

Wrath 981

Chapter 981:

“Fine. But just so you know, I have no patience for nonsense. You can sit with me, but don’t talk to me,” Lancelot grumbled, shooting the envoys a warning glance.

The envoys’ expressions stiffened. This was supposed to be an opportunity to strengthen ties with Aerith’s royal family, yet Lancelot’s cold dismissal made it clear that bridge wouldn’t be built so easily.

“The Delgados from Efrery have arrived!”

“The governor of Cloverhill has arrived!”

Kenneth’s arrival was expected—Janice would have been more surprised if he hadn’t come.

Given his personality, there was no way he’d miss a gathering of this scale.

But the governor? That was unexpected.

Janice’s gaze flickered towards Minnie, who simply smirked and raised her glass. The silent gesture made her message crystal clear—this was her doing. Another power play, another pillar of support for Janice.

“Dad, what the hell is happening?” Calvin’s whisper was laced with frustration. “First Prince Lancelot, then the envoys from Cherriton, and now even the governor? They’re making a mockery of us!”

Mateo’s face was thunderous, his jaw clenched so tight it looked like he was grinding his teeth to dust.

What had begun as a quiet, ordinary banquet had now turned into a battlefield of influence. And it was painfully obvious who was winning. Prestigious figures—ones even the powerful Welch family struggled to court—were now flocking to Janice’s side. It was a slap in the face, a public humiliation the Welch family hadn’t seen coming.

To make matters worse, Mateo's sharp eyes caught a few of their own guests discreetly slipping away, leaving the Welch family's side to join Janice's banquet instead.

"It seems we've underestimated JE and MO's pull," Mateo muttered, rubbing his temples as frustration gnawed at him. "But this game isn't over yet..."

Before Mateo could finish, a figure's appearance left him utterly dumbfounded.

"Mr. Vance?"

Gasps of surprise rippled through the crowd at the sight of Herbert.

With Aiden by his side, Herbert made his way towards Janice's banquet at an unhurried pace.

"Mr. Vance, what an unexpected honor!" Janice quickly stepped forward, helping Aiden steady the elderly man, who was well into his eighties.

"I was simply curious to see what kind of woman had captured Aiden's heart. He is, after all, the grandson of an old friend of mine." Herbert patted Janice's hand with a warm smile. "You look like you'll make a fine wife."

Janice's cheeks flushed, and without thinking, she stole a glance at Aiden. Aiden smirked. Was Janice actually flustered? Did that glance mean she was already imagining their future?

"Well, to keep things simple, I'll complete the writing I promised you right here," Herbert announced.

That single statement sent a wave of shock through the crowd.

The Welch family members' faces darkened in an instant.

They had gone to great lengths to acquire a single writing from Herbert, yet here he was, attending Janice's banquet in person and casually offering to write for her on the spot.

Chapter 982:

The favoritism couldn't have been more obvious.

"Ah, Kern, you're here too," Herbert said, his eyes lighting up at the sight of an old friend.

Kern Haywood, the governor of Cloverhill, strode forward, offering a respectful nod as he greeted Herbert. "I came here just out of curiosity, wanting to see what this so-called nouveau riche of Cloverhill looks like. Turns out, she's truly extraordinary."

He studied Janice with an intrigued expression, surprised by what he saw.

At first, Minnie had convinced him to attend as a courtesy to the Payne family. He had planned to take a glance and slip away.

But now, he found himself not only staying for a drink but fully engaging—Janice was far more intriguing than he had expected.

Even Prince Lancelot and the Cherriton envoys were present.

"Ha! Now this is getting interesting!"

Just then, another lively voice cut through the air.

All heads swiveled to the newcomer, and once more, shock rippled through the room. "Nolan?"

"No way! How is this even happening? Isn't Nolan's schedule packed solid? He never accepts banquet invitations!"

Gasps rippled through the crowd as Nolan strolled toward Janice's banquet, turning heads with every step.

With Nolan—the legendary pianist, second only to the elusive RAIN—gracing the hall, Helen's performance faded into the background, its brilliance overshadowed.

