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## Prologue

The day Grace was released from prison, two men were waiting for her.

One of them sent her to prison, and the other one convicted her.

The snow was very heavy that day. They looked like two snowmen waiting outside the prison.

Grace vowed in her heart, she'd make everyone pay their price.

\*\*\*

"Grace, get yourself a job and be a good person out there."

The prison guard opened the gate and told her so.

Grace nodded. Through the iron bar on the prison window, she saw two black cars parked out of the gate. Waiting for her.

They were Jacob's Benz G-Wagon and Sean's Porsche Panamera.

Heavy snow has caused total chaos on the roads. Jacob and Sean were standing quietly in front of their cars.

Sean held a black umbrella and stared at the gate. Jacob kept looking at his watch.

One of them was Grace's ex-boyfriend, and the other one was her childhood best friend.

How affectionate and caring they looked! If they hadn't sent Grace to prison and told the other inmates to "take good care" of her, maybe she would be moved to tears.

Five years ago, Grace went to confront Lily Atkinson, and her sister Jennifer Atkinson was also there. In an unfortunate turn of events, Jennifer Atkinson died. Although it was a terrible accident, the court still decided to sentence Grace to three years in prison.

Lily dragged her sister's lifeless body out of the car and called the police. Sean arrived soon after.

"Sean, your girlfriend killed my sister!" Lily sat on the ground and cried out.

Sean's first reaction was to push Grace down onto the ground in case she ran away.

But Grace was already too weak to resist because she'd also been hurt. What's more... she was pregnant with Sean's baby.

"How could you be so evil?!" When Jacob rushed over, his eyes were blood shot as he questioned Grace.

Before Grace could explain to the two most important men in her life, she was handcuffed by the police.

In court, Lily's lawyer was Jacob, Grace's childhood best friend, another blow to her heart.

Jacob blamed everything on Grace. She was convicted of reckless driving and involuntary manslaughter and was sentenced to three years of imprisonment.

"Grace, you deserve this. People have to pay for their mistakes," he said.

When Grace first got into prison, she was beaten constantly. She was beaten in places without security cameras and had her nails pulled out. She was yanked by the hair and pressed into toilets. Her back was always being kicked, and it was bruised all the time.

They even broke the bones in her finger, one by one.

At first, Grace didn't know why. She was always stubborn and didn't cry when they hit her.

But after a while, Grace found out why they picked on her exclusively. Grace sucked up to one of the female bosses in prison. She would wash her feet, give her massages, and even do her laundry. Finally, she gained the trust of the female boss, and she told Grace why.

"Girl, you poor little thing. Someone paid us to beat you."

Grace knew who it was then in that instant. Sean.

This was the man who ordered two hundred drones to spell out "I LOVE YOU" in the night sky when he was pursuing her.

He said, "Grace, I will protect you from now on."

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Upon seeing their cars outside the prison gates, Grace begged the prison guard to let her leave from the back door, to avoid seeing either of their faces.

Besides, what if they were still angry with her and wanted to take their revenge?

I am nothing compared to them. I can't afford to provoke them, but at least I can hide. Grace thought to herself.

In a trance, Grace remembered her confrontation with Lily. Lily stood in front of Grace while holding her dog and shouted, "My dog is worth 70,000 dollars. How much is your grandfather's life worth?"

When Grace was three, her mother died and her father remarried. He abandoned her so her grandfather raised her all by himself.

Her grandfather worked night and day collecting junk and empty bottles for recycling.

When Grace was in junior high, she moved to the city from the countryside and lived in a small rental apartment. Her grandfather told her that they could make more money in the city because there was more junk to collect.

But Grace knew the true reason why her grandfather wanted her to go to school in the city.

The children in the city had shiny hairpins, and Grace wanted them too.

Grace's grandfather once stood outside a small accessories store for hours, then he finally went inside to buy the expensive shiny hairpin for Grace.

When the school offered financial aid to students from poverty-stricken families, Grace's teacher Mrs. Green helped her apply for it. That's when Grace met Jacob, Mrs. Green's son, whom she asked to make friends with Grace.

Jacob had the best scores at school. He occasionally helped Grace with her studies. She was clever and studious, so her grades improved very fast.

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Grace's grandfather was very grateful to Mrs. Green, but he didn't have any money, so he offered to help tend her garden.

Mrs. Green lived in a small cottage. Her grandfather swept the garden while Jacob and Grace did their homework and played in the yard.

Mrs. Green joked to Grace's grandfather, "Your little granddaughter is so beautiful and adorable. How about she and Jacob make a cute couple?"

"No, no, Jacob is too good. We don't deserve him," he rubbed his hands nervously and said.

Jacob blushed so much that he didn't even dare to raise his head.

When Grace was accepted by a top university, her grandfather went back to the countryside. He didn't let Grace go back with him, but she followed him back secretly anyways.

That's when Grace saw him begging friends for money to cover her college tuition.

Grace's grandfather did his best to give her everything. Grace vowed in her heart that she would grow up to be a top lawyer so that her grandfather would never have to work again.

He was the best grandfather that anyone could have asked for, but then... he died.

\*\*\*

The year after law school, Grace started dating Sean of the rich and powerful Stevens family. Suddenly, her father wanted to be in her life again, all because of who she was dating.

“What a nice young man. Bless you two.”

This was what her grandfather said the day she took Sean to meet him.

"You are a big girl now. A big girl should have beautiful dresses. My pretty Grace should not wear shabby clothes," her grandpa added.

So he continued to collect junk to make money behind her back.

Grace told him not to, many times. He was getting too old, and Grace was worried about his health.

It was a winter three years ago.

He was tackled by an unleashed dog in the park when he was collecting junk.

He fell unconscious on the spot and was rushed to the hospital.

It was Lily's dog. She said it was worth 70,000 dollars.

That day, Grace's grandpa was sent to the ICU. Due to a fracture of the cervical spine and spinal damage, he became paralyzed.



Grace needed to pay a lot of money to the hospital, so she went to Lily for compensation. It was her dog after all.

Lily stood in front of Grace and said arrogantly, "You are Sean's girlfriend? You didn't get money from him, so you came to me?" Lily had always liked Sean, but he was dating Grace at the time.

"My dog's leg is broken because of your idiot grandfather, I should be the one asking you for money!"

"You and your grandpa are just a bunch of country bumpkin. You both deserve to die."

Grace didn't hold back. She really couldn't. So, she slapped Lily across the face.

Lily and Grace started to fight. Jennifer, who was Lily's sister, saw this and came to help.

Grace couldn't fight two girls as she was pregnant and weak, so she got into her car and wanted to drive away, but Jennifer chased after her in her fancy convertible. That's when the accident happened.

Grace was arrested by the police. She didn't even try to escape. Her grandfather was in the hospital, but no one would listen to a "murderer".

Grace kept shouting Sean's and Jacob's names. Grace hoped that at least one of them could save her grandfather's life.

But they were on the side of Jennifer and Lily.

When Grace was detained, she heard that her grandfather had been in the ICU for 15 days and was discharged.

But he became paralyzed for life, and he didn't want to be a burden to Grace so he committed suicide.

That day, Grace was lying on the ice-cold ground and had a miscarriage.

She couldn't save either her grandfather... or her baby.

When Grace was locked up in prison, Lily went to see her.

Lily whispered to Grace, "My dog has always been obedient. Guess why my dog tackled your grandfather?"

The dog didn't know anything, he only followed his owner's orders, and his owner's heart... was vicious.

Lily hated Grace because she was dating Sean.

Grace had a lot of time to think while she was in prison. She blamed herself for the death of her grandfather. Lily would've never harmed her grandfather if she didn't date Sean.

Grace had a dream that her grandfather came back to life, and he told her how she was a good girl. Grace knew then it was

just a dream because she was not a good girl like her grandfather said, she was a piece of garbage.

If she could turn back time, she wouldn't want any shiny hairpins or any nice dresses, and she most certainly wouldn't want Sean.

The only thing she wants is just to have her grandfather back.

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"Aah!" Grace opened her eyes suddenly. Only then did she realize that she had been dreaming of what had happened all those years ago.

She looked down at her calloused hands.

After three years of imprisonment, and multiple fractures and broken bones, her hands would never look or feel the same way again.

Her fingernails had grown back but the prison doctors hadn't gone out of their way to reset her bones.

Her joints looked distorted, and she had residual pain. I was nerve damage.

There were many fine movements that she couldn't perform very well.

Her fingers hurt more especially when it was cold or humid outside.

Grace flexed her hands and breathed deeply.

It's okay. You're okay.

Today is a new day.

She repeated the mantra as she stood up and resumed working.

Sometimes, the memories threatened to consume her.

She'd lost more than just her freedom in that accident.

Her future. Her boyfriend. Her grandpa.

Everyone and everything she'd cared about was gone in an instant.

Jennifer Atkinson whom she'd accidentally killed was the daughter of one of th

My wife is an ex convict

Construction

Grace finished mopping the room.

She was wearing the bright-colored work suit of a sanitation worker with her long hair tied into a simple ponytail.

She caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror on the wall. Her delicate face was slightly reddish due to the cold weather, and her mouth was pressed into a thin line.

If you were to only look at her face, you would think she was a student who had just graduated from college. But gone was that youthful ignorance.

She'd seen how cruel the world could be.

The eyes that stared back at her were old, far older, and duller than they should be.

She sighed and rolled the cleaning supplies toward the door.

Sitting down for a few minutes had been foolish.

She hadn't meant to drift off to sleep.

With an eye on the time, she moved quickly and efficiently to clean the rest of the building.

The life of a sanitation worker wasn't glamorous, but after she left prison, this was the only job she could find.

When she was about to leave, she heard a colleague watching the news on her mobile phone.

"Whoa! Lily is engaged to Sean Stevens! What a lucky girl Lily is! As a superstar and a daughter of a rich and powerful family, now she is going to marry into the wealthy Stevens family too."

Grace shuddered, and then she hurried out of the Sanitation Service Center.

She took a deep breath. Then another.

She repeated her mantra and pushed the thoughts of her ex-boyfriend and his new fiancée far from her mind.

