

A Man with Nerves of Steel

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Natalie was stupefied. In all her years growing up, this was the first time Cora had ever hit her, and it was a straight-up slap across the face. Judging from the strength Cora had used, she hadn't held back in the slightest. The sting on her cheek she could endure, but the crack that opened in her heart wasn't something she could accept.

"Did you actually hit me, Mom?" she asked in disbelief.

Seeing the hurt in Natalie's eyes made Cora feel like she'd gone a bit too far. However, her gaze stayed sharp as she stared Natalie down. She reached out to touch Natalie's cheek, but the latter flinched and dodged her.

She asked coolly, "What did I tell you before sending you to your father? If he doesn't come back, you and your sisters aren't allowed to come back, either. I wanted you to bring him home. He has issues with me, but he wouldn't have made things hard on you girls. And what did you do? You come back alone.

"Secondly, I'm the one who gave birth to you. Could anyone possibly know better than I do who your father is? Get this into your head-Joseph Hart is your father."

Natalie wanted to argue, but the force of Cora's presence was overwhelming. She couldn't summon the courage, and she felt wronged after being scolded. Still, she clung stubbornly to one last thread of defiance. "But... but there's a paternity test result. It says I'm not biologically related to Joseph."

"That's fake."

"You're saying the test result Joseph gave me is fake?"

"Of course. You were a complete fool for falling for it. Think about how well he's always treated you-he'd give you the best of everything if he could. And you actually question whether you're his daughter? You've really let him down. You've let me down, too!"

Once Cora saw that Natalie had been cowed, she stopped lecturing her. She told Natalie to stay home, then headed to the hospital to pick up Selena and Kimberly. Unbeknownst to her, Natalie only grew more indignant as she simmered. Finally, she stormed off to Bernard and Helen's home to complain.

When she arrived, her tears burst forth like a dam and poured down her face uncontrollably. She sobbed so hard she could barely speak, and the sight of her in such a state made Helen's heart ache.

Choking on her words, she accused Cora of abusing her and poured out how she'd found out that Joseph wasn't her biological father. She talked about her "tragic backstory" and begged Helen to stand up for her.

Naturally, Helen's heart went out to Natalie, especially when she saw how one side of her face was clearly swollen and red. She immediately assumed Cora really had slapped Natalie that hard, not knowing that Natalie had actually slapped herself again outside the door to make it look worse.

Either way, the truth didn't matter. Helen called Cora, laid into her over the phone, then ordered her to come over immediately.

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"Grandma, you can't let Mom come. She'll hit me again," Natalie said pitifully.

"She wouldn't dare! Even if she had all the courage in the world, she wouldn't dare lay a finger on you anymore. I never had the heart to hit her, yet she had the nerve to hit you? She's out of line! You're staying with me this weekend. Don't bother going home," Helen snarled.

"I knew you loved me the most, Grandma!"

Natalie snuggled into Helen's arms, acting all sweet and clingy. But out of Helen's sight, her lips curled into a sly smile. Then, she said, "Oh, right. Joseph told me himself that he's not my biological father, and he even showed me the paternity test. Grandma, what's going on? Who is my real father?"

These past few days, Bernard had been grumbling nonstop about Joseph, especially about how he was demanding billions in the divorce settlement. That made Helen think he really was a rotten son-in-law,

too.

She snorted and spat, “He told you that he wants to divorce your mom, huh? Did he also tell you he’s eyeing her money?”

“Oh? No, he didn’t. He wants to take Mom’s money?”

“Of course he does. He wants to use the divorce to get over a billion dollars out of her. Honestly, some people’s greed knows no bounds. You mustn’t let him fool you, alright? You need to see him clearly for

what he is.”

Natalie nodded firmly at that. In her mind, Joseph had used her, which proved he really was a terrible person. Even if the paternity test results were fake, she still felt ashamed to have any blood ties to him. If he and Cora didn’t end up getting divorced, she would still cut him off and sever their father-daughter relationship!

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At that moment, Joseph was in the operating room as an assistant, with Walt as the lead surgeon performing the craniotomy.

The first assistant was the head of the surgical department. He was in charge of opening the scalp, separating the skull, and cutting through the dura mater. Then, it was up to Walt to handle the

intracranial lesion.

As the fourth assistant, Joseph had no chance to even touch a scalpel. Still, he silently worked through each step in his mind. In his view, after decades in the field, Walt's

surgical technique was polished to perfection, and his judgment of the condition was on point.

Nevertheless, age was catching up with him. When it came to speed and steadiness, he was just a little off his former peak.

Joseph felt that if he were the lead surgeon, he was confident he could operate with greater precision and speed. He could better control the bleeding and give the patient a higher chance of survival.

That thought grew even stronger during the breaks in the operation, when they went over the patient's data and discussed the post-op recovery plan. The plan the hospital leadership settled on was conservative and safe-the patient's life wouldn't be in danger, but there was no way he would make a full recovery.