Even Helen, a star in her own right, had to acknowledge the gravity of Nolan's presence.

"Nolan, you sure took your sweet time!" Lancelot teased, stepping forward the moment he heard of Nolan's arrival. "I've been dying to hear you play!"

"Oh, come on, you're messing with me." Nolan let out a light chuckle, shaking his head. "I'm not here to perform today."

A collective sigh of relief swept through the onlookers. Of course, Janice must have pleaded endlessly to get Nolan to attend. There was no way she had enough influence to draw such powerful figures on her own.

"I came to learn from RAIN."

Silence fell over the hall. Shock registered on every face.

They had assumed that Janice had gone to great lengths to invite Nolan, but things went against their expectations. What did he mean by "learn from RAIN"?

Could it be that RAIN was actually here?

Dear heavens! The enigmatic maestro, the one no amount of wealth or status could lure, was about to perform here?

Meanwhile, at Mateo's banquet, Helen's fingers froze mid-performance. Without a second thought, she rushed outside, her heels clicking urgently against the floor.

“Nolan, you’re not joking, are you?” Helen’s voice trembled with excitement.

“RAIN is actually coming? And performing live? That’s insane!”

“Well, well, Helen, fancy running into you here.” Nolan arched an eyebrow, his tone playful. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“NO, no, you’d never joke about RAIN!” Helen shook her head fervently, all traces of her usual elegance slipping away. “I’ve idolized RAIN for years! Just meeting her would be an honor, let alone hearing her play in person.”

Chapter 983:

“Helen!” Calvin’s face darkened as he shot her a cold glare. “Did you forget you’re here as my guest?”

“Mr. Welch, I truly apologize.” Helen dipped her head respectfully. “I know this is out of line, but I just can’t pass up the chance to meet my idol. I’ll compensate you double for the performance fee.”

Calvin’s face twisted with displeasure. Did she really think this was just about money?

This was about the Welch family’s pride being stomped into the dirt.

Just moments ago, Mateo had been basking in pride. Now, all that remained was sheer humiliation.

He never imagined things would spiral into something this absurd.

“Well, with all this excitement, I guess I have no choice but to step up, huh?” The moment those words left her lips, every head in the room snapped to Janice.

“Wait. Did she just say she’s going to perform? Does that mean...?”

“No way! This is beyond insane!”

“Hold on! She’s JE, right? And a top-tier surgeon, MO. And now she’s saying she’s RAIN too?”

“I mean, it sounds absolutely crazy, but given that she’s already JE and MO, is it really that far-fetched?”

It was almost impossible to wrap their heads around the idea that all these legendary personas belonged to a single woman.

Yet Janice stood there, calm and unassuming, not the least bit pretentious.

A slow, knowing smile played on Janice’s lips as she met Mateo’s gaze. Then, in the softest yet most earth-shattering voice, she said, “You guessed right. I am RAIN.”

A challenge. Unapologetic. Undeniable.

Mateo’s eyes darkened. His grip tightened around the wine glass until it shattered in his palm.

“No way! This has to be a joke!”

Alissa stood frozen, her whole world tilting off balance. She was the Welch heiress, raised to be poised, untouchable. Janice, with her lowly origins, should have been nothing more than a shadow beneath her feet. But now, the script had flipped in the cruelest way possible.

One by one, Janice’s hidden talents surfaced, each revelation slashing through Alissa’s pride like a blade.

If Janice had only been JE, or even the elusive master MO, Alissa could have swallowed that bitter pill. She’d still have her title, her place, her pride. But Janice wasn’t just talented; she was a legend. The world knew her as RAIN, a piano virtuoso of international fame.

That made her a force of nature—brilliant in every arena, unstoppable. Faced with such overwhelming talent, Alissa felt utterly insignificant—reduced to nothing more than a name, a title, a hollow claim to prestige.

“You must be lying!” Alissa jabbed a finger at Janice, her voice sharp with desperation. “The Payne family must have paid all these people to stage this ridiculous act!”