She swept the walkway as this was her routine.

This time of year, the cold winter wind blew and it pained her hands terribly.

She should've stopped to grab her coat, but she'd been too fixated on escaping her co-worker and any more 'good news' about the happy couple.

A couple that had stood by and watched as she was savagely beaten.

Suddenly, a Ferrari stopped in front of her.

Three men and a woman got out of the car; they were obviously drunk.

One of the men looked at Grace with a tipsy expression. He laughed cruelly. "I know you. What are the odds of finding Sean's ex-girlfriend?"

Grace paled. She wasn't expecting to encounter anyone tonight, let alone someone she recognized.

The man in front of her was a trust fund baby that she had once cussed out when he'd made a pass at her back when she was dating Sean.

In hindsight, many of Sean's friends were elitist creeps. She should've paid more attention to that, after all, birds of a feather flock together.

"Aren't you a great lawyer? Why are you sweeping the road here?" Christopher Peterson asked knowingly.

Another man stepped forward after Christopher. Grace didn't recognize him. "Can a woman who has been in prison be a lawyer again?" he questioned.

The woman laughed. "Bah, a lawyer? Just a janitor now!"

Christopher stepped closer. "Surely there are better ways for you to make money. Come with me," he said. "I'll pay you for a night, beats sweeping the streets."

He held out his big, fat hand and the other three burst into laughter.

But Christopher wasn't asking, he was already moving in on Grace.

Grace dodged, but the building was right behind her and there was nowhere to run. He grabbed her arms and pressed her against the wall at the side of the road.

It was late at night, and no one passed by this area.

She screamed but she knew her coworkers inside the building wouldn't hear.

Christopher's friends got back into the car. They didn't care what Christopher did to her.

He knocked her head back against the wall, and her vision dimmed.

The hand around her throat tightened and she clawed at it. "Let me go..."

He used his free hand to pull at his belt, and Grace kicked out hard, kneeling him in the groin.

he jumped backward, and it was just the chance she needed. Grace took off running.

Christopher blocked the way to her building, so she had no choice but to run down the street.

Construction on the road limited the traffic and the late hour ensured there was no one to help her—or to hear her scream.

When the car roared to life and tires screeched, she knew he hadn't abandoned the chase. She stuck to the sidewalk thinking she could evade them, but when she turned down a side street, the car jumped the curb and followed.



When she came out the other side and circled back down the next street, thinking she could run back to the Sanitation Center for safety, the car cut around her and clipped her.

She collapsed to the ground and struggled to get up.

Christopher leaped out of the car and left it running. His two friends fanned out on either side. The headlights all but blinded her.

She scrambled to stand as Christopher pulled off his belt. He shook his head at Grace. "You didn't think I forgot the way you insulted me, did you, bitch? You told Sean to stop working with me, it cost my family millions!"

He advanced on her like a predator.

"Sean isn't here to protect you now." He coiled his belt around his hand like he meant to strike her with it.

"Fight all you like, but I'm going to fuck you like the bitch you are, right here on the street."

Grace struggled to get up, she didn't think anything was broken, but she was still slow and disoriented.

When Christopher lunged, she tried to move, but his heavy body pinned her to the concrete. He fumbled at her clothes and she fought.

"Stop! Get off me!"

She thrashed even as he brought his hand down with the belt. It burned the skin along her arm and the buckle cut through her clothes and skin.

“Stop it! Stop!!!” Grace cried at the top of her lungs.

“I think you should listen to the lady.” A cold voice sounded behind her.

Christopher froze.

Grace turned her head to the man standing beside them. She didn't know where he came from.

“Fuck off!” Christopher told him.

Christopher didn't feel scared of the man, it was three against one.

Grace whimpered. She had no reason to think this newcomer would risk himself for some stranger on the street. Good morning everyone please Can anyone please help me with 1 packet of pads and soap to bath please I will work for it I'm in Mamelodi please. e wealthiest and most powerful families in the country. What's more, she was the fiancée of Jason Reed—the most powerful man in the city.

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Today is a new day.

You don't need anybody.

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1

Terrence Klein shifted in the front seat of the car and considered his options.

His boss, Jason Reed, had approached the group near the sports car. The headlights showed the woman on the ground and the three men.

He better not go crazy...

Terrence had seen his boss Jason lose it before.

It was terrifying.

He glanced around, gauging if there were any traffic cameras on this deserted stretch of road or if there were any other bystanders who might witness Jason killing somebody.

He prayed it wouldn't go that far.

But he knew Jason and what he was capable of.

This was going to be bloody, and brutal.

Tonight, the road had already been closed, so who would have expected that five people and a Ferrari would break in here?

They'd disturbed Jason, who wanted to be alone.

Every year on this day, Jason always closed this whole road and stayed on it alone, wearing old clothes.

No one dared to ask the reason as if it were taboo.

Terrence who had worked here?

for Jason all these years didn't know the reason either.

At this moment, as he watched his boss lift a heavysset man with ease and slam his head against the wall over and over, he did not know whether he should stop him.

He got out of the car.

Beating up some would-be rapists was one thing. Killing them... wouldn't be so easy to overlook. Or clean up.

And the men on this road were driving a Ferrari not a Ford.

Which meant, like Jason, they had money.

He started toward Jason and then paused when just as suddenly, his boss stopped fighting the man.

"Stop. Please." Grace touched the stranger's arm. "If you punch him again, he'll die."

"So what?" the man said. He balled his fist as Christopher slid down the wall.

Grace was stunned. It wasn't until this moment that she really was able to see the man clearly.

He was handsome. With dark eyes and a strong jaw. Full lips and a strong body.

His hair was longer on top and stylishly messy.

When Christopher shuffled back and got to his feet, the man took a menacing step toward him.

“Don’t,” Grace said. “He isn’t worth it.”

The man’s dark eyes cut into her. He looked deadly and still as if people's lives meant nothing to him at all.

Grace took a deep breath and said, "It is not worth being imprisoned for a lowlife like him."

The man didn’t nod nor move, but she sensed him relaxing.

Christopher took advantage of the pause to grab his friends and get back into his car. “You’ll pay for this!” he screamed.

Grace didn’t know if he was addressing her, the stranger, or maybe both.

Whatever there wasn’t much Christopher could do that she hadn’t already experienced in prison.

The woman who’d been with these bastards stuck her head out of the car. “Holy sh\*t! Is that Jason Reed!?”

The other three men looked at her with shock as they climbed into the car and one asked, “Jason Reed, the richest man in the city? No fucking way.”

Grace understood their confusion.

The man—her savior—wore old clothes. He looked... as broken as she did.

This was no billionaire. His jacket was threadbare, and his face was haunted.

Christopher peeled out with his asshole buddies.

Grace watched the car tear up the street. When the road was once again quiet, she looked back at the man.

Grace hesitantly said, "Thank you... for saving me back there."

He grunted, but beyond that, didn't say anything.

When he walked across to the other side of the road

Advertisement

he sat down with his back against the wall.

It was cold and windy. And the temperature was due to drop even lower. If he were to sleep on the road for the night, would he be alive tomorrow morning?

After considering that the man had saved her, Grace started walking over to him.

"Hey, it's been a rough night. Aren't you going home now? Where is your family? Do you have their phone number? I can help you call them and ask them to pick you up."

He slowly raised his head and Grace saw... death.

It was the same darkness she'd seen in her own eyes too many times when she'd been in prison.

The kind of darkness that spoke of nothing to live for. No hope.

"If you have nowhere to stay, you can stay with me," she said.

\*\*\*

Grace did not expect to bring a stranger back to her apartment. She wasn't impulsive by nature, and she certainly hadn't dated anyone or even considered hooking up with a man since her experience with Sean.

But this man had saved her from rape, maybe even death.

She shuddered at the thought.

Those men, the three of them were soulless... and how could that woman watch on while she was beaten up? As an attorney, she would've fought hard to see all of them in prison for their crimes or complacency in it. But life had taught her that the innocent rarely prevailed.

And life was never fair.

So why did she bring this man home?

Hmm. Perhaps she wasn't ready to concede just yet.

Her apartment wasn't large. It was just one room with a small kitchen and bathroom. She grabbed a blanket from the closet

and laid it on the floor. She took her pillow from the bed and placed it on the ground.

"The bathroom is just through there," she said.

He crossed to it and closed the door behind him. The water kicked on a moment later.

When the man came out of the bathroom, his hair was wet. He had washed his hair and face. His sleeves were rolled up.

Looking at the man's wet hair, Grace fetched a towel and said, "Bend over, please."

The man fixed his eyes on her.

"I just want to help you dry your hair with a towel. I have no bad intentions," she said. "If you don't dry your wet hair, you could easily catch a cold."

He still gazed at her but slowly complied. After a few minutes, he asked in a deep voice, "Are you concerned about me?"

"Yes." Grace did not avoid eye contact with him. "After bringing you to my home, I don't want you to get sick."

With his eyes taking her in like she was some oddity, he slowly bent over.

Toweling his wet hair, Grace asked, "What's your name?"

He remained silent for a long time, but finally answered, "Jay."

"Jay," Grace repeated his name. It was a very common name, so Grace didn't think much about it.

"My name is Grace. Where do you live? What about your family?"

"I don't have any family," he responded.

She suddenly stopped.

How sad. No one should be alone.

She had people before—but they'd turned their backs on her.

"Looks like we're in the same boat," she said with a bitter smile on her face as she continued to towel his hair dry.

She rose and got a comb and came back to him. These were small gestures—intimate ones—to touch his hair and smooth it away from his face. But this stranger—Jay—had risked his life for her. It was the least she could do.

As she pushed his hair back, the true features of his face were revealed. He was a devastatingly attractive man. Strong jaw. Full mouth. Dark eyes.

Eyes that were inches from hers and searing her in the place where she stood.

2

"Are you hungry?"

His dark eyes studied her and he tilted his head. "What?"

When he still didn't reply, she wrung her hands together. "I'll get you something to eat."

Grace moved to the tiny stove and threw some noodles and eggs into the pot to make a simple bowl of noodles for him. She didn't have any meat, but she chopped what vegetables she had and added them too.

