

Wrath 471

Chapter 471:

Until now, the meal had been rather monotonous, but Janice's offer to cook for Stephen suddenly drew everyone's eyes to her.

Aiden, Kenneth, and the other guests all turned their focus to Janice.

Online, viewers watching the live stream debated her intentions and skills.

"Can Janice actually cook? Or is this just for show?"

"Do women like her usually not just sit back and be pampered? Yet here she is, cooking?"

"It must be a stunt for attention! While everyone else dines quietly, she chooses now to cook."

"Let's see what happens! Even if her casserole turns out mediocre, they'll probably still praise it. It's all part of the show."

"Stop guessing! She's cooking for Stephen, and he's no liar."

As anticipation built, Janice positioned herself at the cooking station.

She rolled up her sleeves, donned an apron, and confidently grasped a knife.

"Look at her, already striking a pose!"

"Are you kidding? It's a live show; she's not just posing."

“I’ve been a chef for a decade, and by the way Janice handles that knife, she’s no amateur.”

Professional chefs commenting on the live stream started analyzing Janice’s technique.

Janice then began preparing the ingredients.

She picked up a cucumber and concentrated. The knife in her hand danced, slicing the cucumber into delicate strips.

Her precise knife skills left the audience, both in person and online, in admiration.

Even the chef beside her was taken aback.

Though he prided himself on his knife work, seeing Janice in action made him reconsider his own prowess.

A thought struck the chef.

Janice’s knife handling seemed eerily familiar. He furrowed his brow, racking his brain for a memory of someone with similar skills.

Efficiently, Janice finished with the cucumber and moved on to other ingredients.

Initially, Stephen was impressed by her dexterity, but the choice of ingredients puzzled him.

Casserole typically included lettuce, ham, and eggs, yet Janice opted for cucumber strips and salted egg yolk.

Stephen stared at Janice, astonishment written all over his face. How did she know how to make the casserole he had always cherished?

This dish was a secret known only within his family.

Could this really be just a coincidence?

Then, the sizzling sound of cooking filled the room.

Janice skillfully began to fry the rice, flipping it in the pan until it took on a golden color. A delicious aroma wafted through the air, tantalizing everyone's senses.

"It smells incredible!" Maggie exclaimed, her eyes wide as she inhaled deeply. "I've never smelled casserole like this."

"It truly does." Carlton agreed with a nod. "This aroma is unlike any other casserole I've encountered."

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Demi stayed quiet, but her frequent swallowing didn't go unnoticed; her anticipation for the dish was evident.

Even though the viewers couldn't share in the sensory experience, the guests' reactions were a testament to the dish's appeal.

"They must be exaggerating! How can casserole smell that good?"

"I don't think it's an act. They aren't actors, after all—except for Stephen. The rest are CEOs and singers."

"Don't overlook that both Kenneth and Aiden have a soft spot for Janice. It's only natural they'd seem overly impressed."

"Just hold on for Stephen's opinion."

Once finished, Janice plated the casserole and set it before Stephen.

Recovering from his initial surprise, Stephen eyed the casserole, his expression softening with nostalgia.

“Miss Edwards, have you ever worked as a chef?” the chef asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

Janice met his gaze and shook her head. “I’ve only studied it a bit. I’ve never actually worked as one.”

The chef was taken aback.

Without formal experience, her expertise seemed almost too polished.

Her technique also grew increasingly familiar. She reminded him of the mysterious chef in his memory.

Could it be...?

“Stephen, please try it,” Janice encouraged with a smile, inviting Stephen to taste the dish.

Stephen inhaled deeply, steadying his emotions, then scooped up a spoonful of the casserole.

The smell and appearance stirred memories.

Would it taste as familiar as it looked?

Stephen savored the casserole Janice had prepared, his emotions churning like a tempest within.

The instant the dish touched his tongue, his pupils constricted, and his gaze shot up to meet Janice’s, incredulity written across his features.

“What’s going on? Is Stephen enjoying the food or finding it dreadful?”

“Do you even need to ask? It must be terrible. Stephen even stopped eating.”

“No way! I think he’s stunned by how incredible it is!”

The online viewers watched with bated breath, dissecting Stephen’s every reaction.

They scrutinized his subtle expressions, desperate to determine whether Janice’s casserole was a culinary triumph or disaster.