“Ms. Welch, please show some respect.” Minnie stepped forward, her gaze cold, slicing through Alissa like a blade. “We don’t have the kind of pull to gather so many prestigious figures just for a charade. Prince Lancelot, the envoys from Cherriton, and Mr. Fletcher all showed up of their own free will.”

Nolan’s expression darkened as his gaze settled on Alissa. “Janice, who is this woman? And why does she think she can challenge your identity?”

Chapter 984:

“She’s Alissa Welch, the Welch heiress. A fancy title, sure. But she’s not the sharpest. She actually believes I hired you all to play pretend and fake my identity.” Janice’s voice was gentle, yet it carried through the room, each word slicing through the Welch family’s pride like a well-aimed dagger.

“What?” Nolan arched a brow, his gaze dripping with amusement. “Well then, I suppose all doubts will vanish the moment you play, won’t they?”

Laughter rippled through the crowd, the sheer absurdity of Alissa’s accusation too entertaining to ignore.

It was a simple truth—so obvious, yet Alissa failed to see it. Hardly befitting someone who wore the Welch name.

Mateo’s expression hardened, while Calvin and Jensen exchanged uneasy glances. If only they could erase Alissa from the moment.

Though disbelief gripped them, they kept their composure, carefully choosing their words and holding back anything reckless.

But Alissa had thrown reason to the wind, spiraling into blind denial.

“Dad, you have to believe me! This is all fake!” Alissa clung to Mateo’s sleeve, her fingers trembling.

“Janice is just some nobody from the countryside! There’s no way she’s all these people. No way she’s JE or master MO! It has to be a lie!”

“That’s enough!” Mateo’s hand shot up, delivering a sharp slap across Alissa’s face. “Do you have any idea how much disgrace you’ve brought upon us?”

Alissa stood frozen, shock widening her eyes.

“Dad, you hit me? How could you? She’s the one dragging our family’s name through the mud!”

“Keep this madness up, and the only one destroying our name will be you. Get her out of here.”

“Dad, no!” Alissa shrieked, thrashing against the firm grip of the bodyguards as they hauled her away.

Onlookers exchanged amused glances, their eyes brimming with scorn for the Welch family.

The Welch family had basked in the limelight, showered with admiration, but no one expected Janice to drop one revelation after another, tearing their reputation to shreds. And Alissa was so overwhelmed that she completely lost it.

“Please, everyone, take your seats.” Janice’s voice was poised, carrying effortlessly over the murmuring crowd. “As a token of appreciation for your presence, allow me to perform a piece for you all.”

“Incredible! We came expecting RAIN’s music, but we got to witness her true identity too. This is an honor!”

“I’ve spent countless moments wondering what breathtaking beauty might be hidden beneath RAIN’s mask, but now that I’ve seen RAIN’s true face, I realize my imagination didn’t even come close.”

“Who would’ve thought? RAIN is Janice. What a remarkable surprise!”

Awe rippled through the crowd. Learning that Janice was not only RAIN but also JE and MO left them completely dumbfounded.

The elite guests who had hesitated at the sidelines now surged toward Janice’s banquet. Though the Welch family’s influence loomed over them, Janice’s radiance was simply too blinding to ignore, drawing them in despite the risk.

Guests who had initially pledged their presence to the Welch family’s event now scrambled for excuses to leave, eager to align themselves with Janice’s celebration instead. In mere moments, the Welch family’s grandeur crumbled while Janice’s banquet flourished.

Chapter 985:

A soft, ethereal piano melody drifted through the air, washing over the crowd like a gentle tide. On stage, Janice sat at the piano, poised like a goddess, her fingers weaving magic into each note, mesmerizing everyone.

“Aiden, your beloved is a marvel,” Herbert mused from his seat below the stage, a warm, knowing smile softening his aged features as the melody embraced the room. “From what I know of your grandfather, if he ever met Janice, he’d adore her instantly.”

Aiden’s lips curved into a soft smile as he lifted his glass of red wine. He swirled it in sync with the music, the ripples in the liquid reflecting the tide of emotions surging within him—each wave stirred by Janice.