She set the tiny table and poured them both a glass of water from the sink. He moved cautiously to take a seat when she set the bowls down.

"Eat, but don't eat too fast. It's quite hot," she said.

She didn't mean to treat him like a child, but his presence made her nervous even as there was something incredibly calming about him.

He lowered his head and ate his noodles quietly. Grace also stared at him in silence.

Normally, she'd come home and hate the feeling of being alone, confined in a tiny space. For some reason, the loneliness that she'd usually feel seemed to have disappeared. Could it be due to the presence of another person in the room?



After he had finished eating, Grace cleaned up the plates. "I usually sleep with the lights on. I hope you don't mind," she said. Ever since she was released from prison, she had gotten into the habit.

"That's fine."

Grace took her pajamas into the bathroom and shut the door to brush her teeth and change. Was it weird having a man alone beside where she'd sleep? Yeah. Probably.

But she didn't feel triggered by his presence of fearful.

If he'd wanted to hurt her, he wouldn't have defended her on the street.

When she exited and lay down on the bed, he took his position on the floor.

The room was silent save for the sound of the heater. If she listened hard enough, she could hear each breath he took.

It was a steady rhythm, peaceful even.

Grace closed her eyes and focused on sleeping. This was her routine every night because it was almost impossible for her to relax. Even being out of jail, at night she would always dream of her time in prison.

She would be beaten, shamed, and abused... and every finger would burn with the pain of being broken and the nails being torn off...

She'd wake up screaming, fingers curled, terrified, and heart pounding.

However, oddly, that didn't happen tonight.

She slept until sunrise and was not visited by her usual nightmares.

As she awakened, she rolled over to look at the figure lying on the ground beside her bed.

Still here.

Was it because of him? Because she was no longer alone in this room?

Before she even knew it, she had gotten out of bed, squatted down, and placed her hand on his cheek. Her hand felt warm.

He was real, and not something from her imagination.

Last night, she really had taken a strange man into her apartment.

When she came to herself, she found that he was already awake. His beautiful eyes were fixed on her.

"Sorry." Her face heated with embarrassment. "I... I just... that... If you don't have anywhere to go, you can also live here."

She spoke in a hurry, but after she had said it, she felt relieved.

His eyes widened with a trace of surprise.

"If you don't want to, just pretend I didn't say anything," she added, biting her lip.

His mouth finally opened and he spoke quietly. "Do you want me?"

If this had been said by some other man, it would've sounded like they were flirting with her.

But when the words came from him, it was like he was just asking a simple question of "want" or "don't want" and she assumed he meant it to mean his presence here. She didn't read any ambiguity into his words, even if there had been, she realized her answer would be the same. Grace pursed her lips.

"Yes, I do."

He stared at her, and a smile slowly formed on his lips. "Good."

This was the first time she had seen him smile. Although it was very light... it looked extremely beautiful to her.

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Jason remained at the tiny table while Grace got ready to go back to work. When she left money on the table for him to buy himself some food, he sat staring at the twenty-dollar bill for a long time.

With her gone, the room was eerily still.

None of her light vanilla scent or somewhat nervous energy filled the space. He rolled up the quilt that he'd slept on and then washed out the coffee cup he'd used.

Normally he'd be tempted to look around, maybe snoop a bit. But he didn't want to intrude on her space.

When he finally left the apartment, there were already people waiting for him outside.

After seeing him come out, they respectfully greeted him, "Mr. Reed."

"Let's go," Jason responded faintly.

A black Bentley was parked in front of him. Jason got into it and looked at the twenty-dollar bill in his hand. It had been many years since someone had given him money like this. On the contrary, for as long as he could remember, people only wanted to take money from him.

Terrence met his gaze in the rearview mirror. "The woman who was with you last night is a contract worker of the Sanitation

Service Center. She started renting her current residence here a month ago, and was just released from prison two months prior."

"Prison?"

"Yes, her name is Grace Cummins. She's the ex-girlfriend of Sean of the Stevens family. She was convicted of reckless driving and killing Jennifer Atkinson. She was sentenced to three years of imprisonment and had her lawyer's license revoked," Terrence said as he carefully observed Jason's reaction.

Jason kept his expression bland. "Grace..." he whispered. "Well, this is interesting."

Back then, considering how Jennifer Atkinson had been set on marrying him and that she was also a good political marriage candidate, he thought that if he had to marry someone, then she wouldn't be that bad of an option.

However, who would've thought that Jennifer would end up dying in a car accident?

If Grace knew about his past relationship with Jennifer, how would she react?

He considered that twenty-dollar bill again.

When had someone cared for him? Taken his hand, brought him into her home, and said she'd wanted him—just for him.

“Terrence. I want all the information you can find on Grace Cummins on my desk today.”

“Yes sir.” Then... “Sir

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are you interested in this woman?”

\*\*\*

When she got off work, Grace got a call from her father asking her to go home. He said that since she had been released from prison, she should go home to pay her respects to her mother.

Grace's mother died when she was three.

Dad had remarried only a few months after mom died, and her stepmother gave birth to another daughter, Evelyn.

It was always clear that Grace's father favored his "new" family, which led to her being sent to live with her maternal grandmother in the countryside. Grace's grandmother cared for her until third grade, but had to leave her. Fortunately, her paternal grandfather stepped in and kept her by his side.

As she'd been in college and at the top of her class, her father finally warmed to her. He eventually started to show off to others that he had a smart daughter.

When she and Sean started dating, her home life became the best it had ever been. Her father regarded her as an honor, and her stepmother cared about her well-being, even if only out of pretense. Even her half sister tried to get on her good side—something that had never happened before. From the moment Evelyn was born, she'd taken the role of the favorite child, and she'd scarcely bothered to even acknowledge Grace.

Dating Sean had been the one act that had finally made her worthy of love in her family's eyes. She knew it was only because he was the heir of the Stevens Corporation. However, at that time, she still couldn't help but long for familial affection. She'd just wanted to be accepted by them.

To be loved.

After the car accident, she realized that everything was just her wishful thinking.

Coming home, she stepped into her father's house.

The decor was mostly the same. Pictures of the three of them. Not a single photo of her in sight.

Same couches and tables.

The living room had been painted a bright red, and the kitchen was redone with all-white cabinets with stainless steel appliances.

Grace joined her “family” in the kitchen.

Her stepmother, Melinda Riley, smiled at her. That was something, she supposed.

But no hugs or kisses or welcome’s home, around here.

She listened patiently as her father and stepmother made small talk. Evelyn sipped her tea and remained silent.

After a few minutes, the conversation turned toward Evelyn’s career.

“It’s not easy for your sister to get roles these days,” her stepmother said.

Grace took a sip of tea. “Oh?”

Truthfully, she’d had more important things to think about these last three years—like surviving and serving out her time, and staying sane while she’d been wrongfully prosecuted, imprisoned, and beaten.

“It hasn’t been easy to re-enter the entertainment industry in the wake of ... things,” her stepmother continued. “And it’s vital that your sister only accept good roles.”



"Hmm," Grace replied absently.

"You know that our family isn't very rich, but your sister just happens to need money right now. How about... you lend some money to us first, and when your sister becomes a big star in the future, we will return it to you after she makes a lot of money?"

The real reason for being summoned home presented itself... "I don't have any money," Grace answered succinctly.

Her stepmother's expression turned stiff, but then she smiled slightly and said, "You don't have money, but Sean does. You dated him before, but as soon as you had an accident, he broke up with you. Shouldn't he make it up to you somehow?"

Were they really expecting her to beg the man who'd deserted her for scraps of money? She couldn't believe their audacity. Grace pushed back from the table. "I'm sorry, didn't you, Father, and my sister pretend like you didn't know me back then and avoid me the entire time I needed my family?"

Her father said angrily from the side, "So what? Are you here to get even with me? If you hadn't killed someone back then, your sister would have already been cast as a main actress a long time ago and would've already become a big star by now!"

Grace smiled sarcastically. Back then, when Evelyn had been chosen as the leading actress in a television drama, it was

because the Stevens Corporation had been one of the investors in the TV series, and Sean had specifically asked for Evelyn to be the leading actress.

Later, after Sean broke up with her, Evelyn's role naturally went up in smoke.

"Sis, are you still resentful that we didn't do anything for you when you were in jail?" Evelyn asked quietly.

Her features were perfect, her skin smooth. Her long manicured fingers tapped on the table.

"Because I think that's very selfish of you. Your actions damaged our family's reputation. The Stevens family. The Reed family. The Atkinsons, Epsteins, Changs. Even the Westons. Every prominent family in this city wanted your blood for what you'd done. What could our family even do? If back then, we had really stood by your side and helped you file a lawsuit, our whole family would've also offended them."

Because powerful, wealthy families were above the law and enabled to abuse whoever they wanted on a whim? To hell with justice and the entire judiciary system.

Grace shook her head. She wouldn't waste her words or even attempt to make these people see how their actions had pained her.

In their eyes, she was the villain, not the victim.

“How could an ordinary family like ours withstand their retaliation?” Evelyn asked.

"You're right," Grace said coldly.

She was nothing to them. A means to an end. They cared nothing for her pain, her suffering. Her heartbreak. It wasn't just her trial and sentencing to prison. This disconnect had been there from the moment her mother left this earth. She was through with trying to please them. She'd never strive for their love again because they didn't have it to give. Not to her, anyway.

Her eyes burned, and she had only to squeeze her fingers for the pain of her assault to give her strength.

Grace rose from the table and smiled gently. She looked straight at her sister. "Since you couldn't stand by me when I was at my lowest, why should I bother helping to make you rich?"

3

Evelyn's face contorted with rage just as her father's vicious slap connected with Grace's face.

"What are you talking about!" her father screamed. "You drove a car into someone else and were locked up in jail because of it. Our entire family was shamed because of you. You don't have a future anymore. Do you want to ruin your sister's future as well?" His eyes were full of disgust for her.

"The one thing you did right was dating Sean Stevens and then you destroyed it all. We had so much respect from other businessmen and our relatives from that connection..."

