

A Man with Nerves of Steel

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Joseph rinsed his mouth and washed his face in the bathroom of his hotel room. As he pressed an ice pack to the cheek Bernard had hit, he saw Cora come in. He stepped out.

“Is this really necessary? My dad didn’t even hit you that hard...”

Cora wasn’t happy with the way Joseph was acting, but she quickly changed her tune when he pulled the ice pack away, revealing the clear bruise on his cheek. “Joe, I didn’t think it’d be that bad. It must really hurt. I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“You know what? I must be a real masochist. Your dad slapped me, yet somehow I feel relieved. I haven’t been the most devoted son-in-law all these years, and maybe I haven’t done much to make him proud, but I never dragged his name through the mud, either.

“After this punch, we’re even. I don’t owe him anything anymore, nor do I owe your whole family anything anymore,” Joseph said.

He handed Cora a stack of legal papers. “Take a look at these. This is the legal route I’m prepared to take. If you agree to the divorce, I won’t file the lawsuit, even if you refuse to compensate me monetarily.”

“You... Joe, what’s gotten into you? We had a perfectly good life, and you’re dead set on blowing it up for

no reason.”

Cora had never really believed he would go so far as to actually take her to court. It left her blindsided and deeply hurt. ¹

“A good life?” Joseph repeated. “I’m sure it must’ve been great for you, at least. You got to have the best of both worlds, and you even had me raising your kid. Of course you think it’s a fantastic life. But what about me? Natalie isn’t my daughter.

“You lied to me for over ten years. Over a decade! How many decades do you think a person gets? Who in their right mind would want to keep living like that?”

He was worked up, on the verge of exploding and screaming at her, but he forced himself to hold it back. “How many times have I told you to get a DNA test done yourself, Cora? You’ll understand why I’m acting like this when you see the results.

“I’ve given you all this time, yet you still refuse to verify it. The only conclusion I can draw is that you’re guilty and scared of the truth.”

“And how many times do I have to repeat this before you believe me, Joseph? I didn’t cheat on you. Natalie is your daughter!” Cora shot back.

“So you’re saying the paternity test results I have are fake? You think all those different certified labs gave me fake results? What, you think I’ve got that much clout?”

Joseph was furious to see Cora still refusing to admit what she’d done. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “Cora, wake up! Where’s your objectivity and rationality? You need to cut your losses before

it’s too late!

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“I’m a useless loser and a good-for-nothing. I’m not worthy of you, alright? Go to Natalie’s biological father. You raised his daughter all these years-you can make him pay up.”

“Stop shaking me!” Cora shook Joseph off and glared at him. “Nothing good comes from your mouth nowadays. It’s all garbage! I only have one thing to ask you-are you coming home with me or not? What about Selena and Kimberly? Are you just going to abandon them?”

Damn it, those two weren’t his flesh and blood, either! They were both also products of Cora’s adulterous

ways.

Joseph's face twisted in torment. He couldn't hold it back this time. He said, "It's better that you raise them from now on. I'm a useless piece of trash who can't do anything with his life anymore. You've ruined my whole life, Cora. I'm beyond salvaging, so please, just agree to the divorce." 1

"You... You're just throwing your life away!"

Seeing Joseph so beaten down and looking like he would never get back on his feet again, Cora felt both disappointed and heartsick. When it became clear he wouldn't leave with her, she turned and stormed

off.

That afternoon, Joseph went to the courthouse and officially filed for divorce from Cora. He submitted all the paperwork and was then shown to a small room to wait. After about ten minutes, he saw Fiona Sutherland, the legal counsel from Cora's company, come in.

She was one of Cora's closest confidantes, so it made sense.

“Mr. Hart, this isn’t really the place to talk. Why don’t we go somewhere else?” she suggested.

At that, Joseph asked, “Is Cora here?”

“Ms. Lowell is extremely busy and can’t step away right now, so she sent me as her representative. Joseph, let’s just talk first,” Fiona said.

She invited Joseph out, and they got into her car.

He didn’t make a scene. He just asked, “What is Cora trying to pull? Does she really think she can dodge this forever if she ducks out today? Go back to her and tell her to get over here. Let’s get this divorce over and done with.”

Fiona read his expression and could tell he was agitated, so she hurried to calm him down. “Marriage is between two people-it’s not something you can just end with a snap of your fingers. You already went in and spoke to the clerk, right? They must’ve told you that you need to provide grounds for divorce.

