

Wrath 421

Chapter 421:

Stephen took a measured sip from his glass, nodding with deliberate slowness. "In the Ramirez family, fate controls you. But here, you are in control of everything."

Leonie's eyes brightened with newfound possibility, her trembling fingers seeking out his hand. "Really? Everything is under my control here, including you?"

A shadow crossed Stephen's eyes before he offered a careful nod. His vulnerability awakened something primal within her.

Desire coursed through her veins, drowning rational thought beneath waves of longing. All she craved now was sweet surrender with this enchanting man.

"Stephen, kiss me." She tilted her head back, eyes fluttering closed in anticipation.

Stephen's pupils constricted as he studied her face, inner turmoil evident in his hesitation. Despite her age, Leonie had maintained her allure—her skin retained its firmness, and the subtle lines that marked her face only enhanced her sophisticated beauty. How could anyone resist such a charming woman? Yet, Stephen clung to his principles, unwilling to abandon them despite Wendy's explicit instructions regarding Leonie.

"What's wrong?" Leonie's eyes opened, a knowing smirk playing across her lips. "Didn't you say I'm in control of everything here? That includes you, does it not? Why do your actions contradict your words?"

"Your authority here remains absolute. But I think we should cherish each other."

"Is that so?" Leonie arched an eyebrow.

Stephen refilled both their glasses with practiced grace. "Surely our connection deserves more depth than mere physical desire?"

Leonie's lashes fluttered as she studied Stephen anew. His beauty was undeniable, yet it was his untarnished spirit that set him apart from others she'd known.

"You're right!" Leonie agreed, taking the glass and watching the ripples in the wine. "I'm already the master here. It would be ridiculous to remain so superficial." Without hesitation, she drained her glass in one bold motion. The potent liquid blazed a trail down her throat, setting her cheeks aflame and sending warmth coursing through her body.

"In the Ramirez family, everyone has their worth, even Chuck. He's nothing but their carefully crafted puppet. The moment he fails to meet their standards, they'll dispose of him without hesitation."

"My husband loves me. Yet his love withers in the shadow of his family's demands. He's become nothing more than a means to secure their precious heir."

Leonie's knuckles whitened around the crystal stem of her wine glass as visions tormented her: her husband's mistress moving in, sharing her husband's bed. She was powerless; one wrong move, and the Ramirez family would cast her aside like yesterday's newspaper. Time had stripped away her worth like autumn leaves. Once, when she still held value, they'd at least maintained a veneer of respect. Now, they'd dropped all pretense, fixated solely on producing an heir with mechanical efficiency.

"My heart aches for what you've endured." Stephen's hand found Leonie's back, offering gentle comfort.

A bitter smile twisted her lips as tears threatened to spill. Once, she'd been that bright-eyed girl, floating on cloud nine when Chuck had chosen her. However, that fairy tale had shattered after she married him. Reality had struck like a hammer: prove her worth or perish. Unable to give birth to a son had marked her as worthless, but she'd clawed back some dignity by weaving alliances with other affluent women.

But now, she had lost her value again.

The evening stretched until Leonie succumbed to the wine's embrace, collapsing onto the sofa. Stephen, cheeks flushed with alcohol, radiated an even more magnetic charm than usual. His gaze lingered on Leonie's unconscious form, pity softening his features. Her fortress of strength, her untouchable

demeanor—carefully constructed armor for surviving the Ramirez family—was laid bare. Beneath it all beat the heart of a woman both delicate and raw.

His phone shattered the silence.

Stephen's face clouded at the caller ID before he answered with visible reluctance. "Stephen, how was Leonie?"

Chapter 422:

"Nothing transpired between us."

"What did you say?" Wendy's voice crackled with venom through the phone. "Have you lost your mind?"

"I'm merely your puppet string to Leonie. Whether we cross that line or not, the outcome is still the same if I can manipulate her."

Silence stretched before Wendy's laughter shattered it. "Well, well. You've grown cleverer, haven't you? Playing games with me now?"

"I simply chose the path of greatest efficiency."

"Stephen, don't forget your place. You're my chess piece, nothing more. What I've given you, I can snatch away in a heartbeat. Then you'll be right back in the gutter, with wolves at your heels."

Wendy's words pierced Stephen like shards of ice. His grip tightened on the phone, eyes flashing with steel, yet his voice remained carefully measured. "I'm grateful."

