

Wrath 391

Chapter 391:

ended up acquiescing.

“Nina.”

“Yes!” Nina’s demeanor brightened instantly, her earlier somber tone clearly an act.

“By the way, those bags Aiden is carrying...”

“They’re all for you!” Nina squeezed Janice’s hand and gave Aiden a significant look.

Aiden stepped forward, resigned, with the bags. “These are gifts my mom picked up from abroad for you. She really likes you. As her son, I didn’t even get one gift.”

Nina shot him a glare. “You dare ask for a gift? After you’ve lost my daughter-in-law, you still have the nerve to talk?”

Aiden stayed quiet, wary of triggering a more severe scolding from Nina.

“Janice, I don’t know why my son could be so stupid. By the way, I have a cocktail party this afternoon. Would you come with me?” Nina asked with expectation.

“A cocktail party?”

“Yeah, it’s just a small gathering with a few friends. It’s usually quite dull, and if I don’t show up, those old ladies will definitely start gossiping. It would be much nicer with you there.”

Janice’s thoughts briefly wandered to Leonie, and she wondered how Sierra was managing.

“Alright. Since you’re asking, I’d be happy to come along.”

The cocktail party brimmed with sophistication, exuding elegance and style.

On the surface, it was for socializing and bonding, but in truth, it served as a stage for forming alliances and gaining influence for their high-society families.

Nina had little interest in these schemes. The Green family stood at the pinnacle of power, their strength unmatched even by coalitions of other elite families.

So, she and Janice tucked themselves away in a corner. Janice hid behind sunglasses, and Nina wore a fisherman’s hat, keeping a low profile.

“Janice, look at that woman in the black dress covered in jewelry. That’s Wendy Chadwick. The Chadwick family is a newly emerged elite in Efrery, quite similar to what the Edwards family once was.”

Nina carefully watched Janice’s expression at the mention of the Edwards family.

Noting her composed demeanor, she realized Janice had completely moved on. Besides, Aiden had revealed that Janice wasn’t even an Edwards—her true family was elsewhere.

That revelation brought Nina a sense of relief.

Someone as gifted as Janice deserved far better than the lowly Edwards family.

“Normally, families like hers wouldn’t even register on the radar of old money like us. But she’s clever—she’s managed to gain the support of some powerful society matrons.”

Janice glanced at Wendy, her eyes narrowing. “Could the Chadwick family be Laurie’s maiden family?”

“Now that you say it, it really does seem like that might be the case.”

Janice’s remark sparked a connection in Nina’s mind. “I never considered that before, but now that you mention it, it really is Laurie’s maiden family.”

Nina now regarded Wendy with newfound interest.

The Chadwick family was a recent addition to the elite, and Wendy had swiftly joined their social circles. Clearly, both she and her family harbored considerable ambition.

“Laurie’s fled overseas, yet the Chadwick family remains indifferent. That’s curious,” Nina mused, though Janice shook her head in quiet disagreement.

“What do you think, Janice?”

“The Chadwick family’s swift ascent likely had Laurie’s covert backing.”

Janice recalled that during her time advising the Edwards family, Laurie frequently funneled money to her maiden family under her company’s name. She’d then claim to Connor that her business was struggling and needed financial backing. Connor, ever trusting, had always obliged without question.

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Back then, Janice thought little of it, assuming helping family was simply the right thing to do.

In truth, had Laurie cut off her family’s draining demands, Janice could have helped her build a leading fashion brand instead of languishing in mediocrity.

“With Laurie’s influence gone, she’s become useless to them—cast aside like an old rag,” Janice remarked.

Nina suddenly grasped the full picture after hearing Janice. “What a shame! Laurie’s downfall is her own doing. She couldn’t see your brilliance or recognize her family’s greed.”

Janice stayed composed, her expression unchanging. Even before learning her real parents were elsewhere, she had no affection for Laurie. And now, she felt even less.

Suddenly, a message lit up her phone. It was from Prescott. Janice read it, the contents confirming her suspicions. Laurie's company had been absorbed by the Chadwick family.

Janice felt momentarily speechless. Even in disgrace, Laurie had allowed her family to bleed her dry.

"Janice, do you notice that woman with all that heavy makeup?"

Nina's remark pulled Janice back to the moment, leading her eyes to the woman sitting beside Wendy.

The woman wore heavy makeup, standing tall with pride, though her eyes revealed a flicker of uncertainty. "That's Lesly Delgado."