After a surgery like this, the patient would, at best, live another five to ten years. Comparatively, the plan Joseph had in mind carried some risk, but it could completely cure the patient and let them live out a natural lifespan.

Even so, Joseph accepted reality. In this hospital, what Walt said was law. He was just a lowly attending physician-he had no say.

Walt had already asked his secretary to arrange housing for Joseph-a single room with its own bathroom, kitchen, and even a washing machine. After the surgery, Joseph moved straight in. At least his accommodation problem was solved for now.

The next day, Joseph was called back to the director's office by Walt, where he found Bernard waiting for

him.

The last time they'd met, Bernard had punched him, and Joseph had been brooding about it ever since. He didn't even bother greeting Bernard when they saw each other. Once he realized that it was actually Bernard who had come looking for him, he spoke, his tone stiff and cold. "What are you doing here?"

For the first time in over a decade, Bernard could clearly feel how distant Joseph had become, and it irritated him. But when he remembered that Joseph was set on divorcing Cora, it made sense that Joseph wouldn't be polite.

"I'm here to ask you what exactly you think you're doing," he said.

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Joseph frowned. He'd already laid everything out before. There was no need for Bernard to ask again. But since he had, Joseph figured this had to do with taking things to court. Even businessmen were afraid of lawsuits!

He replied, "I've already told you. Cora did something unforgivable to me and to our marriage, so I'm going to divorce her. Put yourself in my shoes for a second, Mr. Lowell. If it were you in this situation, what would you do?"

“Could you really stomach your wife cheating on you and having some other man’s kid? Because I can’t. My answer won’t change, even if you put a knife to my throat.”

“You have no qualms about spouting any and all nonsense now, do you?” Bernard spat.

“If I’ve offended you, then please be the bigger person and let it go,” Joseph retorted. “But I’m not wrong. I just don’t understand why you can’t respect something as simple as basic marital ethics.”

“Divorce is a small matter. But the fact that you demanded several billion dollars the moment you open your mouth-what kind of person does that?”

“I want a divorce, and I want compensation. That’s the price Cora has to pay for betraying me!” Joseph

snapped.

“You’ll get the divorce, but don’t even think about getting the money. Demanding billions of dollars is extortion! If we take you to court for that, you’ll be looking at a prison sentence.” Bernard slammed the table. He was truly upset with Joseph now.

“Then go ahead and have Fiona sue me. I’ll be waiting!” Joseph said, unflinching.

He didn't back down. The fact that Cora had taken a lover and even had his child had already trampled his bottom line. At first, he'd been willing to keep things quiet. He could've gotten the divorce, walked away without taking a cent, and that would've been that.

But Cora was the one who adamantly refused to get a divorce. On top of that, Bernard was threatening and pressuring him. That, he absolutely wouldn't put up with.

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Bernard and Joseph parted on a bad note.

After Joseph walked out, Walt came out of another office. Seeing the awful look on Bernard's face told

him that the talk with Joseph had obviously blown up. A bad feeling washed over him.

He was right.

Bernard turned to Walt and snapped, "That ingrate has grown a pair now. He actually dared to go against me! I'll make sure he gets it into his head that in Jenton, nobody crosses me and walks away! Fire him. Make sure he can't practice as a doctor anymore.

"I'll call in a few favors. We'll see which hospital out there dares to hire him after he's kicked out from here. I can't wait to see how he plans to survive in Jenton!"

"Come on, Bernard. I think that's taking things too far. Joseph only brought up divorce because he wants to give Cora and Natalie's biological father a chance to be together. He wasn't targeting you. Someone at your level doesn't need to come down this hard on him," Walt hurriedly said.

“He wants Cora to pay him several billion in compensation. How is that not extortion? Anyone who thinks they can squeeze the Lowell family is not getting off easy. Walt, just do what I said.” Bernard wouldn’t be talked down. He stormed off.

Walt realized things were getting out of hand. He called Cora and told her not to file a lawsuit against Joseph, or it would only make everything more complicated. Then, he also called Joseph in to talk things through with him.

“You really set Bernard off this time,” Walt said. “He’s ready to sue you for extortion. I’ve never seen him this furious. My advice is that you talk to him again. Try to calm him down before this escalates any further.”

Joseph gave a vague hum in response, then asked thoughtfully, “Besides saying that he would sue me, what else did he say?”

“He wants me to fire you. He says he wants to make sure you can’t practice as a doctor and can’t find a job anywhere in Jenton,” Walt admitted.

“Then I’ll leave the hospital and Jenton. That was always the worst-case scenario in my mind, Dr. Loughlin. If it really comes to that, I’m prepared.”

Joseph smiled bitterly, but his determination to divorce Cora and cut ties with the Lowell family only grew stronger. At the same time, he wanted to see what Walt would do. If Walt chose to bow to Bernard’s pressure, then there was no reason for him to stay at this hospital any longer.

That night, when Joseph returned to his dorm, he found Cora waiting inside. His expression darkened, and he said coldly, “You’re not allowed in my private space without my permission, Cora.”

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“I’m your wife. What ‘privacy’ are you talking about?” she shot back.