"Since you understand your position so well, I'll overlook this little rebellion—just this once." Wendy's tone dripped honey-coated poison. "Come back. I miss you. It's been a while since I've touched you, hasn't it?"

Stephen's heart twisted as he glanced at Leonie's sleeping form. "Yes, I know what to do."

After hanging up, he drowned his sorrow in several more glasses before vanishing into the night.

Getting Stephen's DNA proved laughably simple—his manager's morals dissolved at the sight of money. With the sample secured, Braylen quickly arranged the genetic comparison between Stephen and Janice.

Now Janice clutched the test report, her certainty warring with her nerves despite her instincts screaming the truth.

"Janice, open it." Aiden's voice wrapped her in gentle reassurance.

Janice glanced at Aiden, nodded, and opened the DNA test report.

Relief flooded through her veins as the results confirmed what her heart already knew: Stephen and she were siblings.

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The missing Fabian from their past had turned into Stephen. What trials and tribulations had shaped him into the man he'd become? And what sinister role did Wendy play in this twisted tale?

"Janice, what do you plan to do now? Will you reveal your identity, or..."

A strange serenity washed over her as she'd confirmed the truth. She shook her head with gentle resolve. "I don't want to reveal it yet. Blood may connect us, but I need to understand the person beneath."

Aiden's surprise melted into understanding. The Edwards family's hollow acceptance had carved deep scars in Janice's heart. This time, she refused to rush, choosing instead to silently gauge Stephen's worth beneath his carefully crafted facade.

"If Stephen's soul mirrors the Edwards family's, then blood means nothing to me. Let Leonidas threaten all he wishes — I won't bend."

Aiden nodded, wisdom settling in his gaze. "And how will you approach him? Privately, or..."

"I have a clever plan." A mischievous glint sparkled in Janice's eyes as her lips curled into a cunning smile.

Aiden's stomach dropped at the sight. He knew that look all too well—it always spelled trouble. However, he still underestimated Janice's schemes.

That very afternoon, Stephen's phone buzzed with an unexpected notification. His management company had signed him up for a reality dating show.

Disbelief etched across Stephen's features as he demanded, "Haven't I made myself crystal clear about reality shows? And now you're throwing me into some dating circus? It's like I'm talking to a brick wall."

His manager squirmed under Stephen's piercing gaze. "The investors made an offer we couldn't ignore. They're willing to pay 100 million for your appearance. It's unprecedented in the industry. Sometimes, principles need to bend when opportunities like this arise."

Chapter 423:

"Do you think I'm someone who lacks money?" Stephen massaged his temples, exasperated by his manager's shortsightedness.

As a leading star, his position in the industry was unshakeable. Future endorsements and investments would only multiply. While 100 million was tempting, wouldn't it tarnish his reputation as a serious actor to chase romance on reality TV?

"I know you're not short on money." Settling into his chair, the manager leaned forward with an air of urgency. "But this goes beyond the 100 million appearance fee. We're talking about exclusive, top-tier

endorsements—deals our company couldn't dream of securing on our own. That's what made me listen."

Stephen's breath caught in his throat. The implications hit him like a thunderbolt. Top endorsements meant access to resources controlled by the industry's elite—a realm even Wendy couldn't touch. Yet here was someone offering it on a silver platter.

"Who is the other party?"

"It seems to be Freak Design."

Freak Design?

Stephen knew the company well—an undisputed titan in the design world, wielding influence that few could match. "Freak Design alone doesn't have that kind of pull," he mused.

The manager glanced furtively around before lowering his voice to barely above a whisper. "Word is, the JE Consortium stands behind Freak Design. If that's true, those endorsements are just the tip of the iceberg."

Stephen's composed facade cracked. The involvement of the JE Consortium changed everything. Even their smallest resource allocation could set up an entertainment industry player for life.

"Though I have to wonder—why me?" Stephen's brow furrowed in contemplation. Something about this whirlwind offer nagged at his instincts. The suddenness of it all felt orchestrated, calculated. "Surely there are more prominent figures in the industry they could approach."

"Stephen, why are you being so difficult? They chose you. Isn't that reason enough? Sometimes luck just falls into your lap."

Frustration colored the manager's voice. After laying out such a golden opportunity, Stephen's hesitation was maddening.

“Stephen, it doesn’t matter if you don’t care about one hundred million and those endorsements, think about the team. This is our shot at reaching new heights. After all these years together, can’t you consider it?”