Grace nodded, understanding that her father, Tony Cummins had been embarrassed.

Her relationship with Sean had afforded her dad the chance to claim a higher social ranking. When she fell... he did too. And her father resented her for it.

Her face burned and she knew she'd likely bear a bruise. But her expression remained calm as if she didn't care at all.

"I originally just wanted to say a prayer for my mother—that was why you invited me back home, wasn't it?—But now it seems there is no need for me to do it here. I won't step foot in this house ever again."

After saying this, Grace walked out of the house without looking back.

This place had never really been her “home,” and she should’ve stopped hoping for it to be a long time ago.

When Grace got to her apartment, the place was dark and the lights were off. When she turned on the lights, she was greeted by cold silence.

She could tell at a glance that there was no one else in the room.

Was Jason gone? Her heart suddenly felt a little empty. Which was silly, she knew. The man was a stranger. He’d helped her out, but he didn’t owe her anything, and she was very foolish to think he’d want to stay with her.

Grace let out a bitter laugh. She was alone. Again.

Something in her chest ached painfully at the thought as if acknowledging that even out of prison, she was still constricted, and destined to live out her existence without anybody.

Just as she was about to close the door, she saw a figure slowly walking towards her. She was stunned.

It was Jason.

He was still wearing those worn-out clothes of his from yesterday while he held a bag in his hand. His longish hair

almost covered the entire upper part of his face, making it difficult for people to see him clearly at a glance, but she knew that under that mussed hair was a face that could easily take over people's hearts.

If not for the clothes, she would've thought him an actor like her sister might work with on one of the TV series. He was that powerfully handsome.

Such a man... was he Perhaps humans were tribal animals after all. They needed company.

"I'm back." His voice was low and indifferent, but to her, it was the sweetest sound.

Her throat suddenly felt tight. "I... I thought you wouldn't come back."

He stared at her. "I just really a homeless person?"

And if he was... why? Drugs, mental illness, violent tendencies? There were a number of causes that could set someone on the streets, and most of them carried elements of instability. She knew that taking him in like this was an impulsive decision and could put her in danger, but... she couldn't stop herself.

really a homeless person?

And if he was... why? Drugs, mental illness, violent tendencies? There were a number of causes that could set someone on the

streets, and most of them carried elements of instability. She knew that taking him in like this was an impulsive decision and could put her in danger, but... she couldn't stop herself.

Perhaps humans were tribal animals after all. They needed company.

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Her throat suddenly felt tight. "I... I thought you wouldn't come back."

He stared at her. "I just went out to buy something."

She quickly leaned to one side, pulled him into the room, and closed the door. Then, she saw two white steamed buns in the bag he held.

She smiled gently and felt that her whole body seemed to be much more relaxed now.

Sad, wasn't it? Her family abandoned her, but some homeless stranger was the one to keep her company.

"We'll eat together, but before that, I... wanted to light a candle for my Grandpa and mother. Today is the anniversary of his passing...as well as my mother's."

Fate was cruel to her. Her beloved grandpa and mother died only a few days apart.

Jason's dark eyes followed her movements as she took the prayer candle from her bag that she'd bought on the way home along with a framed photo.

It was a black-and-white photo of a man. The man in the photo was about sixty years old. His eyes crinkled up in a smile that looked kind.

Grace lit the candles and channeled her thoughts.

She kissed the photograph gently.

"Grandpa, I've started a new life now. I'm living a good life. I have a job that pays well enough for me to feed myself. You can rest in peace, and in the future, I will only live a better and better life..."

Jason stood to one side and looked at the woman in front of him with a smile on her lips. However, her almond-shaped eyes looked misty. The light of the candle and the light of the lamp in the corner of the room mixed together and caused shadows to dance across her face.

She had arched eyebrows, a small nose, and pink lips. She was not at all bad-looking, but he'd seen countless women more than Grace.

Back then, Jennifer Atkinson

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his fiancée, had been a rare beauty. To Jason, Grace's looks were only ordinary.

He had seen her information and naturally knew that today was the anniversary of her Grandpa's death. He understood her to need to say some kind words and to acknowledge her Grandpa's passing, but fresh out of prison and working in a sanitation center, to say she was 'doing well' ...was one hell of a stretch.

"Also, grandpa, there's another person here who's staying with me," she said softly. She then turned her head and looked at him. She smiled. Under the light of the candles, she seemed to glow from within.

It was like his presence in and of itself was enough to bring her joy. After a moment, she turned to look at the man in the photo again. "So, I am doing really good, grandpa. You can rest in peace."

After saying this, she respectfully bowed to the photo. She closed her eyes and though her lips moved, whatever words she said were between her and her grandpa or deity.

It was several minutes before she nodded and opened her eyes. "Alright, I'll clean up and make some soup. Let's have dinner together."

"Sure," he responded easily.

He offered to help, but she bid him sit. He washed his hands and set out plates and utensils before sitting at the small table and watching her move around the kitchen.

Her movements matched her name—graceful. And while she didn't hum and there was no sound in the room, there was a rhythm to her motions as if she moved to some languid melody.

When she set a pot of soup on the table between them and a plate of some egg frittata she'd mixed up with leftovers from the refrigerator, he inhaled deeply.

It smelled delicious.

She thanked him profusely for the buns he'd brought back and rather than eat them out of the back she set them out formally on dishes.

His lips twitched at that. She'd been the one to give him the money.

He was the guest here. He should be the one thanking her if anything.

They both quietly ate, and after a few minutes she asked, "Jay, what kind of work did you do in the past?"

"I did all sorts of work," he said vaguely. "If there was work to do, then I would do it. If there wasn't, then I would just find a place to rest," he said.

"Rest? I hope you had comfortable places to rest." From the way she said it, he assumed she was thinking of how she came upon him—wandering the streets on a cold winter night. Hardly a 'comfortable place to rest.'

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-seven," he replied.

"We're the same age," she said in surprise. "Which month were you born in?"

"November."

"It's July for me. In that case, I'm a few months older than you."

Grace

took a bite of food. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

"You don't have any family, and neither do I. Why don't you treat me as your sister from now on? I will also regard you as my younger brother."

"Sister?" He smiled lightly. There had never been anyone who had dared to be his family before, and yet this

Chapter 4

15 min left

421

would just find a place to rest," he said.

"Rest? I hope you had comfortable places to rest." From the way she said it, he assumed she was thinking of how she came upon him—wandering the streets on a cold winter night. Hardly a 'comfortable place to rest.'

"How old are you?" she woman still insisted on being his sister?

If she knew who he was, would she still dare to say such a thing?

However, it was exactly because she didn't know that it was so interesting to him.

"Can't you?" Her eyes darkened.

"You look sad," he said. "This was your idea, adopting me."

Her lips twitched and then she gazed back to the small candle still burning on the countertop in memory of her grandfather and mother. "When my mother passed away, I was only three. I don't have many memories of her, to be honest, but I know she loved me."

He'd have to think very hard to recall his life at that age. And for a child grieving, the trauma would probably overshadow the good memories.

"How did she die?"

"Miscarriage. The baby was six months along." She glanced back at him. "My brother. But he only lived for ten minutes after entering this world. It would've been so wonderful, I think. Having him with me." A tear slipped down her cheek. "I like to think that they're together."

He grunted. So... a brother.

"Are you sure you want to be my sister?" he asked suddenly.

She nodded.

"But, neither do I have a permanent home nor do I have an actual job. I can't even provide for myself properly. Why do you want to be my sister?"

4

"Because..."

Jason swallowed what was left of the steamed bun he was holding as he waited for her to finish her sentence.

Grace struggled to find her words. As an attorney, she'd thought out every argument and calculated conversation to be convincing and compelling. But she wasn't looking to sell him on something or to try and win him over. He either wanted her company or he didn't.

She took a bite of one of the steamed buns he'd brought. The taste was subpar. In the past, she probably would not have liked them, but now, the taste was secondary. The most important thing for her was to fill her stomach.

A dozen different arguments filled her head, for 'why' she should be his sister, but in the end, she went for an honest explanation.

"Jay, we are the same kind of people. We've both been abandoned by others and can only look for a living on the bottom-most rung of society. No one will want people like us, and no one will care about us, but at least we can keep each other warm. I can care about you, and you can also care about me, right?"

"Is that so?" he said. She felt her smile wobble. If he were to describe her expression, what would he see? Hope, loneliness, desire, and also some uncertainty.

She'd been so guarded the last three years. She understood what she was feeling now: vulnerability.

"It seems that we really are the same kind of people..." he muttered. His gaze was like that of a hunter watching a small animal fall into his trap.

"Sister." He nodded as if coming to some agreement.

In the blink of an eye, her smile turned as bright as the starry sky.

After dinner, Grace took Jason with her and left for the night market to buy some clothes. He was bemused by her efforts, but apparently, she was taking this whole 'sister' thing seriously.

Perhaps the days were really becoming too boring for him. He could easily get whatever he wanted with a wave of his hands, but now this game was becoming somewhat interesting to him.

So he indulged her, following behind her like some lost puppy.

Now there was a thought, maybe he should just get her a dog and call it a day.

It wasn't his place to ease her loneliness.

A handful of his normal garments were worth more than the entirety of what was in this store, but he saw the way her eyes widened as the cash register tallied his clothes. She nodded resolutely and paid, and it left him feeling...something he couldn't describe, to see her sacrifice her hard-earned money to buy some spare clothes for him.

"Here," she said. "Put this on."

The cotton jacket was thick, but not particularly attractive.

"Is it warmer now?" she asked.

"Yes," Jason answered indifferently. He lowered his eyes and looked at her. She was almost a head shorter than him.

"Actually, you don't need to buy these clothes for me. I am used to the cold. I'd be fine even if I were to only wear my previous clothes."

"It doesn't mean that you should be cold just because you're used to it," she said. "I don't have much money and I can't buy a lot of clothes for you, but I can at least let you wear something warmer."

"Why are you so nice to me?" he asked quietly.

"Because I am your sister." She smiled and accidentally touched his hands. She found that his hands were freezing, so she held his hands with her own, lowered her head, and blew on his fingers before starting to rub them back and forth.