As Janice illuminated the stage with her brilliance, Aiden’s gaze softened, overflowing with a love so intense and unguarded, it seemed to shimmer in the dim light.

Tonight, Janice had cast aside every veil of pretense, revealing the raw, untamed brilliance that was hers alone.

She sat on stage like a celestial vision, captivating the room as if the very stars had descended to applaud her radiance.

And yet despite the admiration of the world, this luminous, breathtaking woman was his and his alone.

Minnie took a slow sip of her wine, the melody washing over her, but her eyes never wavered from Aiden.

The way Aiden looked at Janice—his gaze ablaze with devotion—was so searing that Minnie felt its heat reach her, burning something deep within.

It was as if Aiden had forged a wall of fire around himself, an inferno of passion that allowed only one person through—Janice, the very spark that set it ablaze. A sharp pang of bitterness settled in Minnie's chest. She had never found a man worth her gaze—until now.

But fate had played a cruel hand. The one man who had finally drawn her in had already given his heart away. No amount of refinement, no level of perfection, could make him turn her way.

"When you love someone, the rest of the world fades away. Maybe that's just how it's meant to be," she murmured.

"Tricia, is something wrong?" Picking up on Minnie's somber mood, Tricia spoke with gentle reassurance. "You're incredible. If Aiden can't see that, then it's his loss, not yours."

Minnie shot her a glance, lips curving wryly. "Tricia, you're not mocking me, are you?"

Tricia hesitated, realizing her misstep. She forced a sheepish smile. "Janice is truly exceptional, but everyone has their own strengths."

In truth, she struggled to finish her sentence.

Because Janice wasn't just talented—she was exceptional in every way, leaving no space for comparison.

"I know you're just looking out for me, but I know my own limits," Minnie murmured, exhaling softly before taking a sip of her drink. "Still, I don't want to back down. I want to try."

"That's the spirit! You've never lost before, and this won't be any different." Minnie remained silent, her gaze drifting back to Janice on stage. A cold, bitter smile appeared on her lips.

Never lost? Tonight alone, she had been defeated by Janice over and over—both in ways that could be seen and in ways that couldn't.

Chapter 986:

Even her position as the Payne family's future heir, a title steeped in prestige, felt insignificant before the weight of Janice's hidden identities. What was inherited status compared to the brilliance of true accomplishment?

As the final note faded into silence, Janice rose gracefully and bowed, a vision of poise and elegance.

The banquet hall buzzed with energy, every seat nearly filled, creating an atmosphere of prestige and excitement. Meanwhile, the Welch family's birthday banquet, once the center of attention, now felt eerily subdued.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I sincerely thank you all for being here. I am Janice Edwards from Efrery, and tonight marks the grand opening of my journey in Cloverhill. Let us raise our glasses—I eagerly anticipate your guidance and support in the days to come."

"Ms. Edwards, with your talent and influence, carving out a place for yourself in Cloverhill will be effortless."

"May your success in Cloverhill be boundless, and may we all thrive alongside you."

“Ms. Edwards, there’s something that has been on my mind for quite some time. May I ask for your clarification?”

Just then, a noble family’s representative rose to his feet, his gaze steady as he directed a question at Janice. “Of course, feel free to ask.”

“The invitations we received were unsigned, so tell us, under what identity are you making your entrance into Cloverhill?”

A ripple of murmurs spread through the crowd, for the question mirrored the curiosity lingering in many minds.

“Allow me to respond to that,” Herbert said, rising from his seat. Though his frame was slightly bent with age, his very presence commanded respect, compelling the crowd to quiet down at once.

Aiden stood as well, steadying Herbert as they made their way toward the stage.

Meanwhile, the Welch family’s guests shifted their focus entirely, their once-celebrated banquet now a forgotten affair.

Seething with unspent fury, they clung to every word, their attention sharpening the moment they heard Janice was about to unveil her true identity in Cloverhill.

“Calvin, any word from your uncle?”

“I just checked—he’s in place and awaiting orders.”