The raw desperation in his manager’s eyes gave Stephen pause. “Let me make a call first.”

“To whom?”

“Wendy.”

The manager fell silent, knowing well the weight Wendy’s influence carried.

One phone call later, after Stephen explained the JE Consortium connection, Wendy’s response was immediate and emphatic—take the offer.

“Stephen, this is your golden ticket! A connection to JE could change everything—not just for you, but for all of us.” Wendy understood JE’s towering presence in the financial world. Besides the Green family, all other players were mere pawns compared to the JE Consortium’s far-reaching empire. Their influence stretched beyond borders, beyond imagination.

“Give the director my approval,” Stephen said simply.

“Alright!” The manager’s face lit up like a child on Christmas morning as he scrambled for his phone to deliver the good news.

The show in question, “Love Lab,” marketed itself as a revolutionary dating experience. Its premise was simple yet alluring—bringing together the most talked-about personalities in entertainment, orchestrating romantic scenarios designed to spark genuine connections between potential couples.

While such matchmaking spectacles typically held audiences spellbound, Love Lab had struggled to escape the shadow of mediocrity. Its formulaic approach had led to plummeting ratings, pushing it to the brink of cancellation. Just as despair threatened to overtake the production, a mysterious benefactor emerged from the shadows. This powerful investor not only breathed new life into the

failing show but also delivered an unprecedented coup—securing Stephen, fresh from his Best Actor triumph, as their star attraction.

Chapter 424:

The announcement sent shockwaves through social media. Forums exploded with speculation about who would be paired with the industry's newest golden boy.

However, the show's director, Devin Reed, frowned as he reviewed the guest list. Something about the names before him sparked serious concern.

Beside Stephen's luminous star power, the other participants seemed to fade into obscurity—a stark contrast that threatened to undermine the entire production.

"Devin, our show is finally going to be the breakthrough we've been waiting for!"

"You bet! Freak Design has poured unprecedented resources into this program. The endorsements they've lined up are incredible, and we've even managed to secure participating pairs willing to cross-promote. That's never happened before!"

"With Stephen joining the cast, success is practically guaranteed!"

The production office hummed with anticipation as staff members rushed to voice their optimism, each hoping to catch Devin's approval.

But Devin's expression had grown increasingly troubled since the guest list had landed on his desk earlier that morning.

"Don't celebrate too soon. Take a look at this first." As Devin distributed the list among his team, eager hands snatched up copies. Their eyes immediately lit up at Stephen's name—he was undeniably their biggest catch. But as they continued reading, their expressions turned from excitement to disbelief.

"What? Daniel Chadwick? That washed-up troublemaker? How did he end up on our list?"

“Besides Daniel, Demi Reed is on here too. She’s nothing but a pretty face without an ounce of talent. What were they thinking putting these two on our show?” The team exchanged looks of dismay.

Daniel Chadwick was notorious for his reckless behavior and inflammatory remarks. If not for his family’s influence, his career would have crumbled long ago.

Meanwhile, Demi’s reputation preceded her—a beauty who’d allegedly climbed the ladder through questionable means, making her a constant target for online criticism. The inclusion of such washed-up celebrities on the show was baffling to the production team.

“Daniel has strong family connections. But how did Demi get in?”

Murmurs of concern rippled through the room. Would associating with such a controversial figure damage their show’s credibility?

Devin massaged his temples, weariness etched across his features. “It’s the influence of her financial backer. Word is, she recently secured backing from someone with deep pockets—someone who happens to be one of our investors. Her appearance isn’t up for debate.”

The staff’s silent glances spoke volumes, their shared frustration palpable in the heavy atmosphere that settled over the room. Such was the bitter reality of financial influence in their industry.

The truth was painfully clear: talent had become secondary to connections. Any artist, no matter how mediocre, could secure a spot on their show if they had the right financial backing. Refusing these wealthy backers’ demands would mean risking their entire funding—a devastating blow they couldn’t afford.

“Devin, what about these names at the bottom? I’ve never seen them in the entertainment circuit.”

Devin’s expression hardened. “Stop speculating. Their presence on our show alone should tell you they wield financial influence beyond our wildest dreams. Let’s focus on making this show exceptional and leave the politics aside.”

“Understood.”