She took in the sight of him holding a thick stack of medical textbooks, looking every bit the bookish nerd.

“What are you trying to pull?” Joseph put his things down and fixed her with a hard stare.

She said, “First, you’re going to the district court to withdraw the lawsuit. Then, you’re going to tell Natalie that the paternity report is fake and that you’re actually her father. You don’t owe me an explanation. Just

come home with me, and I’ll act like none of this ever happened.”

“Cora, do you have any shame? I don’t even want to waste my breath on a shameless woman like you. I’ll

see you in court.”

“Fine. Court it is. But Natalie is our daughter, and nothing you do can change that fact,” Cora snapped.

“You’re an ignoramus. Do you even know how the law works?”

“You-Fine. Let’s set the lawsuit aside for a second. Answer me this instead-why did you dump all of this nonsense on Natalie? She’s just a kid. What were you trying to achieve?”

“She’ll soon be 16, which means she’s basically an adult. She should take responsibility for what’s hers and face the reality before her. As a person in her own right, she has every right to know who her biological father is. You don’t have to tell her his name, but you do have a duty to tell her the truth,” Joseph spat.

“Her father is you-”

“That’s absolutely impossible,” Joseph cut her off. “Don’t forget that I’m a doctor, Cora. If the paternity test says I’m not the father, then I’m not.”

He pulled a document out of his bag. It was a divorce agreement with no compensation amount filled in. He had already signed it. All that was needed was Cora’s signature.

He said, “I’m done with this. I can’t deal with you and your father anymore. You two are taking turns playing the good cop and bad cop. I can’t keep up, and I give up. I can’t afford to offend you, but I can walk away, can’t I? I’m begging you-just let me go!”

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Cora hadn’t expected Bernard to threaten Joseph. She was... speechless. Then, with a sharp rip, she tore the divorce papers clean in half, then folded and ripped them again into four pieces. She didn’t want a

divorce.

“My dad didn’t really mean what he said to you. But if we’re being honest, this is kind of your fault, too. You told Nat about all this nonsense, so she went and exaggerated it to my parents. She’s been crying her eyes out the last couple of days, which is why my dad got so angry and came after you.

“Joe, you used to dote on Nat so much that you wouldn’t let anything hurt a hair on her head. Yet now, you’re using her as a weapon. You’ve become so cold, calculating, and vicious. What caused this change?”

“I’m not taking the blame for that. Natalie isn’t my daughter. She’s the bastard you had with some other man. You and your parents can keep lying to yourselves all you want, but that’s on you.”

Joseph was getting impatient. He genuinely didn’t understand why Cora insisted on deceiving herself. If she’d cheated, then she’d cheated. She could just come clean about it.

With her wealth and status, she had every right to pick whatever man she wanted. She could swap them out every few days, and no one would dare say a word. Most people would still look at her with envy and admiration.

“You’re such an asshole, Joseph. Nat is your daughter, and I never betrayed you!” Cora snapped.

“We’re just going in circles. You say your piece, and I say mine. Neither of us is going to convince the other, so let’s just settle this in court.” Joseph kicked Cora out.

Cora went to see Fiona, who handed her a stack of legal documents. It turned out Bernard was serious about suing Joseph for extortion. The thought alone gave her a headache.

“My dad is completely out of control. Never mind that the lawsuit won’t hold up-this is exactly what Joseph wants. He would love nothing more than to drag this into court. God, my dad is just adding fuel to the fire.”

Cora never imagined that the first thing Bernard would do after stepping back into the game would be to mobilize company resources to go after Joseph. Instead of solving anything, he was just making the conflict impossible to walk back from.

However, Fiona said, “Cora, maybe Mr. Lowell’s approach isn’t all bad. We can make Joseph realize that what he did really does count as extortion, and we need to make sure we get him before he makes his move. When he’s staring down the possibility of prison time, he’ll have to weigh the pros and cons and

back down.”

“Fiona, you’re forgetting one thing here. At the end of the day, Joseph is my husband, and I love him. No matter when or where, I can’t be the one to hurt him.” Cora reminded Fiona of that. She didn’t want to lose Joseph. Emotionally and physically, she needed him-especially physically.

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“What’s really tricky now is the paternity report. As things stand, once the district court starts investigating, they’ll accept that report as valid evidence and naturally take Joseph’s side.” Even someone as sharp as Fiona was stumped; she couldn’t figure out how to discredit Joseph’s paternity

test.

“Why would they automatically accept his test results?” Cora asked.

“You need to be honest with me, Cora. Is Nat really your and Joseph’s daughter?” Fiona finally forced herself to ask the one question no one wanted to voice out loud. In every case she’d handled, once a paternity report was submitted, the judge’s ruling basically followed it.

“What, you suspect I cheated on him, too? Joseph is the only man I’ve ever slept with. You tell me whose child Nat could be, if not his!” There was displeasure in Cora’s voice.

“I have to plan for the worst. Think carefully-was there ever a situation where you got drunk and...”