Janice’s gentle smile radiated tranquility, washing over everyone like a cool summer breeze.

“Can you tell me where you learned to make this casserole?” Stephen’s voice quivered with barely contained emotion.

A flood of memories washed over him. This taste—one he’d resigned himself to never experiencing again—recreated perfectly by a woman he’d encountered only twice on this very show.

Chapter 473:

Janice shook her head. “I made this casserole based on intuition.”

“Impossible!” Stephen’s brow furrowed deeply as he stared at the dish before him, lost in bewilderment. “Even an intuitive recreation couldn’t capture both the taste and recipe so perfectly. This is exactly the same.”

Janice leaned forward, resting her hands on the table’s edge, her eyes meeting Stephen’s with quiet intensity. “Some things are carved into our souls, destined to remain there forever.”

“What do you mean by that?”

With fluid grace, Janice rose from her seat, untied her apron, and laid it gently aside. “It might seem strange to you, but this casserole was born from how I feel about you.”

With graceful poise, she settled back into her seat, lifting her water glass to her lips with measured elegance.

Stephen studied Janice’s profile, an inexplicable sense of recognition blooming stronger in his chest with each passing moment.

Janice’s words echoed through his mind like ripples in still water.

Drawn by an invisible force, he lifted the spoon once more. As he took another bite, that achingly familiar taste enveloped his senses completely.

Delicious! It was beyond mere deliciousness. The flavor was a mirror image of his mother’s cooking.

“It’s confirmed!! Janice’s casserole is absolutely divine! Why else would Stephen go back for seconds?”

“Couldn’t agree more! You can’t fake that look of pure amazement on Stephen’s face. The nostalgia and joy are written all over his expression!”

“While everyone’s debating the quality, I’m sitting here salivating! Just watching Stephen savor each bite is making me hungry!”

The virtual audience had reached their verdict—Janice’s culinary creation was nothing short of masterful.

Though a few dissenting voices lingered in the digital shadows, their criticism stemmed more from envy than honest opinion, their bitter words drowned out by the chorus of praise.

“Leah, I want to try it too,” Prescott said, watching Stephen savor each bite with unbridled enthusiasm, his own mouth watering. “It feels like ages since we’ve had the pleasure of Janice’s cooking.”

Leah’s lips curved into a smile. “We should convince her to prepare us a proper feast sometime.”

“Count me in!!” Costello chimed in.

Meanwhile, Devin began to hype it up.

Janice had proven herself a hidden culinary virtuoso—her seemingly simple casserole had Stephen completely enchanted.

The online buzz surrounding Janice intensified by the minute, her star rising rapidly in the digital sphere. She was on the cusp of becoming the internet’s newest sensation.

Love Lab had barely begun its run, yet it was already capturing hearts and minds across the nation.

Devin could practically taste success on the horizon, his producer’s instincts telling him they had struck gold.

The chef observed Stephen’s rapturous enjoyment with growing professional curiosity. Just how deep did Janice’s culinary prowess run?

Chapter 474:

Something about her technique stirred a memory within him.

His eyes caught the remaining casserole in the pan, and without hesitation, he helped himself to a taste.

“Delicious!” The chef’s eyes widened with sudden recognition as he stared at Janice, his world tilting on its axis.

For a heartbeat, Janice's figure blurred before him, merging with the shadowy silhouette of a legendary master chef he'd once known.

"Could it be that you are...?"

Janice's serene expression crystallized into something sharp, her eyes flashing a silent warning. The chef, seasoned in reading subtle cues, caught her signal and let his words die in his throat.

Relief softened Janice's features as she watched him fall silent, and she offered the barest of nods in acknowledgment.

That tiny gesture sent electricity coursing through the chef's veins.

It was true then—Janice was the mysterious chef! His mind reeled at the revelation. The legendary chef who had nearly ascended to culinary godhood was standing before him.

Drawing a steadying breath, the chef struggled to contain the thundering of his heart. His culinary idol, once a distant star, now stood within arm's reach.

His gaze followed Janice with newfound reverence, his expression mystifying the oblivious onlookers.

"Wow, Janice's cooking skills are really impressive," Maggie observed, noticing the yearning look the chef directed at Janice's creation. "When a renowned chef showers such praise on her cooking, this casserole must be extraordinary."