Suddenly, a staff member’s eyes widened with recognition. “Janice Edwards... Isn’t she the one who exposed Carman’s scandal? If it’s the same person, we might have struck gold. That kind of controversy generates serious buzz.”

Despite their reservations, the show’s schedule was set in stone. Whatever lay ahead was now beyond their control.

Chapter 425:

At Mount Cloudridge, sunlight streamed through the windows as Janice finally stirred from her slumber. A quick glance at the clock revealed it was already past nine.

The sudden chime of her doorbell jolted her fully awake. Throwing on her robe, she padded across the floor to answer.

“Janice! I’m here to escort you to the set!”

“This early?” Janice stifled a yawn, resignation creeping into her voice. “I thought filming didn’t start until noon?”

Leah pushed her way inside, rolling her eyes before pulling Janice into a warm embrace. She studied her friend’s sleep-glazed expression. “Don’t tell me you thought you could just waltz in right before shooting starts? There’s a whole production schedule to follow—makeup, wardrobe, briefings... and plenty of other prep work.”

A frown creased Janice’s forehead as regret over joining the show washed over her. Still, she reminded herself of the silver lining. This was her chance to observe Stephen up close and uncover more about him.

“Alright.”

“Great!” Leah said, her voice laced with satisfaction. She stepped back, planting her hands on her hips with an air of triumph. “I’m your manager now.”

“And me too!” Prescott strode in, sporting his trademark grin. “Janice, I’m your assistant now.”

Meanwhile, Costello maintained his customary stoic presence against the wall. “I’m the bodyguard.”

“All of you?” Janice blinked in surprise. She’d expected Leah as her manager, but the sudden appearance of both Prescott and Costello threw her off balance.

“Oh come on, did you really think I’d let you have all the excitement without me?” Prescott’s lower lip jutted out in an exaggerated pout.

“This isn’t meant to be entertainment,” Janice protested.

“I don’t care. I’m sticking with you.” Prescott put on a disappointed but determined face. “I’ve spent enough time working behind the curtain. Now it’s my turn to step into the spotlight—right beside you, Janice.”

Janice’s gaze traveled from Prescott to Costello, reading the unwavering determination written across both their faces.

Janice knew persuading Prescott and Costello to change their minds was like trying to catch the wind. Since life had been uneventful lately, she figured, why not let them have their fun?

“Alright, let’s do it,” she said with a hint of resignation.

“Yay!” Prescott practically bounced with excitement, bustling around to set up a spread of breakfast delights. “Janice, I’ve packed a ton of goodies for you. What tickles your fancy? If nothing looks appetizing, just say the word, and I’ll whip up something else.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Janice chuckled, amusement growing as she stared at the mountain of food Prescott had prepared. Clearly, Prescott wasn’t wasting any time slipping into his role as the perfect assistant—even before the show officially began.

Thanks to Leah’s efficient planning, Janice soon swapped her usual attire for something more laid-back. She kept her makeup minimal—just enough to enhance her natural glow—then climbed into the van bound for the set. The shooting location for Love Lab turned out to be a villa. When Janice arrived, she was taken aback by an unexpected twist of fate—it was one of her properties. It was quite a coincidence that the production team had chosen this place as the filming location.

“Janice, can you believe it? What are the chances that the filming spot turns out to be one of your properties?”

Chapter 426:

“Isn’t it funny how small the world can be?” Janice gave a casual shrug, a trace of resignation in her expression. “Well, at least I don’t need a tour to get my bearings.” She had once called this villa home for a time. Its serene ambiance and clever design had drawn her in, aligning perfectly with her taste.

Yet, just as she was settling in, the Edwards family claimed the villa was theirs. Reluctantly, she packed up and returned to them.

The irony? Back at the Edwards family residence, she found herself relegated to a storage room—a humiliating twist of fate that felt like a slap in the face.

“Excuse me, are you Janice Edwards?” A staff member approached cautiously, his tone betraying a mix of curiosity and nerves.

From a distance, he spotted Janice and her entourage. Her striking beauty and effortless grace set her apart, commanding attention even in a crowd. Rumor had it Janice was a close confidante of the CEO of Freak Design, a major sponsor, which made him tread carefully.

“That’s me,” Janice replied, stepping forward with a warm smile.

The man blinked, pleasantly surprised. He had braced himself for someone aloof, but her kind expression and approachable demeanor melted away his reservations. She wasn't just beautiful—she was utterly disarming. In that moment, the staff member felt certain Janice would be the centerpiece of their show.