“That’s absolutely impossible.” Cora was very sure of herself. She could really hold her liquor. She’d never once been drunk. One of the reasons she’d been able to take over the

company smoothly and then grow it even bigger was that she handled business dinners and drinking games with total ease.

“Then I’ll go to Joseph tomorrow and see if I can get a read on what he’s thinking.” Since there was no breakthrough with Cora, Fiona decided to try her luck with Joseph.

“It’d be ideal if you could persuade him to withdraw the lawsuit.” Cora did have another option up her sleeve, but it wasn’t something that would be considered socially acceptable. Unless she was truly backed into a corner, she didn’t want to use it... especially not on Joseph.

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The next day, Joseph met Fiona at a cafe at noon. He walked straight over to her and saw that she’d already ordered drinks and food-a large steak set. Since they were friends, she knew what he liked.

“If you’re here to talk me into taking Cora back, then we can skip this meal,” he said bluntly.

“Well, I’m not. I’m here to talk about something related to your job. I have a relative who’s sick and needs to be transferred to your hospital. I was hoping you could keep an eye on them.”

Fiona’s words were half true, half excuse. She just wanted to keep Joseph calm enough so that he would at least make it through lunch with her. She also wanted to sound him out, but every time she tried, he smoothly changed the subject.

“Joseph, do you know Bernard is planning to sue you?” she asked.

Joseph answered, “And he should. After all, I demanded billions of dollars right off the bat. Is that what Cora wants, too?”

“Honestly, she isn’t thinking of that. She just feels like you’ve wronged her.”

“Wronged her? Fiona, you’re a lawyer. Do you really think a certified testing agency would get a paternity test wrong?”

“I believe the test results are real, but judging from Cora’s attitude, I don’t think she’s lying, either. If she really wanted to hide something from you, do you think she could put on an act for more than ten years without you noticing?”

“Sometimes, fooling me doesn’t require excellent acting skills. As long as I’m stupid enough, lying to me for decades would be doable, let alone just one. Since you’re here, I don’t have to go looking for you. Take a look at this.”

Joseph pulled a document out of his briefcase and handed it to her.

“You’re filing a motion with the court to audit the entire Lowell Group? What are you trying to do?” Fiona read it and was stunned. Launching a full audit on the company at a time like this would be a massive drain on resources and could cause unpredictable damage to the group’s operations.

“My dear father-in-law says he’s going to sue me for extortion, right? Then let the authorities step in and trace every cent the company has. As long as it counts as marital property acquired while Cora and I were married, there’s no way I’m giving it up,” Joseph said flatly.

“Joseph, this isn’t funny. This is way too much for a joke!”

Fiona’s scalp tingled. For a moment, she suspected Joseph’s real goal was to bring down the entire Lowell Group. The fallout from that would be unimaginable. This wasn’t something she could take lightly, so she hurried off to report everything to Cora.

Sure enough, when Cora saw the documents Joseph had prepared, she had Fiona go over every detail of their conversation again. After listening, she felt a headache come on. She pressed her fingers to her

temples, suddenly caught between a rock and a hard place.

“Fiona, do you think Joe is the kind of man who’s out for money?”

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Fiona answered carefully. “I don’t think so. If he were money-hungry, he wouldn’t have stayed at the hospital all these years, content with an ordinary life. He could’ve quit and taken some cushy position in the company, and he’d already be making way more.”

“If it’s not for the money, then it’s purely because he wants this divorce. That asshole! We have to stop him. We can’t let him keep stirring up trouble. After days of this, I’m completely exhausted,” Cora growled.

“I’ve also been looking into his record at the hospital. So far, the feedback is that he hasn’t made a single

mistake.” Fiona was a bit helpless.

Joseph had worked quietly and steadily at the hospital for over a decade without a single error on his record. That meant they couldn't use his job performance as leverage. Without that, it would be hard to force him to compromise.

"Yeah. Walt told me ages ago that Joe is a highly skilled doctor. He's been trying to get him promoted and to give him a better position, but Joe turned it all down so he could take care of the girls and me."

As Cora spoke, she felt slightly dazed. It finally hit her that over these ten-plus years, Joseph had poured all his energy into their home and children. He'd kept her and the kids healthy, raising the kids to be smart and well-behaved.

And of course, the more she thought about this, the more she felt she couldn't let him go. Divorce was out of the question.

"So what do we do?" Fiona asked.

"I'll figure something out."

Cora sent Fiona away and paced back and forth in her study. She called Joseph and once again swore to him that she had never betrayed their family or their marriage. She begged him not to go through with the divorce and to just come home and live their life together.

However, he rejected her icily. At that point, her heart hardened. She decided she had to make Joseph submit to her completely.

She had no idea that what she was about to do would drag Joseph into a hell from which there would be

no return.

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Joseph sneezed. It wasn't a cold; it felt more like someone was thinking about him, resenting him, or bad- mouthing him.

Either way, it didn't stop him from paying his PhD tuition. Thanks to his own application and Walt's help, he was able to resume the doctoral program he'd started more than ten years ago. Now, all he had to do was finish his dissertation and defend it, and he'd finally get his PhD.