"Your hands are too cold. Rubbing them like this should make them a little warmer," she said.

His hands, no, his whole body stiffened for a minute. Never had a woman rubbed his hands like this before just to warm them.

He had never liked physical contact with other people, but it seemed that he did not reject her touch as much. Perhaps he was fine with her touch because, right now, she was an important part of this game for him.

Seeing that he had no reaction, she suddenly seemed to think of something and glanced at her hands, which were full of calluses. "Did I hurt you? My hands are quite rough..."

As she spoke, she quickly let go of him.

He frowned. "I don't think your hands are rough at all

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but your hands actually felt quite cold as well. Sister, why don't you rub your hands on mine for a while longer?"

As he spoke, he offered his hands to her again.

She was slightly stunned, but then she held his hands in hers again. Compared with his big hands, hers were much smaller.

She lowered her head and breathed warm air over his hands from time to time. Her nose had gone slightly red due to the cold. In his opinion, she looked adorable like this.

\*\*\*

Two days later, Grace received a phone call from Evelyn. "Grace, father said that he was going to throw the album away today. It was not easy for me to ask him to leave the photo album alone. I want to give it to you. Can you come to get it?"

Grace was shocked as she knew what Evelyn was referring to. It was the album that contained photos of her and her mother before her mom died.

"If you don't come, then I might accidentally lose the album," Evelyn said in a gentle voice. She then added the specific address and ended the call without waiting for Grace's reply.

Grace stared at the phone in her hand. She naturally knew that Evelyn would never hand the album to her for no reason. She had to be plotting something.

However, that album contained almost all her memories of her mother.

"Sis?" a deep male voice rang in her ears.

She came back to her senses, took a deep breath, and said, "Jay, I have to go out for a bit. You should get to bed."

As she said that, she hurriedly stood up, put on her coat, and went out. She didn't realize that a pair of eyes remained fixed on her, staring at her back thoughtfully.

When Grace got to the address Evelyn had provided, she found out that it was a country club. When she walked into the private room Evelyn had mentioned, she found that Evelyn wasn't the only person inside. There was also an overweight, middle-aged man who looked to be in his fifties in the room.

"Evelyn, is this your sister? She was the girlfriend of Sean Stevens back in the days?" the man looked at Grace and asked.

"Yes, Assistant Director Curtis." Grace didn't miss the way her sister used his proper title. She was really looking to score points, it seemed. "This is my sister, Grace. And Grace, this is the assistant director of my film crew. He has always said that he wanted to see you after learning that you were Sean's girlfriend," Evelyn said with a smile.

"Where is the album?" Grace asked coldly.

"I'm first going to have to ask you to put in a good word for me with Assistant Director Curtis."

A 'good word'. Is that what they were calling it, these days?

Grace imagined anything this heinous man wanted would have little to do with talking.

"If Assistant Director Curtis is happy and is willing to give me more screen time," Evelyn went on, "I will naturally give you the photo album."

That last part was said in a low voice and the words sounded like a threat.

"Well, since you are already here, let's have a drink." Director Curtis directly poured Grace a glass of red wine, indicating that she should start drinking.

Grace was still staring at Evelyn with pursed lips. It seemed that this 'kind' sister of hers was going to sell her off in exchange for increased screen time in a film.

Evelyn picked up the wine glass and handed it to Grace. "Grace, since you destroyed my opportunity to stardom in the past, it's not too much for me to ask you to compensate me now. What's more, if you win Director Curtis's favor, you might be able to live a better life in the future. I'm doing this for your own good."

"It's the first time I've heard someone say such things in such a clean and righteous-sounding way." Grace directly swatted the wine glass away, causing the red wine inside to spill all over the ground.

"Don't you want the album anymore?" Evelyn asked through gritted teeth.

"I never thought I'd have to be selling my body in exchange for it," Grace replied. Her mother would not have been happy to see her do such a thing.

However, when she turned around and was about to leave, the Director suddenly said, "Well, you don't care about giving me any respect, do you? Do you really think that you are still the girlfriend of Steven's family heir? I heard from Evelyn that you are now a street cleaner. You should consider it a compliment that I even offered you a drink!"

5

My wife is a ex-convict

Chapter 5

Grace replied, "I don't need your compliments."

Under the influence of alcohol, Assistant Director Curtis rushed towards Grace and slapped her right in her face, then said, "If I want you to drink, then you will drink! Why are you acting all high and mighty when you're just a failure—a f\*cking convict?!"

As he spoke, he grabbed Grace roughly by the jaw. In the next instant, he had the bottle of alcohol and was pouring it into her mouth.

Grace wanted to push him away, but a man's strength was much greater than a woman's, not to mention that Evelyn was helping him from the side. Her sister was holding Grace's arms, so she could only jerk and try not to choke.

The Director paused only to thank Evelyn for her help, saying, "You're still smart," he told her. "I'll talk to the writers and give you more screen time."

Naturally, Evelyn put in even more effort. "Thank you, Assistant Director. My sister isn't smart, so please be understanding."

Grace didn't know how much wine she had been forced to drink. Her alcohol tolerance wasn't good, to begin with, and at

that moment, she already felt a little intoxicated. She tried to hold on to the last of her sobriety. "I... I want to go back..."

"Alright, I'll take you back in a moment." The man only relented when Grace wobbled on her feet.

Grace's vision wavered. But she saw the heated look in this man's eyes and she tried to plan a way to escape.

Assistant Director Curtis liked the way his handprint glowed bright red on this woman's face. The woman in front of him did not have sexual charms. She was too thin and plain. He preferred his women with fake tits and hip. But when he thought that this woman had once been Sean Steven's girlfriend, he couldn't help but get excited.

He wouldn't mind f\*cking the same woman as one of the wealthiest men in the city.

He couldn't help but think that it would be prime p\*ssy.

But then his cell phone rang.

And rang.

He silenced it without looking, but then it started up again.

He glanced at the caller ID. It was his brother, the Head Director of this film. He had relied on his older brother to get this position on the set. And he couldn't imagine why his brother would be calling.

However, after picking up the phone and listening to his brother curse and yell, Curtis felt as if he had suddenly woken up from a drunken stupor.

His face turned pale and his breathing quickened.

"How... how could it be? She, she... she is just a sanitation worker with no background. Even if her former boyfriend was Sean, Stevens has a fiancée now, so he has no reason to care about her at all. Otherwise, why would his ex-girlfriend be cleaning garbage?"

"Don't you dare touch this woman," his brother yelled. "You have to let her leave safely. You have to know that the boss of the company himself called and warned me. The boss also said that if anything wrong happened to this woman tonight, the entire production crew would be dismissed tomorrow. As for you

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you wouldn't be able to stay in this City."

"What!?"

"Are you not listening? They threatened you and me explicitly."

Curtis's hand shook. "How is that possible? Hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of investment? Dismissed?" He glanced at Grace. "Who the hell is this woman?"



"How would I know? Either way, you're the one who caused this mess. If you dare to touch even a single hair of hers, watch how I take care of you!" His brother launched into another rant. "How is she now? She's fine, right?"

Curtis wanted to cry but no tears came out. He did not dare say that he had slapped Grace and forced her to drink more than half a bottle of wine.

That he'd been about to drag her into the nearest vacant room and rape her senseless.

At this time, Grace staggered to open the door of the private room and went out. Evelyn stepped forward and tried to stop her. Sacrificing her stepsister was nothing as long as she could be famous.

That woman!

Curtis surged forward and caught Evelyn by the arm. He spun her around. And slapped her hard.

Evelyn tripped and almost fell to the ground.

"If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be in this mess!"

He watched Grace stumble out of the room.

Evelyn cried and held her cheek. "Assistant Director Curtis, what are you...?"

"Are you trying to set me up? Who is your sister? Who is behind her?" he asked sternly.

Evelyn had a blank look on her face. "I-I don't know what you're talking about! My sister has no one. Not even her family..."

Grace staggered into the hallway. The effects of the alcohol made her feel like she was walking on air, and her vision became more and more blurry.

"I have to go back..." she told herself. "I have to go back quickly. I will be in danger if I pass out outside!"

She tried her best to tell herself that she was going home, but her body seemed to be a little out of control.

A blurry figure appeared before her eyes.

That figure... gave her a sense of familiarity and made her feel at ease. She felt that as long as that figure was there, she would be safe.

Grace walked towards that figure step by step. With much difficulty, she finally arrived in front of him.

She was outside. The cold air helped sharpened her senses before everything started spinning.

"Jay?"

She raised her head and looked at the figure. The next second, she finally closed her barely-open eyelids, and her swaying body fell down.

He took hold of her falling body with a single arm. Jason stared at the cheeks of the woman in his embrace. His fingers gently caressed the area where she had obviously been slapped. He clenched his jaw and his free hand curled into a fist.

"Mr. Reed!" Terrence put away the phone in his hand and carefully explained the situation that he had just discovered. "Miss Cummins must have been forced to drink some alcohol, and then she was slapped."

"Is that so? Break the hand of the person that hit her," Jason said. He picked Grace up and carried her into the limousine.

Terrence was shocked. "Sir, are you sure?" Previously, Mr. Reed had not done anything in retaliation when his fiancée had died, but now, with the perpetrator of the accident, he...wanted to protect this killer?

In the car, Jason couldn't stop staring at the marks on her face. As he looked closely, he thought he saw a second, dimmer bruise on her other cheek. She was obviously just a toy to him, but why was he so unhappy when he saw that she had been injured by someone?

Was it out of pity? But, when had he even felt pity for anyone?

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When Grace woke up, she saw the ceiling of the rental apartment and... a familiar face.

"Jay!" Grace sat up abruptly, but her head throbbed with pain. She took a deep breath and waited for the pain to pass. "How... how did I get back here? I was at that private club..."

The previous scenes in the room replayed in her mind, and her expression darkened.

"I saw you coming out of the entrance to the club, so I brought you back," Jason said.

"But I didn't tell you that I went there."

"When you were answering the phone, I heard the address," he said. "Would you like some water? You'll probably feel better."