Lesly Delgado? Wasn't she Kenneth's mother?

Janice arched a brow, studying Lesly closely. She did resemble Kenneth, particularly in those striking, expressive eyes. Sadly, her gaze seemed shifty, missing any trace of confidence.

"Lesly is quite attractive. I don't get why she piles on so much makeup—it just makes her look gaudy. She comes across more like a nightclub performer."

Nina's remark had Janice stifling a laugh, but it slipped out.

"Nina, you can tell me that, but if she overhears, she'll despise you forever."

"You think I'm scared?" Nina responded coolly, unbothered.

“Ah, of course, you’re fearless.” Janice shook her head in mock exasperation.

With Nina’s formidable influence, even if her comments were overheard, others would only dare to whisper about them in private, never confronting her.

Nina went on, pointing out more women to Janice. However, they were of lesser rank, mostly opportunists, hardly worth paying attention to.

“By the way, why isn’t Leonie here?”

Nina glanced around, not spotting Leonie, who always liked to compete with her for attention. A wave of boredom washed over her.

On the surface, Nina and Leonie always exuded a facade of politeness and camaraderie, yet behind closed doors, they were fierce rivals, each vying to be the center of attention. Leonie once believed the Ramirez family was only marginally less prestigious than the Green family, but now, the chasm between their statuses had widened dramatically.

“Someone who’s always so eager to be in charge shouldn’t be this late, should she?” Nina remarked dryly, her voice tinged with irony.

“Maybe she’s avoiding you,” Janice suggested with a laugh. “After all, the influence of the Green family has grown significantly, and given her past scheming with Bart against us, she’s probably terrified you’ll confront her.”

Nina joined in the laughter. “Janice, you really get me. I was actually hoping to give her a good slap today. That woman had the audacity to conspire against the Green family in my absence. She’s truly playing with fire.”

She paused, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “But if Sierra is around, I need to act with a bit more decorum. She’s a decent person, and I genuinely like her. It’s unfortunate she’s Leonie’s daughter.”

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Janice's face clouded over, her expression mirroring the gravity of Nina's reflections.

The question lingered in her mind, echoing her own thoughts.

Why was destiny so keen on casting her among the opulent rather than the ordinary?

In a more humble upbringing, she could have escaped the twisted web of deceit and betrayal.

"Hi, Leonie."

"Leonie, your presence has been sorely missed." The ladies' voices interrupted Janice's thoughts.

She glanced up just in time to see Leonie enter, her demeanor unruffled, a picture of grace under pressure. Sierra was right behind her.

Typically, Leonie would have Nellie by her side at such gatherings.

However, given Nellie's recent troubles, it made sense to Janice why Sierra was accompanying her today.

Sierra seemed tense, her eyes shadowed by dark circles—a clear sign of sleepless nights likely spent tending to her sister and coping with the weight of familial expectations.

"Leonie, without you, this cocktail party simply lacks its usual sparkle," a lady said, her flattery thick in the air.

Leonie's response was a smile, cold and measured, her gaze sweeping across the room with the poise of a monarch assessing her court.

"You flatter me unduly," she replied cautiously, as if on guard.

Her eyes scanned the crowd, stopping as they landed on two familiar faces tucked away in a corner.

Recognition flashed in her eyes—one was a witness to her past embarrassment, and the other, the mother of a person she dreaded: Janice and Nina.

She mustered a strained smile. “Isn’t Nina the one in charge here?”

The ladies exchanged looks of confusion.

“We haven’t caught a glimpse of Nina! Besides, she tends to shun these functions. What brings her here, then?”

“Exactly my point!”

The ladies shared knowing looks, confirming that none had spotted Nina.

Leonie’s patience thinned, exasperated by their obliviousness. Could they really be unaware of the two people lurking in the corner? At such a prestigious cocktail party, not everyone was granted admission.

Suddenly, Sierra’s eyes lit up as she noticed the two in the corner. However, she quickly composed herself, casting a wary glance at Leonie by her side.

She recognized them as Janice and Nina. Yet, with her mother around, she kept silent, unsure of why they were disguised in such a manner.

“Nina, you’ve arrived quite early,” Leonie remarked to Nina.

Realizing she had been spotted, Nina stood promptly, no longer concealing herself.

"I did come early, and the wait is becoming tiresome. Had you delayed much longer, I might have departed."

Leonie felt a sudden jolt of unease, baffled by Nina's cryptic words.