After paying his fees, he settled down and dove into his medical books and research materials. He studied straight through until about 7:00 pm, when he finally headed to the hospital cafeteria for dinner.

When he got back, he drank some water and studied for a bit more. Soon, a wave of exhaustion washed over him. Before long, he was slumped over his desk and fast asleep.

He had no idea how much time had passed when, in a groggy haze, he sensed someone come into the room. Something was poured into his mouth, then he was lifted and moved onto the bed. He was stripped.

"Cora, what are you doing?" Joseph's voice was thick with sleep, but he still managed to get the words out. The only person who knew he was staying there and had a key to his room was Cora.

But the woman didn't answer him.

He forced his eyes open a crack and managed to make out a slender figure with long hair standing at his desk, flipping through his things. His eyelids grew heavier and heavier, and he slipped back under.

At some point, it all blurred into what felt like a dream. In the dream, the woman with him was Cora, and yet somehow not. Either way, it felt incredibly sweet and intoxicating. The dream went on and on, and he sank into it, reluctant to wake up.

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The alarm wouldn't stop ringing.

Joseph's eyes flew open, and he pushed himself up in bed, still full of questions. He clearly remembered falling asleep at his desk. How had he ended up in bed?

Right after he washed up, his phone rang. It was Walt, telling him his leave was over and he needed to report to the ICU to help out. Joseph found it a bit odd, but he needed a lot of clinical case data, and the ICU was full of cases. They were plenty in number and severe and complicated enough to be invaluable for his research.

The ICU was extremely busy, but Joseph handled it with ease. After his shift, he went back to his dorm room and found Cora already inside, waiting for him. His mood instantly soured.

“Coming into my room without my permission is seriously over the line, Cora. You have no boundaries,” he said coldly.

“What, you don’t want me in here because you’re afraid I’ll find out you’ve been hiding some other woman

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and doing something you shouldn’t?” Cora smiled, still radiating that same powerful confidence.

She loved Joseph, and she hadn’t wanted to make things hard on him. But if he insisted on divorcing her, then she had to do something to put him in his place.

“I haven’t,” Joseph said flatly.

“Are you sure? Or do you just not have the guts to admit it?” Her smile didn’t waver.

“Look, I know you’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. Even if you did mess up a little, I’d still forgive you. As long as you come home with me, I’ll let it slide.”

“Go home with you? Forgive me? Do you even hear yourself right now?” Joseph stared at her, genuinely offended. What really got under his skin was her tone. She sounded so superior, like she was making it absolutely clear that he had no choice but to compromise.

“I have a clear conscience. I’m not going to admit to something I didn’t do. The day you realize how badly you’ve wronged me, you’re going to be overwhelmed by regret. I love you, and I don’t want to see you like this, stuck in this misunderstanding you’ve cooked up,” Cora said.

“You have a clear conscience? That might be the funniest joke I’ve heard all year. I’m positive I’m not wrong about you. In my eyes, you’re nothing but a complete fraud. Get out. I don’t want to see you again!” Joseph snapped.

He pulled the door open, clearly telling her to leave.

“Take a good look at this. I’ll wait for you in the car for five minutes. Once you come down, we’ll go home together, and I’ll pretend none of this ever happened. If you don’t, I’m going back by myself. It’s your call.” Cora took an envelope out of her bag and set it down. Then, she walked out.

Joseph switched on the fan and opened the window, letting the breeze clear out the perfume she’d left lingering in the room. When he finally opened the envelope and saw what was inside, his eyes widened

in shock.

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Joseph thought he was seeing things. He scrutinized the photo from every angle, even suspecting that it was synthesized. But when he compared it inch by inch, he realized every detail matched his dorm room. It was genuine.

He slumped into his chair, feeling defeated. The strength drained out of him. If not for the armrests and the back of the chair, he might have slid straight onto the floor.

According to the photo, last night, right here in this dorm room, he'd done something unspeakable with a woman who was not his wife. The woman's face wasn't visible, but the butterfly tattoo on her body made it very clear she wasn't Cora.

Damn it. Last night hadn't been a dream!

Who was this woman? How had she gotten into his room? Why would he have let her in? Why would he have messed around with her? Why hadn't he pushed her away? What the hell had he been doing?

A barrage of questions turned Joseph's mind into a tangled mess. Compared to this inexplicable disgrace, what really made his head pound was that Cora had somehow found out.

He was filled with guilt, regret, and rage. He turned everything over and over in his mind, trying to think through every possibility. Then, he headed downstairs and walked up to Cora's car window, staring at her coldly.

"Cora, you have a key to my dorm. You've also got money and influence. It would've been easy enough for you to arrange this. What do you gain by ruining me like this?" he snarled.

"Get in the car and come home with me. I won't hold it against you; I'll just treat this as you playing along for fun. You're under a lot of pressure, so I can understand if this is how you blow off steam. I won't dig into it," she said lightly.