"I'm handling logistics and task coordination. You're the first to arrive, so feel free to relax in the lounge, get your makeup done, or grab some breakfast. Or, if you'd prefer, you can head straight into the villa and wait for the others."

"I'll go to the villa," Janice said with a nod. Her makeup was flawless, and she'd already eaten. "Leah, you and the others can take a break. I've got it from here."

"What? Absolutely not!" Leah protested, her brows knitting in concern. "I'm your manager, Janice. I need to stay close in case anything goes sideways. Don't worry, I'll be keeping an eagle eye on things. If anyone dares to cross the line, I'll make sure they regret it."

The staff member's smile faltered as he shivered slightly under Leah's scrutiny. "Ms. Sugden, there's no need for concern! Our show values the guests' autonomy. Aside from assigning tasks, we keep out of the way."

"Alright, lead the way. I need a quick word with Devin," Leah said, motioning for the group to follow.

"No problem at all."

Leah and the others followed the staff member.

Janice turned her attention to the villa. She took a deep breath, savoring the familiar sight, and strolled inside. She quickly found a pair of slippers in the shoe cabinet and slid them on, relishing the soft comfort. From there, she made a beeline for the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of water with practiced ease before settling into the living room sofa.

Devin, perched in the control room, watched the live feed from hidden cameras with a furrowed brow.

“Have you noticed? She seems unusually at ease in this villa, as if it’s her personal retreat.”

“Exactly! We never tipped her off about the filming location, yet she moves around like she’s lived here all her life.”

“For a second there, I thought we were trespassing on her property,” someone quipped, drawing a few awkward chuckles from the crew.

Devin shrugged off the strange vibe, deciding it wasn’t worth overthinking. Whatever Janice’s connection to the villa, it wouldn’t throw a wrench in their shoot.

Chapter 427:

Meanwhile, Janice sank into the plush sofa, effortlessly plucking a book off the coffee table. With a calm air, she flipped it open and began to read.

On the monitor, her elegance was magnetic. Every inch of her seemed to belong to the screen, her serene beauty enchanting the crew. They had worked with plenty of dazzling stars, but Janice’s understated charm had an ethereal quality that was hard to pin down.

What truly set her apart was her poise—a natural grace that turned even the mundane into something cinematic. When she turned a page, it wasn’t just reading; it was artistry, like a scene lifted straight out of a storybook.

“Grab that shot right there!” Devin barked, breaking the spell. “Perfect for the promo.”

“On it!”

The production’s art team displayed their mastery, perfectly immortalizing Janice’s beauty from every possible angle. The closer they examined her, the more mesmerized they became by Janice’s unblemished elegance, questioning how such perfection could grace the world.

Demi Reed, the second guest to arrive on Love Lab, made her entrance with flair. Determined to leave a striking impression on the crew, she woke early, applied her makeup with precision, and arrived at the set ahead of time.

“Demi, you’re utterly radiant today! With your beauty, you’re undeniably the centerpiece of this show,” Zoie Bates, Demi’s manager, showered her with compliments.

A self-assured smile played on Demi’s lips. She remained silent, but her demeanor spoke volumes—her beauty was peerless, unrivaled even among the stars of the entertainment world. After all, what else could explain the relentless pursuit of powerful figures vying to claim her as their most desired companion?

“Be sure to connect with the production crew later and request extra shots of me, particularly from the left side; that’s where I look the most striking,” Demi requested.

“Relax, I’ll handle it. Even without a nudge from me, the team will take care of it. After all, you’re Mr. Mendoza’s girlfriend, and no one would dare cross him.”

Demi arched her eyebrows, a smug grin crossing her face as she tugged at her jacket. Clad in a mini skirt and leather jacket, she radiated a daring, untamed allure. She was certain her magnetic charm was impossible for most men to ignore.

Zoie accompanied Demi to the villa’s front door before making her way toward the production crew. “Where can I find Devin?”

“He’s in the observation room right now.”

“Go and let him know to meet me here.” Zoie lifted her chin, exuding an air of haughty confidence.

“Devin’s tied up at the moment. If you want to see him, you’ll need to head to the observation room yourself,” the staff answered, unbothered.

Zoie scowled, her irritation evident. "Are you aware that I manage Demi? She's Mr. Mendoza's girlfriend. Is Devin really risking his sponsorship by behaving this way?"