"Could you clarify what you just said?"

"Simply put, I came to this cocktail party with the sole intention of slapping you."

Color drained from Leonie's face as her hands balled into tight fists.

The disgrace she had endured at Green Group lingered painfully, marking it as the most humiliating day of her existence.

Forced to kneel and apologize to a young man in full view of an audience—the memory haunted her relentlessly, night after restless night.

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"Mom, are you alright?" Sierra's voice, laced with worry, broke through Leonie's reverie.

Nina cast a fleeting glance at Sierra, her expression softening into a resigned sigh. "Consider yourself fortunate that Sierra is here today instead of Nellie."

Leonie deciphered Nina's implied message: the presence of Sierra was the only reason the confrontation was on pause. Without Sierra in the picture, Nina would definitely slap her.

"I'm alright." Leonie managed a strained smile towards her daughter.

"Goodness, Nina graced us with her presence, and we were oblivious."

“Nina, when did you get here? Why not announce yourself? We could have had a delightful chat!”

The ladies recognized Nina.

Moreover, her exchange with Leonie sparked speculation among them.

It became obvious that Leonie was intimidated by Nina.

In the past, Leonie and Nina appeared to maintain a polite and cordial relationship, but beneath the surface, it was clear that Leonie harbored doubts about Nina’s capabilities, constantly measuring herself against Nina in every possible way.

At this particular cocktail party, the moment the two women came face to face, it was painfully obvious that Leonie was entirely outmatched by Nina in every way.

“It looks like you were all enjoying your conversation, so I left you to it.” Nina drew Janice closer and gently patted her hand. “The main reason I’ve come here is to introduce Janice to all of you. And from now on, if anyone dares to trouble her, they should be aware that they will be facing me, as she’s under my protection.”

Her voice was soft, yet each word carried the weight of a storm.

The women’s expressions changed as her words sank in. To them, it sounded like a clear warning, a silent threat hanging in the air.

Nina’s message was unmistakable—Janice was off-limits. Slowly, the women began to grasp the significance Janice held in Nina’s world, a position of undeniable favor.

Nina, who typically avoided such gatherings, had arrived at the cocktail party solely to deliver this unspoken threat on Janice’s behalf.

“Nina, what a thing to say! Of course, we’ll look after her as you do.”

“Indeed! I have a bracelet I’d love to gift your... friend.”

“A friend? She’s Nina’s daughter-in-law,” someone quickly interjected, her flattery tinged with sharp recognition—Janice was Aiden’s wife.

The ladies buzzed with energy, flocking to Nina and Janice, each one fearful that lingering too long would be seen as an oversight.

Watching the swarm of women, Sierra’s nerves tightened, a gnawing unease settling in.

She longed to join Nina and Janice, to inquire about the recent happenings that weighed on her mind.

Yet with Leonie beside her, Sierra felt trapped, frustration gnawing at her.

“Go ahead,” Leonie urged.

“What?” Sierra stared at her mother, eyes wide with disbelief.

“It’s a stroke of luck that Janice holds you in regard. I won’t stand in your way.”

“Are you serious, Mom?” Sierra’s eyes were wide with disbelief, as though she were seeing her mother in a whole new light.

“If you’d rather not, you don’t have to go.”

“Of course, I want to go. I’ve missed Janice terribly these past days.”

With that, Sierra hurried toward Janice, her steps quick and determined.

Leonie watched her daughter disappear into the crowd, bitterness twisting in her chest. The girl she once scorned had become her only hope.

Had it not been for Aiden and Janice's consideration for Sierra, she likely wouldn't even be at the party.

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The future of the Ramirez family in Efrery rested on Sierra's shoulders. If they angered her, Janice might retaliate, and that would be the end.

Though Leonie didn't fully understand Janice's ways, her gut told her that Janice was just as formidable as Aiden.

"Janice!" Sierra called, waving her arms as she sprinted toward her.

The women, preoccupied with winning Nina and Janice's favor, had no time to pay attention to Sierra.

They were shrewd enough to notice Leonie's decline, seizing the opportunity to charm Nina and impress her with extra effort.

"Excuse me, please," Sierra said, trying to get through but was blocked by others.

"What's wrong with you? Can't you see we are speaking?"

"I wonder how your mother raised you. How could you be so rude?"

The women voiced their discontent, lacing their words with sarcasm, their disdain subtly aimed at Leonie.