"A lack of denial is as good as admitting that you did this. You really are full of surprises, Cora. No-this is who you really are! But your perfect little plan is gonna backfire on you, because I'm not going home. with you."

Joseph was deeply disappointed, but he still forced himself to stay calm and not lose control. Otherwise, he honestly wouldn't be able to tamp down the urge to kill Cora.

Then, another thought hit him. Cora had lied to him for over ten years, and she still refused to own up to her mistakes despite everything being out in the open. She even ignored the paternity tests he'd had done. To go down together with someone this rotten wouldn't be worth it.

"I know exactly what kind of person I am, and so do you. Honestly, it doesn't even bother me that you slept with another woman. So why won't you just come home with me?" Cora asked.

"You cheated on me first, you betrayed our family. And now, you've got something you can use against me. Why don't you tell me what's the point of this marriage continuing to exist?" Joseph shot back.

"I already told you that I don't care if you-"

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"But I care!" Joseph shouted. "You have no idea how much you disgust me, Cora. I can't even bring myself to look at you for another second!"

He stormed off, seething. He went back to his office, wrote himself a prescription, and went to pay for it. Then, he collected the meds from the pharmacy.

He'd slept with a woman who had come out of nowhere. He was terrified of catching something, so he also bought a test kit to check himself.

On his way out, he noticed Cora's car was still parked there. He frowned, acted like he hadn't seen it, and went straight back to his dorm.

Half an hour later, Cora texted him. "You should have cooled off by now. Let's call a truce. Come downstairs, and I'll take you home."

Joseph never replied.

Cora had no choice but to head home first. As soon as she arrived, Kimberly ran up to her. "Mom, didn't you say Dad was coming home with you? Where is he?"

"He's still at the hospital, saving lives. Go to bed. When you wake up, he'll be home," she said.

Feeling worn out, Cora had Mary soothe Kimberly and put her to bed. Then, she went back to the master bedroom. The moment she stepped into the wide, spacious room, a crushing sense of loneliness washed over her. On normal nights, this was when she would be welcomed by Joseph's strong, warm

embrace.

But an urgent phone call shattered her thoughts. What she heard on the other end of the line only made her mood worse.

It turned out that Joseph had just posted a statement on the company's internal network, publicly accusing Cora of cheating on him and betraying their family. He'd even announced that he had already filed for divorce.

The news blindsided Cora. She immediately had the tech team delete the statement and lock down access for any employees who had seen it. Then, she sent Fiona to talk to those staff members one by one. By the time everything was arranged, she was even more exhausted, and her resentment toward Joseph deepened.

He'd really crossed the line this time!

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A Man with Nerves of Steel

That night, Joseph tossed and turned, unable to sleep. He kept glancing at the door, worried he hadn't locked it properly and that another woman might walk in. In reality, he'd already wedged the door shut from the inside. Even if Cora or anyone else had a key, there was no way to open it from the outside.

Although this whole "one-night stand" was something Cora had orchestrated to force him to compromise and go home, it was still dirt on him. If word really spread around the hospital, no one would care why it had happened. They would only care that it had.

In their eyes, he would be a man with a filthy personal life. In the worst case, he could be fired on the spot. Even if Walt tried to shield him, any hope of promotion would basically be gone.

He just wanted a quiet, ordinary life and career, but reality kept playing cruel jokes on him. He was left feeling helpless and furious.

Joseph sighed heavily, but deep down he'd already made up his mind. Whatever consequences were coming, he would face them head-on.

The next day at noon, Joseph had just pulled a patient back from the brink.

Looking at the now-stable numbers on the monitors, he figured there wouldn't be another episode. The patient was finally out of immediate danger and could be transferred back to a regular ward. He exhaled, feeling relieved.

In the afternoon, he was summoned to Walt's office.

Was this Cora's revenge? It would've come sooner or later.

Joseph took a deep breath, knocked, and walked in. Bernard and Fiona were there, but not Cora. He looked straight at Bernard and said, "There's nothing left for us to talk about. Just have Cora sign the divorce agreement. You don't need to keep coming here. Even if you're not sick of it, I am."

Bernard gave a cold snort. He was obviously unhappy with Joseph's attitude, but Joseph had already said what needed to be said.

Sensing the tension, Fiona stepped in. "Joseph, why did you post that statement on Lowell Group's internal network? It's caused a huge misunderstanding for Cora and put her in a really awkward position..."

”

“I’m still legally married to Cora. I have the right to use your company’s intranet. Besides, what I posted was the truth—a truth that directly involves your company. She might think it’s a misunderstanding or that it puts her in a difficult spot, but I don’t see it that way.

“It’s a fact that I’ve already filed for divorce with the court. My marriage with her is as good as over. I don’t want to see any of you again. If there’s a problem, we’ll settle it in court,” Joseph said bluntly.

He turned to Walt and said, “I’m sorry about this, Dr. Loughlin. This is my personal mess, and this is the

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last time I’m dealing with it in your office. If they want to look for me again, they can come directly to me. If there’s nothing else, I’m going back to work.”