The staff member's brow furrowed with mild frustration. "I'm not sure about that. Devin's in a meeting with—"

Janice's manager and truly can't step away right now."

"Janice?" Zoie let out a derisive scoff. "Who is she, some unknown nobody? How dare she even think of being compared to Demi?"

"I can't say if she's a nobody, but her manager is a Sugden. Oh, and she's from Freak Design."

Chapter 428:

Freak Design? Zoie froze for a moment, caught off guard and confused. A Sugden from Freak Design—could it possibly be Leah? The possibility of such an influential individual prompted the manager to quickly rein in her irritation. Even if it wasn't Leah, the mere mention of Freak Design was enough to demand admiration.

"Let me go check it out."

Containing her annoyance, Zoie followed the directions to the observation room.

At the same time, Demi made her entrance at the villa. Adjusting her outfit and taking a deep breath, she stepped in with an air of elegance. This was her debut in front of the cameras. She needed to leave an impression that would make her online followers adore her even more.

Yet as she entered, her gaze landed on an exceptionally beautiful woman lounging on the sofa, engrossed in a book. Her features were so perfect they seemed like they belonged in a painting.

Demi, intent on making a striking impression, found herself momentarily thrown off.

"A new face?" Janice turned her head to meet her.

When Demi saw Janice's face, the confidence in her own beauty wavered, replaced by an unexpected unease.

"Yes. Am I the second guest here?" Avoiding Janice's eyes, Demi quickly busied herself looking for slippers.

"The slippers are in the cabinet next to you, on the second shelf. The first shelf is likely for the male guests."

"Thanks!" Demi quickly slipped on the slippers and retreated to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water. She composed herself, but a surge of resentment brewed. She had arrived early to command attention, only to have the spotlight stolen by the woman outside.

That flawless image was precisely how Demi envisioned her own appearance.

"I can only count on my manager to ensure the cameras focus on me. If they keep zooming in on her, what hope do I have?"

What Demi didn't realize was that Zoie, upon entering the observation room and spotting Leah, was left utterly stunned and silent. Zoie recognized Leah instantly, knowing her as the president of Freak Design.

Now, the president had arrived, sitting beside Devin. With Leah's presence, Demi's connection to Mr. Mendoza suddenly seemed irrelevant. Even if Mr. Mendoza were standing here, he would have no choice but to show deep respect to Leah.

Zoie had observed Demi's entrance and concluded that Demi's attempt at making an impression had utterly fallen flat, eclipsed by Janice's breathtaking poise.

Demi stood frozen, resembling a fish flung out of water, utterly unremarkable in the moment. Every eye was drawn to Janice instead.

Zoie had intended to request extra camera time for Demi, but a single look at Leah made her scrap the plan entirely. She decided it was safer to lay low—if Leah noticed her and turned against her, the outcome would be impossible to predict.

At that moment, another figure emerged just beyond the set. It was a tall man. He exuded charm with his tall stature, trendy haircut, narrow eyes, and lean legs.

“Devin, Carlton Patterson is here.”

“Really? He came alone? No manager or assistant tagging along?”

“He mentioned that a dating show thrives on genuine connections and guest interactions, and having others around would only be a distraction.”

Devin nodded in complete agreement with Carlton’s perspective.

“Devin, are you implying that we shouldn’t have shown—”

Chapter 429:

Leah’s remark struck a nerve, sending a chill through Devin as he hurried to flash an uneasy smile.

“Ms. Sugden, how could you say that? I’m absolutely delighted to have your oversight on our work.”

“Devin, spare me the flattery. If you find me a hindrance, just say the word, and I’ll leave right away.”

Leah idly played with her nails as she spoke, her nonchalant tone laced with an unspoken warning.

Aware of the subtext, Devin, ever shrewd, didn’t dare take her words at face value and maintained his practiced smile.

“Ms. Sugden, your reputation in the design world is unparalleled. Our art team would greatly value your input. Since the guests will soon introduce themselves, how do you suggest we stage it for maximum impact?”

The idea struck the right chord, stroking Leah’s ego while making her feel actively involved.

Her demeanor softened, her irritation fading as a gleam of interest lit her eyes.

“A self-introduction? Make it a talent showcase. Considering they’re part of the entertainment world, it would be ridiculous for them not to have a talent.”