"If only I could sample it!"

Maggie wasn't alone in her fascination; Kenneth too found himself tempted.

But the show's strict guidelines stood firm—stealing even the smallest taste remained forbidden.

Aiden's gaze lingered on the casserole before Stephen. A revelation dawned on him about Janice's hidden depths.

She possessed talents far beyond his initial assessment, particularly in the culinary arts—a skill that had completely escaped his notice.

The casserole's mere presence spoke volumes about its exquisite taste.

Aiden glanced down at his steak, finding it suddenly lackluster. His thoughts fixated on sampling just one morsel of Janice's creation.

Stephen savored the casserole in reverent silence. Tears threatened to spill as emotions surged through him. Were it not for the rolling cameras, his composure might have crumbled entirely.

Each bite transported him back through two decades of memories.

The familiar taste felt almost surreal, like stepping into a cherished dream.

After savoring the final mouthful, Stephen released a heartfelt sigh and met Janice's gaze. "Thank you."

With her characteristic gentle smile, Janice responded, "You're welcome. I'm delighted I could bring you joy."

Stephen hesitated, puzzlement crossing his features. "You seem remarkably attuned to my preferences. We've only met once or twice."

"Don't misunderstand," Janice replied, a hint of mirth dancing in her eyes. "You're handsome and famous, but my interest isn't romantic."

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Stephen felt a wave of relief wash over him.

Though Janice possessed an ethereal beauty that surpassed any woman he'd encountered, his connection to her stirred something deeper—a puzzling sense of familiarity that kept romantic notions at bay.

"There's something I'd like to discuss with you, Stephen."

"Mm-hmm?"

Janice's lips curved into a meaningful smile. "If you're available later, shall we meet at the pavilion in the yard?"

"The live stream won't run continuously. We should have some free time once this segment wraps up."

As someone constantly in the public eye, Stephen understood the delicate nature of being seen alone with a female contestant on camera.

He had no intention of subjecting Janice to unnecessary speculation.

"Alright." Stephen nodded in agreement.

He, too, harbored questions that needed answering.

As their meal drew to a close, Devin's voice resonated through the loudspeaker. "I hope everyone's satisfied with their meal."

The words had barely left his mouth when Daniel burst through the door, his appearance disheveled. Sweat drenched his clothes, making him look even more unkempt than usual.

"What do you mean satisfied? I haven't had a single bite! How could I possibly be full?" Daniel's protest echoed through the room, his dignity forgotten. "I've circled this entire villa twice! I'm exhausted! Are you trying to make me collapse from hunger?"

The other guests turned to Daniel, their expressions a mix of disapproval and disbelief at his unseemly state.

The man truly had no sense of decorum.

His sweat-drenched appearance seemed almost deliberate, as if he thought it added to his masculine appeal.

“Come on! I’m so sick, I’m going to vomit,” a comment said.

“Someone needs to tell Daniel that his desperate attention-seeking is suffocating to watch.”

“The way he carries himself is borderline nauseating. Does he actually believe this makes him look masculine?”

The stream’s comment section erupted with mockery.

The representatives from Daniel’s talent agency, including his manager, watched in horror as their meticulously crafted public image crumbled before their eyes.

The inevitable damage control would cost them dearly, both in resources and reputation.

“Mr. Chadwick, someone bursting with such vitality hardly seems at risk of hunger,” Devin’s voice cut through the air with razor-sharp disdain.

Though Devin held only the title of director, the presence of several influential figures among the guests bolstered his position. Their silent backing ensured Daniel would think twice before challenging his authority.

“Rest assured. Should you actually succumb to low blood sugar, our professional medical team stands ready to intervene.”

The threat to Daniel's health might be nonexistent, but his pride was another matter entirely.

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"How can you even think of food right now with rage, but one glance at Aiden's and Kenneth's commanding presence made his protests die in his throat.

Devin continued, "Alright, let's proceed with room assignments based on the earlier support rankings."

Devin announced, "Stephen and Janice, our first-place winners, will be accommodated in two separate suites on the second floor. Aiden and Maggie, who placed second, will each have a single room also on the second floor. All other participants will be assigned rooms on the first floor. The rooms on the first floor are the same. Please feel free to pick any room that you prefer. We will now take a two-hour break, and the live stream will temporarily be paused. Please gather in the yard outside after the break."