Mateo’s eyes narrowed, his entire being exuding a dangerous aura. “Janice, I had planned for fireworks to mark my birthday, but instead, I think I’ll set the sky ablaze as your farewell.”

Just then, Herbert took his place on stage, a fresh sheet of paper before him. The crowd’s anticipation surged, and many discreetly pulled out their phones, eager to capture this historic moment.

Herbert had long withdrawn from public appearances, and his writing pieces were considered treasures. Yet today, he was here, poised to pen something for Janice—an honor beyond measure.

With a steady hand, Herbert lifted the pen, pressing the first stroke onto the pristine sheet.

In that very moment, something shifted—his once-bent frame straightened, his presence radiating newfound vigor, as though he had been reborn.

The crowd fell silent, struck with awe as the old adage suddenly made perfect sense.

“Each stroke of a master’s pen carries their very soul, becoming a timeless masterpiece that breathes with life and meaning.”

Chapter 987:

What once seemed like mere poetic exaggeration now stood before them as undeniable truth—Herbert was living proof.

Herbert exhaled deeply, then set down his pen with a deliberate flourish. “It’s been a while since I wrote with such focus. It seems I’ve still got it.” Herbert’s words were a subtle jab at the Welch family, suggesting that the birthday gift for Mateo was merely perfunctory.

“Thank you, Mr. Vance,” Janice said, her smile genuine.

Herbert acknowledged her with a dignified nod, and with Aiden’s assistance, he returned to his seat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe you’re all eager to know what Mr. Vance has written for me. And you’re probably wondering how this piece of writing relates to my settlement in Cloverhill.” Janice’s tone carried a tantalizing hint of mystery. “But before I reveal it, I need to ask someone to join me, because tonight is all about him.”

A ripple of bewilderment passed through the gathering.

Janice, with her constellation of illustrious identities, wasn't the central figure of the banquet?

Who could possibly eclipse her significance?

"Stephen, it's your time to shine!" Janice called out, her gaze fixed on the entrance, anticipation illuminating her features.

All eyes followed her line of sight to behold a man approaching in an immaculate white suit, his demeanor exuding confidence and refinement.

Mateo's composure disintegrated. A violent tremor coursed through his body, his pupils contracting to pinpoints of unbridled rage.

"That bastard! I never expected Janice to orchestrate this entire event for him."

Stephen met the curious stares with unwavering resolve.

Though he had been nervous earlier, Wendy's encouraging words had erased any trace of it.

"Stephen, you're here for revenge. Tonight's banquet is your first step in declaring war on the Welch family."

Indeed, the sole purpose of tonight's gathering was to challenge the Welch family.

Stephen carried the weight of hatred and the loss of a hundred lives from the White family. There was no room for stage fright—plus, his sister had paved the way, standing as a bulwark against ridicule and doubt. How could he possibly let her down?

With this resolve burning within him, Stephen stood straighter and stepped confidently into the spotlight.

“Stephen, show it to the audience,” Janice urged, passing Stephen the piece of writing, her eyes alight with fierce determination. “From tonight onwards, the name of the White family will resonate throughout Cloverhill.”

“Yes.” Stephen nodded with resolute purpose, then turned to reveal the words Herbert had so carefully penned.

White Family!

The simple yet powerful words seemed to carve themselves into the collective consciousness of all present.

“The White family?”

“The one systematically eradicated by the Welch family all those years ago?”

“This is interesting! The White family was annihilated by the Welch family for reasons unknown, and now, after all these years, they’re back in Cloverhill. This is a declaration of war against the Welch family!”

Chapter 988:

Kern’s brow furrowed, concern etching lines across his face as he contemplated the implications.

He recognized the formidable forces backing Janice tonight, yet the Welch family was hardly defenseless. A clash between these powers could plunge Cloverhill into chaos.

“Mr. Haywood, the Payne family will keep vigilant watch to prevent any escalation,” Minnie offered, noticing the concern etched across Kern’s features. “With the strength Janice has demonstrated, the Welch family wouldn’t dare repeat their mistakes from twenty years ago.”