Leonie said nothing, pretending to ignore them as she settled into a seat, turning her back to the crowd, sipping her cocktail in silence.

"I think it's you who are rude," Janice said sharply, her gaze icy as she looked at the ladies. "Nina and I were enjoying our conversation when you all swooped in, talking incessantly. Did you even check if we welcomed your presence? Should I take this as an intrusion?"

Her words sliced through the air, leaving the ladies speechless, their faces frozen in shock.

They exchanged stunned looks, having believed their compliments would win them favor, only to be metaphorically slapped by Janice's biting retort.

"Nina, your daughter-in-law has quite a sharp tongue," one lady said, managing a strained smile.

Nina shot her a cold glance, her lips curling into a sneer. "You think it's harsh? Then don't listen. Please, leave us alone."

The ladies were taken aback, staring at Nina in stunned disbelief.

They had heard of Nina's fierce nature, but they hadn't expected her to explode so fiercely, outright telling them to leave.

"What my daughter-in-law says, I echo. If you take issue with her, you take issue with me."

"No, no, Nina, that's not what we meant at all!"

"Exactly! We think your daughter-in-law is absolutely wonderful, so genuine and straightforward. It's such a rare quality!"

The ladies scrambled to shower Janice with compliments. Janice knew their type all too well—fair-weather friends who switched allegiances as easily as flipping a coin. If things didn't go their way, they'd find another angle, always playing to their advantage.

"All right, enough," Nina said, waving them off with a hint of impatience. "You're all crowding around too much. Let Sierra through."

The ladies exchanged subtle glances, realizing that Sierra seemed to hold a unique place in Nina's favor.

Quickly, they recalculated. If Nina and Janice were too strong to influence, perhaps Sierra, quiet and seemingly unassuming, might be the key.

Without hesitation, the women stepped aside, clearing a path for Sierra.

"Janice, Nina, I've missed you both so much," Sierra said as she approached. Her eyes glistened with tears, the emotion in her expression almost palpable.

"Oh no, Sierra, why are you crying? Did something happen at home?" Nina asked, her voice full of concern as she clasped Sierra's trembling hands.

Janice stepped closer, gently patting Sierra's head in a familiar, comforting gesture.

It was something she had always done, and Sierra couldn't help but feel a flicker of solace even through her tears.

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"Is it about your sister?" Janice asked.

"Yes." Sierra nodded, her face shadowed with sorrow. "Nellie hasn't been herself lately. She locks herself in her room all day and refuses to eat or drink. I managed to coax her into eating a little. I thought things were improving. But yesterday, she wouldn't eat anything. I called her over and over, but she didn't respond. I panicked and had someone break down the door. I found her..."

Sierra's sobs grew heavier, her shoulders trembling. "She tried to end her life. If I hadn't gotten to her in time..."

Janice's expression darkened, her jaw tightening. She struggled to reconcile the image of strong, resilient Nellie with someone in such a fragile, broken state.

Bart's cruelty hadn't just hurt Nellie physically; it had left deep psychological scars that seemed impossible to heal.

"What am I supposed to do? I can't lose my sister," Sierra cried, her voice barely audible.

Janice placed a steady hand on Sierra's shoulder. "It's okay. I'll go see her tomorrow."

"Really?" Nina looked at Janice with concern. She knew the tension between Janice and Nellie, and she wasn't sure what would happen when they saw each other again.

"Nina, don't worry. I know what I'm doing. Besides, Nellie and I aren't at each other's throats."

"All right, if you're sure. That does ease my mind."

Janice turned to Sierra, offering her a reassuring smile. "Come pick me up tomorrow, and we'll go see your sister together."

"Okay!" The weight on Sierra's shoulders seemed lighter now. For reasons she couldn't quite explain, she felt certain that Janice might be the only one who could truly help Nellie.

"Ladies." Wendy stepped forward, her posture poised and her smile confident. "I've arranged a little entertainment for today's cocktail party. I thought it might liven things up."

"Entertainment?"

"How thoughtful! What kind of entertainment are we talking about?"

The interest of the women was instantly piqued. They turned their attention to Wendy, who basked in the spotlight, her smile widening with satisfaction.

Janice and Nina exchanged a glance.

Earlier, when the ladies had gathered to flatter Nina, Wendy had remained aloof, quietly sipping her drink.

Lesly, too, hadn't joined the group, but for an entirely different reason—her hesitation stemmed from insecurity. Unlike Wendy, she lacked the confidence to engage in their social games.