“Excellent idea. As soon as all the guests are here, I’ll organize it right away.”

Meanwhile, Zoie, still trying to remain invisible, felt a wave of panic sweep over her.

A talent showcase?

Demi’s reputation revolved around her beauty, not talent. If she was required to perform, how could she rely on looks alone? However, Janice’s presence diminished Demi’s appeal. Trying to compete with her beauty would only lead to embarrassment.

Zoie rushed out to send Demi an urgent text.

Demi, clutching her glass of water, had come back to the living room and taken a seat opposite Janice. She had carefully positioned herself facing the door, ensuring she’d be the first person the arriving guests noticed. This tactic was meant to prevent Janice from stealing all the attention.

At that moment, the door swung open.

Demi sprang to her feet, her eyes fixed on the doorway. A tall man entered, and Demi’s face brightened. She moved to intercept him before he could notice Janice.

“Are you here as a participant?”

“I am.” Carlton nodded, his gaze briefly lighting up at Demi’s appearance. He seemed genuinely struck by her beauty.

Pleased with herself, Demi silently celebrated. If she hadn’t stepped in, this man’s first impression might have been Janice instead.

“You’ll find slippers in this cabinet—the top shelf is for men, and the second one is for women.”

“Thanks, that’s very thoughtful of you.” Carlton smiled warmly, clearly appreciating Demi’s gesture.

Feeling triumphant, Demi hurried off to the kitchen.

“Let me grab some coffee for you.”

“That’s kind of you. Thanks.”

Carlton slipped on the provided footwear and strolled into the living room.

As his gaze fell on Janice, his steps faltered briefly, a flicker of astonishment crossing his face.

Chapter 430:

Janice looked up at Carlton, offered a courteous nod, and returned to her reading. Her calm detachment only deepened Carlton’s interest, stirring his curiosity.

While Demi busied herself pouring coffee, Zoie’s message popped up on her phone. Reading about the talent segment, Demi felt a surge of panic.

“What am I supposed to do? I don’t have any talent!”

As Demi fidgeted anxiously, Carlton's voice from the living room made her heart sink even further.

"Hi, I'm Carlton Patterson."

"Janice Edwards. Nice to meet you."

"I noticed you were reading. Was it a novel?"

"Yes, just skimming through."

Hearing their brief conversation sent a surge of alarm through Demi. Carlton striking up a conversation with Janice was unthinkable! Her goal was to dominate the male guests' attention and become the star of the show. No one was going to outshine her.

"Oh no!" Demi cried sharply, letting the cup slip from her grasp.

"What's wrong?" Carlton burst into the kitchen and found Demi crouched on the floor, surrounded by broken cup shards.

"I'm sorry, the coffee was too hot, and it slipped," Demi explained, her voice tinged with regret. Her expression was so pitiful it was difficult not to sympathize.

With a frown of concern, Carlton quickly helped her to her feet. He checked her hands carefully, relieved to find them slightly red but not badly hurt.

"Thank goodness it's nothing serious. I'd hate to feel responsible."

Demi shook her head, her smile bright and carefree. "It's not your fault. I'm just a bit clumsy today."

“Oh, right!” She turned, filled another cup with coffee, and handed it to Carlton.

Holding the cup, Carlton felt a mix of pity and admiration. To him, Demi seemed genuinely kind-hearted and endearing.

Janice watched the scene unfold, noticing a quick flash of cunning in Demi’s eyes. She knew that look all too well. It reminded her of Delilah. Were these women skilled only at playing the victim and acting helpless?

Janice sighed to herself. If not for the chance to get closer to Stephen, she would never have joined a dating reality show. Who could predict the quirky characters she’d meet?

“Janice, do you know where the first-aid kit is?” Carlton and Demi appeared from the kitchen, Demi following him like a loyal puppy, utterly charming.

“In the second drawer of that cabinet,” Janice replied.

Carlton retrieved the first-aid kit from the drawer. “Janice, you’re incredible! You know this place so well, I almost thought you lived here.”

Janice just smiled and went back to her book.

“Demi, let’s get this cleaned up.”

Carlton began treating Demi’s hands with ointment.

“Thank you,” Demi said, her eyes glowing with gratitude as she watched him.

Carlton was handsome and considerate, making him the ideal partner to boost her profile on the show. With reality shows like Love Lab, strong connections between guests often led to viral fame. Carlton was just the ally she needed.