Once Devin finished his announcements, he switched off the loudspeaker.

A collective sigh of relief was heard as the live stream stopped.

With a two-hour break, the production team handed back personal phones, allowing everyone some time to catch up on work or personal matters.

The moment Daniel received his phone, he was about to place an order for takeout when his agent called him.

"Daniel, this is serious! You're destroying the both of us!"

"Karl, what do you mean? Forget it, just bring me some food. I'm starving!"

"How can you even think of food right now? You're all over the internet! Everyone's talking about you!"

Daniel paused for a second, then smirked, stretched out his long legs, and casually placed them on the table.

“Are they admiring my perfect form, then? Consider it a gift to them and a showcase of what true fitness looks like.”

Karl found himself speechless. He had not anticipated the level of pride Daniel exhibited. Daniel seemed entirely unaware of the irritation his actions were causing others.

Karl took a deep breath, fighting the urge to curse, and said, “If you want to continue in the entertainment industry, you better hear my advice.”

“What?” Daniel responded with a frown, clearly annoyed.

“What’s with your tone? I’m the talk of the town, and you think you can threaten me?”

Karl felt a strong desire to shout out his frustrations! “If you think I’m threatening you, just take a look at your Twitter.”

After saying that, he ended the call.

“Daniel, you’re such a fool! If it weren’t for my reputation as a top agent, I wouldn’t tolerate your shenanigans!” Karl vented aloud, feeling somewhat relieved after expressing his anger.

Now, he just needed to wait for Daniel to see the gossip on Twitter and recognize his mistakes before they could move forward.

Expecting to find admiration, Daniel opened his Twitter. Instead, the trending topics about him left him shocked.

#DanielAwkwardPhysique

#DanielUnmatchedNarcissism

#DanielOverlySelfIndulgent

“What’s all this about?” Daniel’s eyes widened as he scanned the trending topics, quickly realizing they brought bad news.

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He clicked on a trending topic, and as he read through the comments, he could feel his anger rising.

“Ha-ha, Daniel is so funny! While he can be a bit cringy and self-centered, he’s definitely the comic relief of the show.”

“Any takers for Daniel’s awkward physique? Count me out.”

“There’s no denying Daniel’s dedication though.”

Upon reading this comment, Daniel felt a slight sense of relief, comforted by the thought that someone still valued his efforts. However, his embarrassment grew as he continued reading.

“What an idiot, yet he tries so hard only to look so ugly. That’s tough.”

“Screw you! Can’t you ever say anything nice?”

In a fit of rage, Daniel hurled his phone across the room.

He was now convinced that the internet was unanimously insulting him, labeling him unattractive, foolish, and excessively self-centered.

Public opinion was quickly getting out of hand, threatening to shatter the image he had carefully built over the years.

Trying to contain his fury, Daniel redialed Karl.

“Daniel, did you see what they’re saying?”

“Karl, what’s happening? Why is all the gossip about me so negative?”

Karl’s lips twitched. Hadn’t Daniel seen it all? How could he still be so ignorant as to ask why?

“Over the years, we’ve built your image as a fitness enthusiast with a cheerful demeanor. However, a single live stream has undone all the hard work we put into crafting your public image,” Karl explained.

“Karl, is someone targeting me?”

Karl had little patience left for this fool. Even now, Daniel failed to see that he was to blame.

“Do you understand why there weren’t problems previously? Because past shows were not live; they could be edited to fix mistakes. Now that it’s all live, every word and action of yours is out in the open. The damage to your reputation is done. What we need to focus on now is how to recover from this,” Karl explained further.

“What should I do now?”

“There are two things you must do. First, be more careful with what you say and do; don’t be as carefree as you’ve been. Second, make an effort to connect with Janice.”

Daniel stared at his phone, his mind struggling to process Karl’s demands. “The first thing, I can understand, but the second? I don’t think it’ll be easy. Janice has both Aiden and Kenneth hovering around her like hawks. What chance do I have?”

“If there’s no chance, then create one,” Karl snapped, his words sharp with urgency. “Unless you’re ready to wave goodbye to showbiz and go back home.”