He handed her a glass of warm water. She took a few sips of it and then felt more comfortable.

"I didn't do anything strange when I was drunk, did I?" she couldn't help but ask.

6

My wife is a ex-convict

Chapter 6

"No," he said, but he recalled that after he had carried her back to the rental apartment when he wanted to put her on the bed, she had clung to him.

When he went to lay her down, she pulled him onto the bed and rolled until she was on top of him.

A man of rigorous control and training, how had he let his guard down like that? Before he could get up, she touched his face with her hands.

"Your eyes are so beautiful... I really... like them..." she murmured.

"Like?" The word was not strange to him. After all, there were always women who said that they liked him and liked his eyes.

In the past, when he was young, his father would always look into his eyes and become lost in thought. His father would mutter to him, "The kind of eyes you have are deceptive. They look like they're very emotional, but in reality, they're the most heartless. I don't know if you will be emotional or heartless in the future."

"They're clean..." She ran her fingertips across his brow.  
"Clear."

He sneered. She was drunk. Of course, his eyes were clean or clear or whatever. He'd showered this morning.

"It's like... They have never been tainted by any sin... They're clean..." She was so drunk that she didn't seem to notice that her face was almost touching his. "Jay, don't be afraid... I will... protect you..."

After saying that, she lay on his chest and fell asleep.

Protect him? This woman can't even protect herself, but she wants to protect him? What a joke.

Grace's face blushed as she stared at him. She really didn't remember.

"You didn't do anything. You just fell asleep."

Hearing this, she let out a sigh of relief.

His eyes fell on the red, swollen part of her cheek. "Does your face hurt?"

Her eyes widened with surprise. "It's fine." This was the truth. After all, she had suffered much worse pain in prison.

"What happened yesterday? How did you get hurt and drunk?" he stared at her and asked.

"Nothing, I just met a drunkard and had a little conflict," she said lightly. She didn't want to tell him about the dark things from last night.

She always felt that he was clear and clean. Even though he had been wandering on the streets, he was still pure like the horrors of this world had yet to touch him. If possible, she hoped that he would stay that way.

"Is that so?" He frowned. "It would be great if I had arrived earlier. In that case, you wouldn't have been hurt."

In reality, it wasn't true that he couldn't have solved this matter earlier. This was just a game that added a bit of fun to his boring life. He had even expected that something might happen after she entered the private room.

But when he really saw what had happened, he found that he was not happy.

"It's already good enough for you to have come to the club to pick me up. Otherwise, I might have slept right next to the street," Grace said and pulled at his hand. "Thank you, Jay. It's really good to have you here. And I'm fine, really. It was just a slap in the face. It's nothing to me."

Hmm. It was nothing to him either. But the bruise on her face offended him and when she smiled as she did now

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looking at him like he was the greatest man in the world...it stirred something to life inside him.

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"What? Evelyn tricked you into drinking with a man? She's shameless! I'm going to find her!" Lina had gone to look for her friend that day and saw that Grace's face was still faintly red and swollen.

"So what?" Grace held back Lina. "I was too careless. I thought that she would at most try to get some money from me. I didn't really expect... but fortunately, Jay came to pick me up when I was drunk."

"Jay?"

"He's the person who's living with me now. Think of him as my younger brother. I got him to call me 'sister'," Grace said. When she mentioned Jason, a smile unconsciously appeared on her face.

"Younger brother? How old is he?" Lina asked.

"Twenty-seven years old, a few months younger than me."

Lina almost choked on her own saliva. She couldn't believe that her friend was living with a man.

"What are you thinking? What if he has evil intentions? Have you ever thought that you might be putting yourself in danger?"



You studied law, didn't you? Are you not thinking about the risks!"

"I know what you're worried about, but, Lina, with someone living with me, I don't feel as lonely. Plus, Jay is a nice person."

"What do you mean that you feel lonely? Don't you still have me!?" Lina said. "Why don't I move out and live with you?"

"Don't do that. Your parents will hate me even more if you move out of the house," Grace said.

When the car accident happened, she had not been drinking, but all the evidence seemed to show that she had been driving under the influence.

No one believed her words except Lina.

And during the three years she had been in jail, Lina had been busy with Grace's case. She had even given up studying abroad for her. This also made Lina's parents angry with Grace because they thought that she had delayed Lina's work. They hated her for disrupting their daughter's career path.

And it was the truth. If it weren't for her, Lina would have had a better life now instead of being an obscure designer in an architectural firm.

"Moreover, Jay is like a little brother to me. You know, in the past, I always wanted to have a little brother. Now, my wish has finally come true," Grace said.

Lina knew that there was no way she could dissuade her good friend. She could only put up with the second-best option. "Let me meet with him next time." Only after she had met Jay could Lina feel at ease.

"Sure," Grace replied.

"By the way, this is a copy of your case from back then. There's also some information I've found over the past few years." Lina passed a stack of documents to Grace. "Since you have been released already, are you planning on reopening the case?"

"I don't know. I don't know where to find the witness from that year, and all the evidence still points toward me. I haven't been able to reverse the verdict for three years. In the future..."

"Perhaps we'll find an opportunity to turn over the case in the future. Don't forget that you are Grace Cummins, and the Grace I know doesn't give up easily," Lina said.

Grace smiled, but it was forced. Maybe she would have tried to overturn the verdict for herself three years ago, but after spending three long years in prison, her high spirits and sharp edges had been obliterated by pain. And by acknowledging that the system was broken and corrupt.

Grace took the stack of information back to the apartment. She saw that there was no one in the room and Jay was nowhere to be found.

That void of emptiness inside her deepened. What she'd said to Lina was true, she liked his company. But how would she feel when he inevitably moved on? Would this time have been a balm or would she feel worse, and even more lonely?

## Chapter 7

As the hours ticked by, Grace worried that something had happened to Jay. He didn't have a mobile phone so she couldn't even make a phone call to contact him.

Maybe he'd already moved on, and her whole vision of a sibling and having some semblance of a family was just a pipe dream.

Grace went outside and walked to the entrance of the residential community. She kept looking around, hoping to see some sign go him.

After God-knows how long, she finally saw a familiar figure walking towards her.

"Jay!" Seeing him approach, she finally heaved a sigh of relief.

Jay eyed the figure that was rushing towards him and could not help but be slightly startled.

He looked at her as she ran over to him. She was panting slightly, her face completely red from the cold, and yet her pretty eyes were bright.

"Great, you're finally back," she said.

"Sister, are you... waiting for me?" He gently touched her cheek, and the coldness seeped into his fingertips. It seemed that she had been waiting outside for a long time.

"Yes, I was so worried because you hadn't come back yet and it's late. Fortunately, you've come back safely," she said with a smile.

He rolled his eyes slightly. She was worried about Jay-the-homeless-man instead of Jason from the Reed Conglomeration. However, if she found out that he was that Jason in the future, would she still worry about him so much?

Not likely.

Raising the corner of his mouth, he said, "I was working." He made up some job about handing out flyers.

She nodded.

"Your hands are cold. I'll help you warm them up." As he said this, he held her cold hands in his palms. Taking the same action as she did last time, he rubbed the backs of her hands with his palms.

Grace felt her hands gradually warm up. It was such a cold day, but... it felt so warm.

"Jay, it's so good to have you home," she muttered in a low voice.

His lips curved into a smile. "I'll keep that in mind. I hope you won't regret saying that in the future."

"I won't regret it," she said. "Well, my hands are warm now. Let's go back to the house and I'll heat up the food." She pulled him into the complex and did not notice a black car parking at the corner of the street just outside.

Meanwhile, in the car, Terrence couldn't believe what he was seeing. Mr. Reed must have just been... warming the hands of a woman...

He had never seen Mr. Reed do this to any woman. Even Jennifer Atkinson, who had once been Mr. Reed's fiancée, had never been treated this way.

But now, Mr. Reed was doing this to Grace. The same woman who was the cause of Jennifer Atkinson's car accident!

It made no sense.

Recalling the scene of Mr. Reed going to the club and picking up the drunk Grace at the door, Terrence felt that his brain was not working properly.

What was going on in Mr. Reed's mind? Had Grace taken up space in his heart?

Surely not.

But as he stared at the couple across the parking lot, holding hands and staring into each other's eyes, he couldn't help but wonder if this unlikely situation was real or if he'd imagined it.

The next day, at Reed headquarters

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when Terrence reported on Jason's schedule and work, his gaze could not help but turn to Jason's hands.

Jason's fingers were long and slender. Terrence would even go so far as to say his boss's hands were beautiful and that was saying something because he didn't think of hands or men in that way. Terrence had seen this pair of hands choking someone without mercy, almost taking that person's life. Mr. Reed didn't care about getting his hands bloody, and the thought of it could make people shiver and give them goosebumps.

However, he had never seen this pair of hands being used to keep another person's hands warm, let alone those of a woman who had been locked up in prison.

"What's wrong with my hands?" Jason's voice suddenly sounded in Terrence's ears.

"Ah, nothing." Terrence came to his senses and quickly turned his eyes away. He handed an invitation card to Jason. "This is

the invitation. In two weeks, Lily and Sean Stevens will get officially engaged. Chairman Stevens hopes that you can join."

"Engagement?" Jason glanced at the card.

Of course, he understood the intentions of the families in sending this invitation. After all, Jennifer Atkinson, the eldest daughter of the Atkinson family, had once been his fiancée. They wanted to see his attitude. "Then let's go and have a look."

In the afternoon, Terrence accompanied Jason to a private hospital in the city. Terrence stood outside the ward. Jason pushed open the door and walked in slowly.

The old man in the ward had once dominated the world. He'd built the Reed empire and it was his efforts that grew his family's fortunes. But his only son had run away from home for a woman.

Many years later, the only two things that would come back to the Reed family were a handful of ashes and a child.

Jason looked at the old man in the hospital bed. This man, who deserved to be called his grandfather, was dressed in a hospital gown with a needle in the back of his hand. His body was getting weaker and weaker day by day, and he looked thin. Frail.

Mr. Reed looked at his only grandson and said, "You're here."