“You only wrote down irreconcilable differences. I can tell you for sure that the court will ask for a clearer explanation if we contest the divorce. I’m sure you have more convincing reasons for doing this, don’t you? You need to persuade not just the judge and me, but also Ms. Lowell.”

Joseph frowned in displeasure. “Cora knows exactly what she’s done. She’s just pretending to be

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Fiona returned to Lowell Group half an hour later to report back to Cora.

Cora set aside what she was working on and asked, “So, did you manage to talk Joseph out of his

ridiculous idea?”

Fiona gave a small shake of her head and carefully pulled out the paternity test report she’d gotten from Joseph. “It’s going to be hard to do if he has this.”

“Again with that thing? It’s obviously fake.” One glance at the report, and Cora could already guess Joseph was still obsessing over his conclusion.

She said irritably, “He’s been driven to insanity by this result. How could he just run off and get a DNA test done on his own? He didn’t get my consent at all. Doesn’t acting on his own like that count as breaking the law?”

“Mr. Hart is also a legal guardian. He was acting within his rights when he requested the test, so it’s not illegal,” Fiona explained.

“Then what if I countersue him for slandering me? Can I have him thrown in jail? I mean, it’s not really to lock him up for good. I just want him to understand that he can’t go around accusing me like this.”

Fiona understood what Cora was getting at and chose her words carefully. “If the test result is fake, then yes, you’d definitely win that lawsuit. Even if he doesn’t end up behind bars, you can at least force him to apologize and back down. But if things go that far and the authorities get involved, it might make things even messier.”

Cora frowned. “Natalie is my daughter. I know exactly who her father is. Are you saying I should arrange for another DNA test? Should I use the new results to overturn Joseph’s?”

Fiona nodded. “Yes, you should. Facts speak louder than any argument. I can go set up things right now if you want.”

Cora didn’t rush into a decision. She called Joseph first. When she realized how vicious and unyielding he still was, with no signs of backing down, she finally agreed to Fiona’s suggestion.

Fiona then went to Joseph again and asked him to provide the necessary samples. After getting what she needed, she didn't hurry to leave. Instead, she sat down on the edge of the bed and said, "Joseph, this is now a private conversation. I'm leaving your relationship with Cora out of this."

Joseph said, "You don't need to plead her case with me. She did what she did, and she lied to me for 16 years. Anyone in my position would find it impossible to just forgive and forget. If she thinks I only want a divorce for the money, then fine-I don't want a cent. I just want to get away from her as soon as

possible."

"Well, if this is all true, then you've definitely been wronged," Fiona said. "I'd feel indignant on your behalf, too. By the way, Nat is already 15, yet you never suspected anything all these years. I was at your place last month, and you two still seemed really close. What changed all of a sudden? What made you decide

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to get a paternity test?"

Her question hit a sore spot. Joseph fell silent for a beat, then pulled out a cigarette and lit it. As he took a drag, his mind drifted back to the days before he'd done the test.

It started when a young patient was admitted to the hospital. The child needed a blood transfusion and had a particularly rare type. Naturally, the doctors first considered close relatives as donors. But the supposed father's blood type was completely incompatible with the child's.

Suspicious, the man had demanded a DNA test. The result proved the child wasn't biologically his. The mother had cheated and gotten pregnant by someone else.

Cases like that weren't exactly unheard of. In over ten years of practicing medicine, Joseph had seen this situation several times and had always just pushed it out of his mind.

But when he went home that day, Natalie came to him, asking for money to buy a luxury sports car worth five million dollars. Her reasoning was that she was old enough and had gotten her learner's permit. Therefore, she deserved to have her own car.

Cora might have been the richest woman in Jenton, but Joseph had no control over her money. Naturally, he didn't have any money for Natalie. She'd flown into a rage, yelling at him and accusing him of not being her real father. She hadn't meant it literally, but he'd taken it to heart. On a whim, he'd gone and gotten a paternity test done.

And the conclusion was that there was no blood relation between him and Natalie.

Joseph exhaled a stream of smoke and decided against telling Fiona all of that. He just said, "Fiona, just tell Cora that she can't keep things secret forever. If she doesn't want anyone to find out the truth, then she shouldn't have done this in the first place." 1

“Joseph, you still haven’t told me what suddenly made you suspect her,” Fiona pressed.

“You should ask her for the answers...”

He paused, then added, “By the way, since you’re so close to her, how many possible candidates do your

think there are for Natalie’s real father?”

“Come on, don’t drag me into this. All I can tell you is that Cora has always treated you incredibly well. She loves you very, very much.”

“Yeah, right. You think I’m stupid?” Joseph snapped.

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