“I’ll figure something out. But why does it have to be Janice? There are other female guests.” The thought of returning to the family business made Daniel’s skin crawl. He lived for the spotlight, the thrill of the chase. Going back meant trading his freedom for endless boardroom meetings.

“Because Janice is the most talked-about. Pull off a media sensation with her, and we might just save your image. The company can spin it into a bold, refreshing narrative — exactly what we need to counter the current mess.”

Karl silently prayed Daniel would grasp the obvious. If this didn’t click, his client’s career was as good as dead.

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To his relief, Daniel wasn’t completely dense. He could still recognize a lifeline when he saw one.

“Fine, I’ll do it.”

After hanging up, Daniel dove into social media, searching for anything related to Janice.

What he found made him whistle low — the gap between their public images was like a canyon.

Every mention of Janice dripped with adoration.

#BeautyGuestOnLoveLab

#JanicesCasserole

#JaniceAidenKennethLoveTriangle

“Is she really that big of a deal?” Daniel’s frown melted into a sly grin as he pictured Janice. “Well, since the company insists, I suppose I can throw her a bone. And if she happens to fall for my charms? Poor Aiden and Kenneth won’t know what hit them.”

Pleased with himself, Daniel let out a laugh that echoed through his empty room.

Demi shuddered at the sound of Daniel’s laughter. Whatever scheme her neighbor was cooking up, it couldn’t be good.

Sunlight streamed through the balcony doors of Janice’s room, casting warm patterns across the elegant furnishings. The outdoor view and natural light gave the space an airy, peaceful quality.

Just as Janice finished arranging her belongings and turned to leave for her meeting at the garden pavilion, a gentle knock echoed through the room.

Opening the door, she found Aiden standing there, his expression clouded with unspoken thoughts.

“Aiden, can I help you with something?”

“Janice, are you planning to tell Stephen the truth?” The question caught her off guard, but she recovered with a rueful smile.

“You figured that out, did you?”

Aiden’s lips tightened. Of course he did. He’d watched her intently during the cooking session, cataloging every micro-expression, every subtle furrow of her brow.

“I think you should wait and observe the situation longer,” he advised.

Janice shook her head. “I’ve confirmed that Stephen does not voluntarily rely on Wendy. And you saw his reaction to the casserole—that’s not the response of someone who doesn’t care about family.”

“What if it’s all an act?” Though Janice’s logic seemed sound, uncertainty lingered in Aiden’s tone. “We still don’t know the full story of what happened back then. Coming clean now might stir up more trouble than it solves. Remember, Wendy has been there for years, nurturing him into the star he is today. That kind of bond isn’t easily broken.”

Janice studied Aiden’s worried expression, his concern for her as palpable as sunlight on skin. Her heart fluttered at the intensity of his care—it burned bright as flame, impossible to dismiss.

“I understand,” she said softly, then gave a wistful smile. “You know, I thought after the Edwards family’s betrayal, I’d grown numb to all this. But discovering Stephen is my only living family makes my heart race with possibilities.”

She lifted her gaze to meet Aiden’s, sincerity burning in her eyes. “Thank you for watching out for me. I promise to think carefully about how and when to tell him.”

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Relief softened Aiden’s features as he watched clarity return to Janice’s eyes.

“No need for thanks. After all, we’re practically family.”

Janice started to protest, but thoughts of Nina’s maternal warmth gave her pause. Perhaps ‘family’ wasn’t so far from the truth.

“Aiden, this is for you.”

“Hmm?” Surprise flickered across Aiden’s face as Janice extended a lunchbox towards him. “What’s this?”

Janice pressed a finger to her lips in a playful warning. “I saved this portion especially for you.”

Aiden’s eyes lit up. She’d saved this specifically for him? “Keep it under wraps. It would be rather difficult to explain otherwise.”

“Alright.” Aiden tucked away the lunchbox, warmth blooming in his chest.

At that moment, Stephen emerged from the neighboring room, his steps faltering at the sight of them by the doorway.

“Stephen, please wait for me in the pavilion,” Janice called out with natural ease.

“Okay.”

Janice slipped into some comfortable home attire, her demeanor entirely relaxed. It was as if she truly belonged there. Stephen, observing her, momentarily felt more like a visitor in her space.

“You seem quite at home, Janice.”