"Yes, I'm here," Jason said.

The grandfather and grandson quietly faced each other. The two of them seemed to be extremely familiar with this kind of silence.

After a long while, Mr. Reed spoke. "I heard from my secretary that the Stevens family and the Atkinson family are going to join forces through marriage?" Even during the old man's hospitalization, his secretary would still report to him every day.

"They're getting engaged in two weeks, and they've already sent us the invitation," Jason said.

"You're going?"

"Why shouldn't I go?" he asked back.

Mr. Reed stared at the grandson in front of him. After a long time, he suddenly laughed and said, "Good, good, you're not like your father."

Since the death of Jennifer Atkinson, his grandson had not been in contact with any woman for years. Mr. Reed had once worried that his grandson would turn out to be like his son, who had been deeply trapped in his love for a woman.

He thought perhaps Jason would avoid any reminders of his pain. Or he might resent the Stevens Family since Sean's

girlfriend had been the one to crash into the car and kill Jason's fiancée, but Jason seemed calm and collected about everything.

Jason naturally understood what Mr. Reed meant by saying 'You're not like your father'. He replied, "No, I am not him, and neither will I be like him."

Mr. Reed grabbed hold of Jason's wrist. His wrinkled old fingers seemed to have used up all of their strength. "Remember what you have said today. Do not act like him. If he was willing to listen to me back then, he would not have..."

Mr. Reed gritted his teeth. His fingernails sank into Jason's wrist, producing deep red marks.

Jason acted as if he could not feel the pain at all and a mocking smile slowly rose from the corners of his lips. He would never give up everything for a woman. He was not his father. He would never do something like groveling at her feet until there was nothing left of him.

My wife is an ex-convict

## Chapter 8

After coming out of the hospital, Terrence asked, "Mr. Reed, do you want to go back to the mansion, or...?"

"Back to the Westside," Jason said absently.

The Westside was where Grace lived. Terrence didn't know how long his own superior was planning to stay in that small rental apartment. With that damaged woman.

Then a thought occurred to him... maybe Jason wasn't as calm as he pretended to be. Maybe he indeed intended to seek his revenge and his time spent with this Grace woman was only in preparation for ...something.

On the way to the Westside, at a traffic light intersection, Terrence suddenly noticed something. "Uh, Mr. Reed, Miss Cummins is on the side of the road."

Jason turned his head and saw a slender figure sweeping the garbage with a broom at the side of the road.

She was wearing a fluorescent work suit with a simple ponytail. Because of the cold weather, every breath she exhaled was accompanied by white vapor.

At this moment, an electric bike sped by, trying to catch the green light. It bumped into Grace's leg and made her fall to the ground.

However, the person riding the electric bike didn't stop but simply rode away.

"Mr. Reed, do you want to find out who the owner of this electric bike is and make him take responsibility?" Considering his actions when Grace had gotten drunk and been beaten up, Terence assumed Jason would stand up for her again.

Jason's gaze fixed on the woman who had fallen to the ground outside the car window.

His grandfather's voice rang out again in his mind: "Remember what you have said today. Do not act like him..."

He would never care about a woman like his father did. It was just a game, and right now he was not Jason Reed, but only some random stranger, so why would he care about a sanitation worker named Grace?

"There's no need to worry about it," he said placidly as he looked away.

Terrence was stunned.

The red light turned green, and the car continued to drive forward.

At this moment, Claire helped Grace to her feet and said, "Grace, are you alright? Do you want to go to the hospital?"

Grace gritted her teeth and checked her injury. There was no bleeding. There were only some heavy swellings where her ankle had been scratched. "No need. It's just a bruise. I'll be fine."

"If the swelling doesn't diminish, go and get checked out," Claire said, and then she swore at the driver who had done the hit-and-runs.

Grace thanked her friend and then resumed her cleaning.

In the evening, at the end of her shift, Grace returned home. As soon as she entered the room, she saw a figure sitting under the light.

"Sister, you're back." The man stood and greeted her.

In an instant, the chill in her body dispelled. It turned out that what she wanted was just a person who would wait for her, even though this apartment was simple and small.

It was having someone that cared about her in it that made this house a 'home.'

"Well, I'm back." She smiled gently. "I'm hungry. Give me a few minutes to wash up and then I'll prepare our dinner."

"Okay," he answered and then watched her limp across the room to the kitchen.

"What's wrong with your foot?" he asked, even though he already knew.

"It's just a scratch. I'll massage it with safflower oil," she said lightly, but her face would change slightly with every few steps she took, and her forehead beaded with sweat.

Jason pursed his lips. "Then it would be better to clean it up now." As he said this, he stretched out his arm and caught her from moving past. Then, he pulled up the cuff of Grace's pants.

She sucked in an unsteady breath.

Immediately, an obvious lump met his eyes, even though it was still covered by her sock.

When he pulled the sock down, he saw the bruise on her ankle which had already swollen to the point of going purple.

He thought that he wouldn't care. Even if she broke her leg

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he would still be indifferent. But, for some reason, when he saw her injured foot, it stirred something in his chest.

"It's nothing," she insisted. "Some safflower oil will mend it up."

She tried to pull her ankle out of his hand, but his fingers firmly held onto her, making her unable to move at all.

There was a moment of silence that filled the air.

"Where's the safflower oil?" he asked.

"It's in... the medicine cabinet on the bedside table," she answered.

The next moment, she gasped because he had suddenly picked her up, bridal style. Carrying her, he walked to the bed, put her down, and took out the oil from the medicine box.

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling her injured right foot onto his lap. Then, he took off her shoes and socks and pressed his finger against the lump. It was a terrible bruise. Hot to the touch and incredibly swollen. He was no doctor, but he pressed down on the spot to feel for any breaks or fractured bones.

She hissed a breath but didn't complain.

"Point your toes," he said. "Now flex your heel. Roll to the right, then left."

She clenched her jaw but was able to make the necessary movements.

There was nothing wrong with the bone. It seemed that it was as she said, only a flesh wound. Jason poured some safflower oil into his palm and began to rub Grace's ankle.

His touch was not light, but she gritted her teeth and her body trembled. The pain would have been intense. Truly, for getting clipped as she did, it was a miracle she wasn't more injured between the impact and her fall.

"Isn't it painful?" he asked. If it had been any other woman, she would have screamed in pain a long time ago.

"I'm fine," she said although she couldn't hide her wince. "This doesn't hurt as much as when I..." She paused but did not say the word "prison". Instead, she said, "It's nothing compared to what I've had to deal with in the past."

Jason glanced at Grace with a thoughtful look in his eyes. He naturally understood what she had not said.

When she had been in jail, even when he had only watched coldly and not taken any action, the Atkinson family had not let her go. Moreover, there were many people there who wanted to be on the Reed Family's good side. Her life in prison had been much worse than that of an ordinary person.

"It seems that my sister has suffered a lot before," he whispered.

"It's all in the past," Grace said. "There," she whispered. "The pressure is already reducing, thanks to you."



He grunted but didn't believe her. It would take weeks for a contusion like this to heal.

"Jay, thank you. You're a really good person." She smiled at him.

"Good person?" His lips curved. Even those who flattered him never used the words "good person" to describe him. He'd done many things in his life, but none of them would qualify him as 'good.'

"Sister, do you really think so?"

He was teasing, but she replied in earnest, "Yes, of course, Jay is a good person." She spoke matter-of-factly as if, at least in her eyes, he really was her good younger brother.

"Then, if one day you find out that I'm not a good person, will you be disappointed?" he asked.

My wife is an ex-convict

## Chapter 9

Since that night at the country club, Evelyn had been feeling anxious.

After all, Assistant Director Curtis's attitude that day had been really odd. He'd gone from praising her to slapping her, from desiring Grace to shoving away from her sister.

After a few days of him not coming to the set, his older brother, the Head Director had also been replaced.

As for the reason, no one in the film crew could seem to explain it. However, Evelyn felt that the change in the film's director had something to do with Curtis. When she thought about it some more, she became afraid that it had something to do with Grace.

Then, a few days later, when she heard Assistant Director Curtis had been hospitalized and that his right hand seemed to be ruined for life, she was dumbfounded. His right hand... If she remembered correctly, that was the hand that he had used to slap Grace.

Evelyn was panicking inside. "What the hell is going on?"

After Assistant Director Curtis answered the phone that night, his attitude towards Grace had completely changed. As for

what had happened to Assistant Director Curtis afterward... Was this all a coincidence? Or could it be that... Grace really had someone powerful behind her?

But if Grace really had someone watching over her, would she still be bitterly sweeping the road every day?

Evelyn couldn't help but tell her parents about what had happened that night. When her father heard that his youngest daughter had sent his eldest daughter to drink with an old man, he immediately glared at Evelyn. "How could you ask your sister to do such a thing? At the very least, our family is..."

"It's just drinking together. What's the big deal? Besides, Evelyn did this for the family. Only if Evelyn makes it as a star will our family have a good future. Otherwise, do you want us to rely on your eldest daughter who had been to jail?" her mother interrupted

Upon hearing this, her father's expression fell, but he didn't say anything.

He'd never been warm to Grace, but Evelyn acknowledged that she had set her sister up to be sexually assaulted. Her father wasn't stupid. He knew that too.

If he pressed her, she'd deny it. As she said, it had only been a few drinks. Her father couldn't prove the rest, and she'd launch into a tearful performance if he pushed the point.

"Dad, could Grace really have found someone to help her? Otherwise, why would Assistant Director Curtis have let go of her that night and even later ended up in the hospital himself?" Evelyn asked.

How would he have known anything about this!?

Her mom touched dad's arm. "You are her father after all. You should try to ask her about it. If she really has a backer now, she should tell the family about it. I'm worried that if she gets involved with some bad people, then our family will be dragged down as well. Again. She was in prison before, and there are all sorts of people in prison. Who knows who she had met in there!"

Evelyn covered her mouth as though the very suggestion terrified her. "Oh, father! What if they come after us? Or her criminal friends do more damage to our family name. Father, you were so honored and revered before Grace killed that woman and dishonored us all."