“Indeed.” Kern sighed, taking a thoughtful sip from his glass. “When the White family was destroyed overnight, I faced tremendous pressure. Through my rise from officer to governor, the White family’s tragedy has always weighed heavily on my conscience. Perhaps now that burden can finally be lifted.”

Back then, he was a passionate young man, determined to uncover the truth behind the White family’s massacre.

But the Welch family’s influence reached too far, their wealth buying too many allies, forcing him to abandon his investigation against his principles.

For him, a man of integrity, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

At present, Janice was standing beside Stephen, her gaze piercing as she looked toward the Welch family.

“Today, I hereby reclaim the family name White. My brother and I will settle in Cloverhill under our rightful name—the Whites.”

She smiled, her eyes fixed on Mateo with an intensity that made him visibly wither under her gaze.

Mateo collapsed onto the sofa, overcome by a wave of panic. “So it wasn’t only Stephen who survived, but Janice too? She would champion Stephen’s cause so fiercely because she herself bears the White family blood.”

Calvin and Jensen were immobilized by shock.

They had foolishly interpreted Janice’s alliance with Stephen as mere romance or perhaps ambition—a calculated move to challenge the Welch family. Now, the truth unfolded with devastating clarity—her motivation ran far deeper than strategic maneuvering.

She was a White.

The siblings had returned to avenge their family's destruction.

The crowd was left in complete shock upon hearing that Janice and Stephen were reclaiming their place in Cloverhill as the Whites.

There was no mistaking it—this was a bold declaration of vengeance. Now it all made sense—Janice hadn't just allowed the Welch family to host their banquet nearby; she had orchestrated it. This was a full-blown declaration of war.

The sheer audacity of the Whites left the crowd in awe. Their courage burned like wildfire.

All eyes shifted to the Welch family, their faces twisted as if they had swallowed pure vinegar.

The Welch family had set out to dominate their rivals, yet fate had flipped the script in the most astonishing way.

Whether it was external backing or sheer power, the White family now stood at the top. For the first time in their long reign, the once-dominant Welch family found themselves reeling from a crushing blow.

"As a royal of Aerith, I pledge my full support to the White family." At that moment, Lancelot rose to his feet, making his allegiance to Janice unmistakably clear.

Chapter 989:

"As a representative of Cherriton, I, too, fully stand with the White family," an envoy from Cherriton announced, his voice steady with conviction.

These weren't just ceremonial declarations—moving forward, any venture involving the White family would have the full weight of these allies behind it. No matter how fierce the competition, these allies would place the Whites first. For the Welch family, who had been desperate to expand their global reach, this was a devastating loss.

"I appreciate your support," Janice said warmly, lifting her glass in a toast. "I won't forget this kindness. Should you ever need anything, you only have to say the word."

Stephen stole a glance at Janice, his emotions swirling in a storm of disbelief. This moment felt unreal.

He had spent endless nights haunted by revenge, knowing full well the Welch family was a mountain too steep to climb alone.

He had resigned himself to a life shackled by bitterness, believing his hatred would fester until his last breath. But now, everything had changed.

He turned to Wendy, an unexpected peace settling over him. Not only had he found love, but he had reclaimed his family, his identity. And now, against all odds, he had returned to Cloverhill—not as a victim, but as a warrior.

"Janice, thank you."

"Stephen, from this day forward, you are the head of the White family," Janice smiled, her voice carrying both warmth and authority. "No slacking off."

Stephen gave a firm nod. He grabbed a glass of wine, tilting it back in one swift motion. "No half-measures. I'll give it everything I've got to destroy those who stand in my way."

Just then, Mateo strode forward, flanked by his men, his presence radiating silent aggression.

The heavy tension in the air made the crowd uneasy. Were the Welches so consumed by jealousy that they'd resort to confrontation right here?

"So, you're the so-called Whites?" Mateo curled his lips into a mocking smirk. "There was a White family here once. But they made fatal mistakes and paid the price. I trust you'll be smarter than them."