Since Bernard didn’t say anything, Walt let Joseph go. Fiona hurried after him as soon as he stepped out.

When they reached the end of the hallway, he lit a cigarette and said, “There’s no end to this with Cora, but there’s absolutely no point to it at all. You’re a smart woman-why don’t you give her the best advice? All I want is to cut ties with her as soon as possible. I don’t want to be linked to her in any way for a second longer.”

“Joseph, you’ve changed. You’re smoking now, you don’t even bother shaving, and that smile you used to have is gone. Looks like this whole mess with Cora has really hurt you, too,” she said.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Put yourself in my shoes. The child you’ve raised for over a decade turns out not to be yours, and the partner you’ve lived with for more than ten years is actually a serial cheater and liar. Do you think you’d be able to smile?” Joseph shot back.

“I’ve never been married, and I don’t have kids. I really can’t say I understand.”

“I don’t need your empathy, anyway. What I can’t understand is why Cora won’t just agree to the divorce after everything I’ve done. Is it because she still hasn’t gotten the promise she wants from Natalie’s biological father?”

“I can’t tell what Cora is thinking now, either. But one thing I’m sure of is that she still has feelings for you. No matter what kind of trouble you stir up, she’ll forgive you.”

“Is that so? Then maybe I’ll just quit my job and plaster posters all over Lowell Group so that all the employees know she cheated on me. Would she agree to divorce me then?” Joseph snarled.

“Joseph, you absolutely cannot do that!” Fiona cried. “You’d be pushing Cora completely over the edge. You don’t come to the company much, so you probably don’t really understand what she’s capable of. She didn’t just inherit that company by luck.

“She took full control, expanded it to its current size, and became the wealthiest person in Jenton. That kind of thing doesn’t happen by accident.”

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A Man with Nerves of Steel

After ending the conversation with Fiona, Joseph was called back to Walt’s office. Bernard had already

left.

“Joseph, you didn’t go easy on Bernard at all. He was steely-faced when he left.” Walt told Joseph to sit.

Bernard had punched Joseph without even bothering to get to the bottom of the matter, and he'd even threatened Joseph. On top of that, there was the scandal Cora had created. Joseph didn't think he had anything to do with either of them anymore.

He said, "I didn't say anything wrong or untrue. The divorce itself is a simple matter. Bernard is the one who's acting out of line and coming to the hospital time and time again to push me."

"It does involve his daughter, after all."

"And Cora is the source of all these problems in the first place." Joseph didn't want to waste time talking about his messy personal life now. He switched to talking about work.

Right then, Walt's secretary came in with a fax. He signed in, then said to Joseph, "I'm heading to an important medical conference, and I'll be gone for a few days. I've already spoken to Dr. Tate. You'll stay on rotation in the ICU."

Joseph accepted the arrangement and went back to the ICU. As soon as he got there, he heard a family member crying in the hallway. He didn't need to ask to know that the patient inside hadn't made it.

He was slightly shaken. In his years of practicing medicine, he'd always worked in the inpatient department with relatively stable patients. He'd rarely encountered truly critical cases. But in just two days in the ICU, this was already the third instance.

The family refused to accept the outcome. They begged the doctors and nurses to keep trying, but no one responded. When the woman saw Joseph, she rushed over, fell to her knees, and grabbed his leg. She sobbed and pleaded with him to go in and save her loved one.

Joseph glanced at the deputy director standing nearby. He quietly stepped back, leaving Joseph alone to comfort the family member. After a few seconds of consideration, Joseph told the woman to head into

the ward with him.

Inside, the patient was already covered with a white sheet and lay stiffly on the bed. All the machines were still attached. The attending physician and nurse had already left; the scene felt eerie and cold.

The woman's eyes were red and swollen from crying. She didn't dare go any closer, terrified that lifting the sheet would force her to see the thing she feared most. As long as she didn't look, it was as if her loved one was still alive.

Joseph checked the chart. He didn't recognize the name. There was nothing in his mental notes about this patient. That meant they'd been admitted temporarily as a critical emergency. He scanned the resuscitation record-they'd already tried three rounds of defibrillation, but still hadn't managed to restart the patient's heart.

He went to feel for a pulse and realized the patient wasn't completely gone. There was still the faintest trace of life. He turned on the ECG and the other monitors, but the heart tracing was flat, showing nothing. He checked the pupils and other signs, then started chest compressions again, refusing to give

After a long stretch of relentless effort, the ECG suddenly showed activity. First came a heartbeat. He hurriedly grabbed the phone and called the other doctors and nurses back to help with the resuscitation.

The woman refused to leave the room, only agreeing to cooperate after she personally named Joseph as the attending physician she wanted.

Joseph accepted, deciding he would clear it with the deputy director when he arrived. When the deputy director came in and saw that the patient was still in critical condition, he told Joseph to take charge because he himself wasn't confident in the prognosis.

Joseph first focused on stabilizing the patient's heartbeat. Then, he quickly reviewed all the lab work and test results and pulled together a viable treatment plan. On that basis, he immediately moved forward with cardiac surgery.