Wendy, however, had been watching, scheming. From the very beginning, it was clear she was using this cocktail party as a stage to assert her influence and win over the elite circle.

A few sharp claps from Wendy silenced the room. All eyes turned toward her as a tall, striking man entered.

His features were refined, his bright eyes radiated charisma, and his tailored suit, embroidered with a pair of wings, somehow didn't feel excessive. On him, it added an air of brilliance, as though he carried his spotlight.

"This is Stephen White. He recently won the Best Actor award."

Wendy shot Stephen a look, prompting him to step forward and address the room.

"Ladies, it's an honor to be invited by Mrs. Chadwick to perform for your enjoyment at this lovely cocktail party."

The words were polite, but something in his tone felt off to Janice, a subtle undertone she couldn't quite ignore.

Janice narrowed her eyes, studying Stephen intently. On the surface, he was a celebrated actor, but something about the situation didn't sit right. He wasn't just a guest; he was a performer brought here to entertain the whims of the elite.

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White? Was that his real surname, or just a stage name?

“Janice,” Sierra whispered, “don’t you think Stephen looks a little like you?”

“Really?” Janice’s expression changed, her gaze snapping to Sierra.

“Exactly!” Nina chimed in with surprise. “There’s definitely a resemblance. If you two stood side by side, I might believe you were siblings.”

When one person brought it up, Janice dismissed it as mere coincidence. But when two more echoed the sentiment, she couldn’t help but cast a second, more thoughtful glance at Stephen.

Stephen’s complexion was radiant, and his deep-set eyes seemed to pull others into their gaze. Those eyes alone made Janice wonder if perhaps the comparison wasn’t as far-fetched as she first thought. After all, her own gaze had that same irresistible quality, a fact Aiden could undoubtedly confirm.

Unfortunately, Aiden wasn’t around. If he were, he’d likely have something to say about Stephen.

This guy must be quite the charmer, as he gazed at everything with such affection.

The thought made Janice’s lips curl into a fleeting smile, which she soon masked, as though it never appeared.

“His eyes do remind me of mine. No wonder he snagged the Best Actor award,” she remarked.

“Huh? Janice, what do you mean? How would eyes like yours help him win the award?” Sierra asked, her gaze wide with innocent curiosity.

But Nina, ever sharp, caught on immediately. She smiled and playfully pinched Sierra’s nose. “Janice is giving herself a compliment, naturally.”

Sierra paused, still puzzled, before shaking her head in confusion.

Nina rolled her eyes and gave Sierra's forehead a playful tap. "Oh, you silly girl! It's obvious. Janice means her gaze is so captivating that if she acted, even the coldest heart would feel special."

Janice glanced at Nina, amused. Just like Aiden, Nina's logic was sharp and on point.

"Oh! Now I understand!" Sierra exclaimed, her eyes suddenly sparkling with realization.

Janice could only offer a small, faint smile before turning her attention back to Stephen.

Stephen had already exchanged pleasantries with several ladies. His gaze flicked briefly over Janice before he refocused on the crowd.

"I'd like to play a piano piece for everyone."

"Huh? Stephen, you play the piano?" one of the ladies asked, clearly taken aback.

Stephen gave a slight nod, his gentle smile putting everyone at ease. "Though my main focus is acting, I've always had a passion for the piano. I've even considered diving into music more seriously down the road."

"Impressive! You're juggling both acting and music. So like you."

"If you ever release an album, consider partnering with my family's music company."

Stephen's refined demeanor and musical talent only deepened his charm, and some ladies even hinted at future collaborations. Wendy's proud smile revealed her satisfaction; inviting Stephen had been a smart move.

“The piece I’ll perform today is Redemption, a recent favorite of mine,” Stephen said.

Redemption? Janice raised an eyebrow, mildly surprised. He had picked her own piano piece.

“Redemption? Isn’t that a composition by RAIN?” someone exclaimed.

“That piece is incredibly difficult! Even professional pianists struggle with it.”

“Stephen, I’m excited to hear this.”

The ladies displayed eager, expectant expressions. They huddled closer to Stephen, clutching their drinks and settling in comfortably.

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Only Leonie and Janice sat at a distance, uninterested in joining the crowd. Wendy noticed but didn’t mind. She knew that the truly influential were tougher to sway. For now, she focused on making connections with the smaller players, hoping they’d lead her to the more powerful ones.