His words dripped with provocation, a deliberate challenge thrown into the air. The crowd hummed with excitement, eager to see the unfolding drama. Janice had ignited the Welch family's fury, and now they were attempting to strike back.

Stephen's fists tightened, his eyes burning with raw fury as he locked onto Mateo. But before he could lunge forward, Wendy caught his arm, holding him back.

"Mr. Welch, if you're here to offer congratulations, grab a seat and share a drink. But if you came looking for trouble, we're more than ready for it." Wendy met his gaze without flinching. "Once, the White family stood in the Welch family's shadow. But times have changed. Think carefully—are you truly strong enough to stand against us now?"

"Who the hell do you think you are, talking to my father like that?" Jensen snarled, charging forward with a wild swing aimed straight at Wendy. The attack came out of nowhere. No one had expected the Welch family to throw fists so recklessly, especially with the governor watching.

But before the blow could connect, Wendy shifted smoothly to the side, her lips curling into an icy smile as she seized Jensen's wrist in an iron grip. "Tsk. Didn't anyone teach you manners, kid?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

With a quick, practiced motion, Wendy twisted Jensen's wrist.

Chapter 990:

Jensen had built his reputation on brute force, crushing countless opponents with his fists.

But now, in an instant, he had been completely overpowered—by a woman, no less.

Jensen let out a pained scream, staggering back. If Calvin hadn't stepped in to catch him, he would have crashed to the floor.

"How dare you lay a hand on him!" Calvin bellowed. Just as he was about to summon the bodyguards, Kern rose from his seat.

“What? Do I look invisible to you?” The governor’s voice turned icy as he leveled a hard stare at Mateo. “Mr. Welch, this is the White family’s banquet. Shouldn’t you be running your own party instead of stirring up trouble here?”

“Mr. Haywood, my sincerest apologies. My sons can be a bit impulsive. I regret their lack of decorum.”

“Apologize to me?” Kern scoffed, his gaze flicking to Janice and Stephen. “Save your apology. You should be directing it to the White family.”

Mateo’s expression darkened, his jaw tightening. Kern had made his allegiance crystal clear—he was siding with the White family. In the past, even when he leaned toward the Payne family, he had never gone so far as to publicly humiliate the Welches like this.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Welch? Don’t like how this is playing out?”

“Not at all.”

Mateo forced a smile before turning to Janice and Stephen. “I sincerely apologize for my sons’ behavior. As a gesture of goodwill, I have a gift for you.”

Janice stiffened for a moment. Her gaze met Stephen’s, both instantly sensing the malice hidden beneath Mateo’s words.

“If my timing’s right, my gift should be arriving any moment now.”

G3t th3 l3g1t v3rs10n 0n g4ln0v3ls.c0m

The moment Mateo’s words fell, Janice’s phone buzzed.

One glance at the caller ID made Janice’s heart clench. Her grip on the phone tightened as she answered.

“Gerda? What’s wrong?”

“Janice! It’s bad! The orphanage is on fire!”

Janice’s gaze snapped to Mateo, her eyes burning with pure rage. “Mateo, you bastard! How dare you?”

Ten minutes earlier, a black sedan melted into the night’s shadows, gliding to a silent halt beside the Generous Lives Orphanage in Efrery.

Though the car appeared unremarkable, its passenger was anything but—inside sat Gilmore, a man wielding immense power in Cloverhill.

Leaning casually against the car window, Gilmore’s sharp gaze locked onto the orphanage, his expression unreadable yet heavy with intent. His dark eyes gleamed with icy malice. “I should have seen it earlier—the link between you and that bastard, Stephen. But no matter, you’ve come too far now. Time for a little surprise.”

With a slow rub of his temples, Gilmore flicked his wrist in a lazy command. At once, masked figures slipped from the darkness, their hands arcing as flaming Molotov cocktails soared through the air towards the orphanage. Within moments, flames devoured the building, turning it into a blazing inferno.

Agonized screams split the night, sharp and raw, echoing through the burning wreckage.

Gilmore’s eyes narrowed as he calmly raised his phone, recording the devastation before sending the footage to Mateo.