Arriving at the pavilion, Janice took a seat opposite him. The space between them was perfectly balanced—not too intimate, yet not too remote—establishing a comfort zone for both.

“Despite being on a show, we still decide how we approach the filming.” Janice looked up just in time to notice the chef approaching with a tray.

The chef greeted Janice with a smile and respectfully set the tray on the pavilion’s stone table.

This gesture caught Stephen off guard, and he wasn’t the only one surprised; the production team was equally perplexed.

“What’s happening with Aaron?” Devin said, his brow furrowed in confusion. “This wasn’t in the plans, was it?”

“It seems Aaron holds Janice in high regard,” a crew member remarked, taken aback. “Ever since that casserole she made, his attitude towards her has changed dramatically.”

Devin rubbed his chin, puzzled. All he could deduce was a chef's admiration for another's culinary prowess. "Let's not worry. Aaron is our special guest. As long as he doesn't disrupt the shoot, it's fine."

Leah's lips curled into a smile. The others might not have grasped Aaron Wright's change of heart, but she understood it clearly.

Aaron had likely discovered Janice's credentials as a chef, which explained his newfound respect.

Leah recalled Janice's earlier words. "Being skilled is always an advantage; one day, these skills will ease your path."

In the pavilion, Aaron had already prepared the table and brewed coffee.

"Janice, this chef seems to treat you with more warmth than us," Stephen noted, his tone mixed with curiosity and a slight challenge.

Janice offered a serene smile. "He was taken by my casserole and wanted to share tips. It seems we have a mutual respect as fellow chefs."

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Stephen nodded, choosing not to delve deeper.

"Ms. Edwards, this is a premium coffee blend, ideally brewed at the perfect temperature," Aaron explained, his smile a marked change from his previously stern expression.

"Thank you," Janice responded. "You can return to your duties. I'll manage from here."

"Enjoy," Aaron replied with a respectful bow before stepping back discreetly.

Janice took her time, skillfully preparing the coffee.

Before long, the refreshing scent of coffee filled the air, capturing even Stephen's attention, who typically did not care for coffee.

"This coffee is truly outstanding."

Janice smiled, placing a cup before Stephen. "Give it a try."

Stephen lifted the cup, the inviting aroma surrounding him. The coffee's deep, velvety hue promised a rich taste without any bitterness. Even before his first sip, he was impressed.

The coffee's smooth, rich flavor washed over him as he drank, a comforting warmth spreading through his body.

"It's delicious," he admitted.

"If you like it, I can get you more," Janice suggested.

"This is your coffee?" Stephen asked, taken aback. He had thought the coffee was provided by the show, not realizing it was supplied by Janice herself.

"I enjoy several hobbies—listening to music, savoring coffee, and occasionally wine tasting. They keep life interesting."

Stephen's eyes lit up, filled with admiration for Janice's free-spirited approach to life, a lifestyle he longed to embrace. However, reflecting on his own life brought a hint of bitterness to his expression.

"Do you have something on your mind?" Janice inquired, her eyebrow arching curiously.

"To be honest, I envy your lifestyle. Unfortunately, I'm tied down by too many responsibilities, so such dreams remain just that—dreams."

“But you’re an award-winning actor, successful and renowned. Why can’t you live as you wish?” Janice probed.

Stephen paused, lifted the coffee cup, and downed it in one go. The warmth did little to soothe his inner unrest, leaving a bitter taste lingering.

“Being an award-winning actor might seem glamorous, but it’s not what I truly desire.” He sighed, the bitterness clear in his tone. “People see my achievements and think I’ve found fame and fortune, but in reality, I’m just a pawn in someone else’s scheme.”

Realizing he might have shared too much, Stephen offered an awkward smile. “Please forgive my outburst. Consider it a mere jest, and don’t take it to heart.”

“Yet I am concerned,” Janice said, her frown deepening as she fixed her gaze on Stephen.

The moment Stephen’s eyes met Janice’s piercing gaze, his heart faltered, a flutter of uncertainty passing through him. Something about Janice’s penetrating stare made him feel like a child caught in mischief, though he couldn’t quite explain why.

Her eyes held a haunting familiarity, transporting him back to his mother’s warm, understanding gaze. They mirrored the same look his mother would give him whenever he stumbled in his youth—a perfect blend of concern and unconditional love.