good ? Good enough to erase everything Kyla was proud of ? " I'm sorry , Kyla ...

Preston's voice was low , heavy with defeat . " Preston , Tilda's really amazing . Look at all those votes - she got them all by herself ... " The others don't even come close . This has to be the most one - sided championship ever . " Tilda really is Dad and Mom's daughter . I could never compare . " As she said that , tears slipped down her cheeks , and she started sobbing . " Kyla , don't cry , " Preston said quickly , his voice desperate . " She probably just dumped a ton of money into buying votes . " Otherwise , how could she win with such a huge lead ?

" The moment Preston saw Kyla cry , his heart ached like crazy . He quickly tried to comfort her in a gentle voice . Kyla threw herself into his arms , sobbing miserably . " Preston , I know you're just saying that to make me feel better , but even if Tilda bought votes , she's still the champion . That's the truth we can't change . " This round , I screwed up . But Kyla , listen , next time , I'll make sure it doesn't end like this again . " Every tear you cried today , every insult you had to swallow , everything Tilda pulled - I swear I'll make her pay it all back !

" Preston's eyes burned with fury . " Come on , Kyla . Let's stop watching . If we keep staring at Tilda showing off , it'll just hurt you more ... " Preston , I'm not that petty . Honestly , I'm glad for Tilda - she's Dad and Mom's real daughter , after all . I bet Dad , Mom , and our brothers will be proud out of their minds when they see this . I'm gonna snap some photos and send them in the family chat for Dad to see ! " Kyla forced a cheerful smile .

Yet , inside , she was dying to leave , to get away before Tilda's spotlight grew any brighter under the flashing cameras . Still , if she wanted Preston to keep pitying her , she had to play the part . Back at the Jenson house , Dad and Mom hadn't really changed . But Dominic , Howard , and Wade ? They had already shifted sides . They barely even looked at Kyla anymore , acting like she did not exist . All their attention was glued to Tilda now . And Rebecca ? That fool had already been tricked into running off to Slosa . She would be useless for a long while . Not good .

Not good at all . Kyla had to gather every last card she still had left . The Bells ' second branch was still on her side , and her tie to the Jensons was her sharpest weapon against Tilda !

Chapter 200 The Champion Right now , Kyla did not have the luxury to daydream about Jude . She needed to keep Preston locked in tight - no way was she letting him pull a Dominic and flip sides . The last thing she could afford was Preston getting cozy with Tilda . " Kyla , you're just too good for this world . How can someone like you even exist ? You are so sweet and so pure ... Preston's hands itched to grab Kyla , hold her close , kiss away those tears , and drown in her lips . He wanted her so badly it hurt , but reason kept him frozen .

Thanks to his stupid engagement with Tilda , Kyla had been dodging him , afraid to admit what she really felt . But Tilda ? Your days are numbered . I'm dumping this engagement . The only woman I'll ever call mine - the only Bell daughter - in - law - will be Kyla . You ? Selling yourself to climb higher ? You're trash . You'll never be worthy . Just then , the winners were announced . Champion , runner - up , and third place were all headed to the stage . And of course , the spotlight fell on Tilda . As soon as she stepped up , the cameras went nuts .

Flash after flash , shutters going off nonstop . Tilda looked like she had been born for this . Cool , confident , almost smug as she played to the cameras . As the champion , all eyes were locked on Tilda . Her porcelain - doll face looked flawless under the lights , her loose black hair framing it just right . Dressed in a sleek trench coat , one hand tucked casually in her pocket , a faint smirk tugged at her lips . Her chin tilted upward ever so slightly , carrying that kind of pride that said , " I'm the ruler of art , the rest of you don't even come close .

" She looked untouched by the dirt of the world , pure and otherworldly , yet never fake . That impossible vibe hit everyone like a wave , making their hearts skip a beat . Even the live chat was going insane . " Gosh , Tilda is unreal ! " " No wonder she painted something that crazy . She's gorgeous , and the vibe matches perfectly . " " Girl crush activated . Don't forget us , Tilda ! " " Forget it , I'd totally go gay for her . " " Holy crap , it's bad enough the guys are all fighting over her , and now even the girls are in the mix ? What is happening ?!

" Sis , please don't swing that way ! I'm a guy , I like girls , and I'm right here ! Look at me , I'm fresh meat ! " Meanwhile , the artist behind entry number four was spiraling . Most art kids are full of themselves - cocky and hard to impress . If you make it to the national finals , you've got the skills . But against Tilda ? It was like a bug facing a hurricane . He had nothing left , not even pride . So , he could only admit defeat . And yet , somehow , entry number four still managed to snag a few votes .

Even the artist who painted it was totally dumbfounded . He honestly wanted to shout , " Are the judges and audience blind or what ? " With a masterpiece like number five shining up front , how could anyone bother with something that looked like pure garbage ? It made people suspect the whole thing was rigged . For him , this was without a doubt the biggest stain on his art career - no contest . Once the three finalists walked up on stage , the awards ceremony officially began . That's when Alfie appeared on camera . Grinning , trophy in hand . Simon froze in shock .

Wait , wasn't the award supposed to be given out by someone from Woodward Group , the main sponsor ? So Tilda's friend was actually from Woodward Group ? No wonder he carried himself with that cool , mysterious vibe ! Alfie passed the trophy to Tilda . Then , he grabbed the flower garland from the hostess . He slipped it around Tilda's neck . " Congrats , Tilda . " His smile this time was warm and real . Tilda stayed calm , just answering , " Thanks . " Her expression never wavered . It was like trophies , fame , and all that noise meant nothing to her .

The win itself ? Already decided . How did it come about ? Who cared . Alfie's curiosity only grew . What was this girl really thinking ? She had that strange magnetism - get too close , and you could not pull away . Jude , you'd better watch out for this little sorceress . She could reel in anyone if she wanted . Professor Linscott was so hyped that he actually teared up . He whipped out his phone , snapping away at the effortlessly cool Tilda . Then blasted it all over his social media .

" Proud of my student Tilda for taking first place in the National College Art Competition and moving on to the world finals ! ' Good luck , Tilda - show the world your brilliance and make us all proud ! " And instantly , Simon's notifications went insane . ' Yo , Simon , since when did you have such a hidden gem under your wing ? " Wait , didn't you hype up Kyla Jenson before ? How'd it end up being Tilda instead ? " Dang ! So this genius is yours ? I was dying to know who she was - can't believe I missed out ! " Simon , hook us up ! Let's co - mentor her .

I want to be able to brag I trained Tilda , too ! " Simon scrolled through his feed , seeing all those big - name art masters - people who could stir up storms in the industry - blowing up Au