A white grand piano was wheeled out, its luxurious sheen catching the light.

Stephen sat down, and for a moment, it seemed like a scene pulled straight from a painting.

“This actor is really quite handsome,” Sierra murmured, her eyes sparkling as she gazed at Stephen. “Especially when he sits like that—it’s like he’s a prince. He’s absolutely perfect.”

Nina sighed, mirroring the sentiment. “I usually don’t care for pretty boys or charming types, but Stephen is truly different.”

While the two women openly admired Stephen, Janice remained composed, her expression neutral. She picked up her glass, sipped, and glanced back at him.

The first note rang out, clear and bright.

Janice instinctively began counting the rhythm in her head. As soon as she hit the second beat, the next note flowed seamlessly. What followed was a smooth cascade of notes, like a stream flowing effortlessly.

The timing of each note was perfectly aligned with the rhythm in her mind. It felt as though she and Stephen were performing an invisible duet.

Stephen's grasp of Redemption—its nuances, its emotional depth—far exceeded her expectations.

Fascinating.

This wasn't just raw talent; he must have dedicated years to mastering the piano.

And yet, he was also an actor. The blend of his acting career and extraordinary musical ability was nothing short of remarkable. This wasn't just talent; it was the signature of a true genius.

As the final note drifted into silence, Stephen exhaled deeply, stood, and bowed gracefully to the audience. The ladies erupted into applause, showering Stephen with praise, their admiration evident.

"Stephen, are you absolutely certain you're not a piano prodigy?"

"Your rendition of 'Redemption' was so striking, I almost mistook it for RAIN herself. Truly incredible."

"Exactly! I've heard RAIN play many times, and your performance was so close. If I had my eyes closed, I'd swear it was RAIN herself!"

Stephen received the ladies' praise with a composed demeanor, his responses humble and graceful.

“RAIN is my idol, the standard I aspire to. To hear such praise from you is an honor, but I’m still far from her level. Her performances are driven by a deeper purpose, while mine...”

“But yours, on the other hand, carries an undeniable vulnerability.”

In that moment, Janice rose unexpectedly, continuing from where Stephen had left off.

Stephen glanced at Janice in surprise, his eyes betraying a hint of something hard to read.

“What do you mean by vulnerability? If you don’t understand, it’s better to stay quiet!” a lady scowled, casting Janice a look of disdain.

Though Janice was linked to Nina, this lady was unfamiliar with her background and showed little respect.

She didn’t think her rudeness would upset Nina, especially since she had no interest in winning Nina’s favor, given the lack of opportunity.

Janice dismissed the lady’s disdain, her focus solely on Stephen.

“From your performance, I sensed your emotions. On the surface, it seemed composed, but underneath, there was a sense of helplessness and sadness. Playing ‘Redemption’ with such emotions feels out of place, as it turns the piece’s passion into vulnerability.”

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Stephen narrowed his eyes slightly, but he forced a smile.

“Thank you for your input, Miss. However, I’m quite satisfied with my life and don’t feel any helplessness or sadness.”

After speaking, he instinctively glanced at Wendy.

Janice caught the subtle gesture, sensing that Stephen was under Wendy's influence, something she was clearly exploiting. In her company, he had to feign contentment with his life, or else things could turn sour for him later.

"Well then, I must have misunderstood. After all, I don't know much about the piano."

"No worries. If you're ever interested in discussing the piano further, we can chat when there's a chance."

"Of course." Janice returned to her seat, her demeanor relaxed.

However, the earlier lady wasn't pleased, especially since Janice admitted to not knowing much about the piano, which only deepened her disdain.

"I told you—if you don't understand, don't speak out of turn. It's just ruining the atmosphere."

"Who do you think you are, speaking to Janice like that?" The lady, assuming Nina wouldn't defend Janice, was taken aback.

"I've never liked you. Haven't you been slapped before?" Nina continued.

"I—I haven't." The lady stammered, her face going pale as she hadn't anticipated Nina defending Janice so fiercely.

"Nina, she's just ignorant of the rules. Don't let it upset you." Wendy quickly interjected to mediate.

"Enid, apologize to Nina and Janice right now."

Nina raised an eyebrow at the words. No wonder Wendy was so skilled at winning people over—she knew exactly how to flatter and please.

“I’m sorry, Nina. I misspoke. And to you, Janice, I apologize if I’ve offended you.”

Janice glanced at Nina, noting her anger had faded. It wasn’t worth lingering on, so she decided to move on.