The operation went on until 8:00 pm. By the time they finished, he had fully pulled the patient back from the brink. He stayed in the ICU until the early hours of the morning, monitoring the patient post-op. Only when the patient woke up on schedule and Joseph confirmed there were no abnormalities did he finally return to the dorm.

After a shower, inspiration for his doctoral dissertation suddenly struck. He sat down to work on the core idea, the outline, and the basic structure, drafting a rough framework.

At 3:00 am, just as he was about to call it a night, his phone rang. It was the local precinct. They needed him to come down and post bail for Natalie. He was the only person she'd given as her contact.

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A Man with Nerves of Steel

Joseph tried calling Cora, but her phone was switched off. He couldn't reach Fiona, either, so he had no choice but to go down to the precinct.

"Dr. Hart, it's you? If I'd known Natalie was your daughter, I would've sent her to your place." The pretty policewoman on duty recognized Joseph and greeted him warmly.

Joseph, however, wasn't pleased in the slightest. He exchanged a few perfunctory pleasantries and went straight into the paperwork. When he saw the intake form and realized Natalie had indicated he was her stepfather, his heart gave another sharp twist.

Natalie had been brought in for theft-or more accurately, for being mistaken as a thief. She'd gone into an upscale private club and had been stopped and detained by security. When she couldn't produce any ID, they'd handed her over to the patrol officers.

Joseph said nothing on the drive. He kept his eyes on the road as he took Natalie to Bernard and Helen's place. She was supposed to be attending a night class at this hour, so she'd clearly snuck out. If he sent her back to Cora, she would only get chewed out. Of course, he also had no desire to see Cora again.

"Do you know why I did all this, Joseph?" Natalie finally broke the silence. "I went to look for my real dad. Mom has a cocktail party tonight, but she never came home to get ready. Where else do you think she'd go?"

"And? Did you find him?" Joseph arched a brow and glanced at her.

He hadn't expected her to be even more determined than he was to track down Cora's lover. But when he thought about it, it made sense. As their kid, of course she wanted to know who her actual father was. She had that right-perhaps it was even obligated to her.

Natalie huffed. "Almost. I'm confident I could've made it upstairs if they hadn't caught me. Then, I would've finally seen the man Mom's been sneaking around with. We can still make it if we turn back now. Come on, let's go."

She checked the GPS and realized they were headed in the opposite direction, yet Joseph showed no sign of turning around.

“This isn’t the way there,” she protested. “You need to turn around up ahead.”

“You can go look for your father all you want, but don’t drag me into it,” Joseph said shortly. “Once you get to your grandparents’ place, you can ask them to take you.”

“Seriously? Joseph, how can you not want to know who Mom is seeing on the side?” Natalie stared at him incredulously. “Don’t you want to know what kind of man she picked?”

“Nope. Finding out you’re Cora’s kid with some other guy is disgusting enough for me. Going to hunt that man down would be like this-imagine you’re at a restaurant, and you accidentally swallow a fly.

“Are you really going to force yourself to throw up just to get a good look at what kind of fly it was? I don’t want to have anything to do with any of you anymore.”

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“You’re so pathetic for thinking that way!” Natalie declared.

“I watched you grow up, so don’t think I don’t know what’s in your head,” Joseph shot back. “You just want to use me to track down your biological father so you can finally break free from Cora. She won’t buy you a car, she cuts back your allowance, and she won’t let you blow money with your spoiled little

crew.

“You hate that you can’t be some rich rebel queen like your friends. You’re resentful and you want to rebel, but you’re nowhere near as ruthless as Cora.”

“Hah! Look who’s talking. You’re no better. You’ll never get out from under her thumb, either! Grandpa and Grandma told me that even if you divorce Mom, she’s not giving you a single cent. Don’t forget that you’re just a nobody doctor. Your yearly salary isn’t even as much as my monthly allowance!

“If you divorce her, you’ll have literally nothing. You’re a walking sob story!” Natalie yapped nonstop, annoyed that Joseph was lecturing her.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re absolutely right. So next time, don’t get me to bail you out. I’m done embarrassing myself on your behalf,” Joseph said coolly.

“You!” Natalie didn’t expect him to stay so unbothered. His expression remained calm and composed, but it only made him look even more spineless to her.

The rest of the drive passed in heavy silence.

Soon, Joseph pulled up in front of Bernard and Helen's home. He'd barely pushed open the courtyard gate when he saw Bernard already up and about. The two men came face-to-face.

"I just bailed her out of the local precinct," Joseph said evenly. "I couldn't reach Cora, so I'm leaving her with you. This is as far as I'll go."

"What the hell, Joseph?" Natalie shot him a murderous glare. They'd barely arrived, and he'd already thrown her under the bus. He was unbelievable!

She turned to Bernard and cried, "It's not like he said, Grandpa! He's twisting everything to make me look

bad!"

"What a little liar. You really did inherit that from Cora." Joseph snorted.

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