“Watch your words next time. You won’t always have someone to back you up. If you speak out of turn again, you might just get slapped.”

“Thank you for the heads-up.” Though she felt wronged, Enid Hudson had no choice but to endure it, given the circumstances.

Janice sat back down, and Sierra quickly linked her arm with hers.

“Janice, why did you say that back there?” Sierra was frustrated. Janice was clearly very talented, so why pretend not to understand the piano?

“Just keeping a low profile to avoid drawing unwanted attention.”

“I don’t understand!”

“Neither do I!”

Nina and Sierra exchanged glances, both looking at Janice with confusion.

Janice sighed, then lowered her voice. “Stephen seems to be under Wendy’s control. By pointing out his flaws, I may have put him in a difficult spot. To protect him, I had to throw him off the scent.”

“Now I see!”

Nina and Sierra both suddenly grasped the situation. Their shared understanding was so effortless, it made Janice smile inwardly.

However, this scene was deeply unsettling for Leonie, who watched from a distance. Sierra was her daughter, yet she seemed so at ease with Nina and Janice. This made Leonie feel more out of place.

Was she truly failing as a mother?

With Nellie in her current state and now Sierra drifting away from the family, Leonie's position within the Ramirez family seemed more unstable than ever.

Chapter 400:

Lately, Leonie's husband had been putting pressure on her. She worried that if she failed to properly raise their two daughters or provide a son, she'd be pushed aside. The idea of a crafty rival stepping in and altering her destiny was all too clear in her mind.

"Leonie, why are you sitting here by yourself instead of mingling with the others?" Wendy walked over with a smile and sat down beside Leonie.

Leonie regained her composure and glanced sideways at Wendy. "You're aware of my circumstances. There's no need to flatter me. If you're trying to win favor with someone, it should be Nina."

Wendy smiled faintly, pouring a cup of coffee for Leonie and passing it to her. "Have some coffee. Some people, even when they know it's pointless to curry favor with Nina, continue doing so. It's degrading and ungrateful. I don't want to be seen as that."

Leonie narrowed her eyes. Wendy was no ordinary person. She was aware that Nina hated cliques and wouldn't use her influence to befriend other women. Those who failed to understand this and tried to gain favor would only irritate Nina.

Wendy was clever, which explained why she hadn't tried to win favor earlier.

"So, you're trying to win favor with me?" Leonie asked.

"I genuinely care about you," Wendy sighed, filling her cup with coffee and sipping it. "I sympathize with you, having given so much to the Ramirez family over the years, only to be blamed for a minor setback. It really saddens me."

Whether genuine or not, Wendy's words helped calm Leonie. At least someone was standing up for her.

"In high society, fate is often beyond one's control. A single wrong move can destroy someone, regardless of their previous high status. Once they lose their worth, they become ordinary."

Leonie clenched her coffee cup firmly, the veins on the back of her hand protruding slightly.

Wendy extended her hand, gently placing it on Leonie's as a gesture of comfort. "I heard your husband has been growing close to another woman. Have you heard about this, Leonie?"

Leonie scowled, giving Wendy a cold, piercing look. "What exactly are you implying?"

"I'm just concerned for you. I'm afraid you might be replaced by a mistress."

Leonie stayed quiet, aware that Wendy was trying to sow discord. However, she couldn't deny it, as it was already happening, just echoed in Wendy's words.

"I can assist you in solidifying your position."

"Do you honestly think I would trust you?" Leonie shook her head, steadying herself. "I might be down, but I'm still sharp. Keep your manipulations to yourself; I'm not interested in playing your game."

"What do you mean? I'm only trying to help you, that's all. It's understandable for you to be wary, but in time, you'll see I'm sincere."

After this exchange, the two sat in silence.

Janice kept an eye on Wendy from the corner of her gaze. Wendy sat beside Leonie, and although they had been talking for a while, Leonie's face showed the conversation wasn't going well.

She also watched another person—Kenneth's mother, Lesly.

Lesly remained quiet, sipping her coffee and nibbling on snacks, her expression only changing slightly when Stephen played the piano. Her lack of involvement was rather perplexing.

"Nina, Sierra, I'm going to greet Mrs. Delgado," Janice said.

"What?"

Nina and Sierra exchanged confused looks. Why was she suddenly going to greet her?

Janice gave no explanation, simply standing up and walking over.

"Hello, Mrs. Delgado."