Her father frowned when he heard this. Then he slapped his fist down on the kitchen table. "If she dares to implicate the family again, I'll break her legs myself!"

When Grace was cooking a meal in the apartment and waiting for Jason to come back for dinner, the doorbell rang. However, when she opened the door, she saw her father

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her stepmother, and that stepsister of hers.

The three of them then rushed straight into her apartment. Her father immediately asked, "Did you meet some shady people in prison? I'm telling you right now if you dare do anything that will affect our family... Don't expect me to deal with you lightly!"

"What on earth did I do that would require you to 'deal with me'?" Grace looked at her father coldly.

"Did you ask someone to break Assistant Director Curtis's hand? He was just asking you to drink with him, and he didn't do anything else. How could you be so vicious? Did you lose your memory while in prison? Do you think that you can just do whatever you want after meeting some evil people in prison!?" Her father scolded.

Grace snickered. "It seems like karma is real. He got what he deserved. Also, if you think that there's nothing wrong with drinking together, then go ahead and ask your precious daughter Evelyn to drink with him instead. What did she scheme against me for!?"

"This is what you owe her! If it weren't for you, she..."

"If it weren't for me, do you think she would've even had a chance at being chosen as the female lead for a film in the first

place?" Grace paused and let that little barb land. Then she said directly, "Don't tell me that I owe her anything, because I never did!"

"Sister, I've never blamed you for your sins. You don't need to speak to dad like this." Evelyn acted like she had been wronged.

"You're so noble," Grace replied sarcastically.

She was bemused that they thought they could charge into her home and bully her into being some sex toy to advance her sister's career. This entire conversation and trying to blame her for her sister's shortcomings was ludicrous.

Her stepmother quickly comforted her daughter and looked at Grace with dissatisfaction. "Grace, don't take your anger out on your sister. Your father just doesn't want you to go down the wrong path. If you go to jail again, what will happen to our family's reputation!?"

"What's the point of talking to her about all this? Anyway, go to Assistant Director Curtis immediately. No matter what method you use, ask him to forgive you. You can't implicate Evelyn because of this matter, do you jail again, what will happen to our family's reputation!?"

"What's the point of talking to her about all this? Anyway, go to Assistant Director Curtis immediately. No matter what method you use, ask him to forgive you. You can't implicate Evelyn

because of this matter, do you understand? If you dare to ruin Evelyn's future, just watch how I deal with you!" Her father ordered.

Grace felt that this was laughable. Did her father really think that she could be controlled at will? Or was it that when one's heart was completely biased, one would ignore everything else they didn't agree with?

"I won't apologize to anyone, so you can go back now. You're not welcome here," Grace said.

As her father heard these words, his face flushed with anger. "Who do you think you are!?" He raised his hand to strike her.

Grace subconsciously took a step back, but when she moved her feet, her ankle rolled. She winced and braced for the hit.

But it never came.

A hand blocked her father's fist in mid-air.

"Jay!" Grace had not expected Jay home so early.

Jason looked coldly at the three uninvited guests in the room. He had read Grace's files and so he knew that these three were her father, stepmother, and stepsister.

"Get out!" he said coldly.

"Who do you think you are to stop me from hitting my own daughter?! Let go!" Her father shouted. He felt that his hand was about to break from the man's grip.

Then, her father got what he wished for. Jason let go of his hand after throwing her father out of the apartment.

Her stepmother and Evelyn rushed outside the apartment to help him up.

"Grace, why are you letting a stranger treat your father like this?" her stepmother scolded.

"Who is this man?" her father asked with hatred. "Fine, Grace, I see how great you are. You hooked up with a wild man right after getting out of jail..."

Her father's voice suddenly stopped. Jason growled. The sound was more suited to a wild beast than this man, but the intent was the same.

He would fight. He would kill.

Grace dragged Jay inside and slammed the door behind him. Her father asked with hatred. "Fine, Grace, I see how great you are. You hooked up with a wild man right after getting out of jail..."



My wife is an ex-convict

## Chapter 10

Her father, stepmother, and Evelyn looked at each other hesitantly.

Her stepmother was about to curse and start pounding on the door, but her husband caught her hand. "Let it go."

Her father shrugged. "Come, let us leave. Perhaps the man was released from prison as well! There are all kinds of people in prison. Who knows why this man had been sentenced to jail?"

Hearing this, Evelyn and her mother exchanged a glance. "Then shall we just let it go?"

Her father hesitated for a moment and said, "Let's wait. If Assistant Director Curtis holds Evelyn accountable in the future, then we'll think of other ways." He didn't have the courage to come in and challenge the man now.

Evelyn frowned. "Had the man just now ... really been in prison?" Although she could not see very clearly since the man's hair was longer on top, she could still notice that he was good-looking.

Particularly for some reason, she felt that the man looked somewhat familiar as if she had seen him somewhere before.

Or was this man also a member of the entertainment circle?

In the apartment, Grace looked at Jay and said, "Thank you." If Jay had not come back, she would have been beaten by her father just now.

"Don't thank me for the help, Sister. Isn't it what I should do?" He pointed at her ankle. "It hasn't healed yet. I'll apply the Safflower Oil for you."

The routine of removing her sock and shoes, rubbing in the oil, and wrapping her foot took several minutes. The whole time, he didn't say a word.

Grace bit her lip and finally said, "Why didn't you ask me what those three came here for?"

"I won't ask if you don't want to tell," he said.

"Actually, it's nothing difficult to say. They are my father, stepmother, and half-sister," Grace said. "But now, they are no longer my problem."

After hesitating for a moment, she asked again, "Didn't you have anything else to ask?"

He should have heard her father scolding her in front of him, saying that she had been in prison.

His eyelashes flickered, then he lifted his eyes. "What do you wish me to ask?"

His dark eyes revealed a kind of strange silence under the dim yellow light.

Grace took a deep breath. She was swallowed by shame and that was something she'd have to contend with for the rest of her life. She was innocent, but that didn't matter. She'd been tried, convicted, sentenced, and had served her time.

"I was sentenced to three years in prison for drunk driving and killing a person, Jay. I was released not long ago."

Many people would change their attitude when they heard that. After her release, as long as people around her knew that she had been in prison, they would treat her with prejudice and deliberately keep a distance from her.

There was a reason she was working in sanitation.

No one else would hire her.

As she waited for his reaction, for him to say something or judge her with his beautiful eyes, she felt as edgy as she had while awaiting the trial verdict in court.

"Really?" he said indifferently, still concentrating on massaging her ankle.

"That... that's it?" She blinked her eyes in surprise. "You don't mind?" she asked.

"Why should I mind?" he asked in response. "As you said, from now on, we only need to care about each other, and there is nothing else to care about."

Her heart seemed to swell in her chest.

Here, with a total stranger

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she found acceptance.

How ironic that her only family, who should've loved her unconditionally were completely incapable of this.

Grace smiled as if she had been relieved of a heavy burden.

"Jay, I am so lucky to have met you."

Something flashed in his eyes, but it was gone in an instant.

On Sunday, Lina specifically visited Grace's apartment. When she saw Jay, she could not associate him with the homeless person that was mentioned by her friend. And she made it a point to say so, in a whisper that wasn't really a whisper.

Grace groaned and ultimately laughed.

It was true.

Jay looked good. Even in the cheap pants and sneakers and jacket more suited to an old man, there was no hiding his tall frame or strong muscles. His bone structure was too perfect,

the kind of polished good looks that only came from surgery or good breeding.

Although he was only wearing an ordinary cotton-padded jacket and trousers and cheap sneakers, Even his too-long hair fell just right so it looked more intentionally styled than overgrown.

He was a handsome man. A kind man.

Grace valued Lina's opinion, but if her friend had anything negative to say, they'd be the last words on the matter. Just as Jay had defended her, Grace would not let anyone disrespect him in her house.

Lina pulled Grace to the side and asked again, "Are you sure he is a homeless person who has no place to live? Seriously. I can't believe it. He can be a star or model just with his appearance."

"Not all the good-looking ones are suitable to be stars or models," Grace replied.

Lina thought again and realized that it was not easy to make a living in the entertainment circles. That took a certain personality and drive. "As you're stuck with him every day, don't you have any idea?"

Grace rolled her eyes. Wasn't Lina worried before that Jay would do something evil to her? Now, she seemed to worry that she would do something to him instead.

"He is a few months younger than me. I only regard him as my younger brother."

Lina walked in front of Jay. "I'll be frank that you can live here if you want, but you have to promise that you won't mess around and won't lie to Grace. You know, she hates deception, and if you are a liar, I'll call the police and have you arrested!"

"Lina, what are you talking about? Jay wouldn't lie to me," Grace replied in a hurry.

"How long have you known him? Let's make it clear first. Hey, Jay, did you hear that?" Lina said to Jason.

He raised the corner of his mouth and said, "Okay, I know."

He was smiling lightly at the moment, but saying 'I know' wasn't the same as vowing not to lie. She didn't miss the way he evaded her question.

Grace's eyes rounded and she was shaking her head vehemently so Lina dialed back her impulse to interrogate this man. She knew Grace.

Grace had the biggest heart of anybody.

And this man, Jay, was likely just the first of many strays she'd take in.

Lina glanced at Grace. "Cats are easier, you know. Even a dog. They're always loyal."

Jason snorted.

Grace rubbed her eyes, embarrassed.

“Walk me out,” Lina said. Slinging her arm through Grace’s. “I can see why you keep him around,” she said. “He’s easy on the eyes. But I don’t think he’s all he appears to be.” She kissed Grace’s cheek. “Protect yourself. And call me if you need anything.”

Grace shook her head. “I will. Love you.”

When only the two of them were left in the room, and the door was closed and locked behind Lina, Grace said, "Don't mind what Lina said just now. She's just worried about me."

"She is your friend. No matter what she says, I won't take it to heart." Jason’s expression revealed nothing. She didn’t know to take him at his word or if he’d been offended. "Are you getting on well with her?"

"Do you know what a life-saving straw is? When you are drowning, you can't grab anything no matter how hard you try. At that time, when you are able to grasp a straw, even if this straw can't save you, it will give you hope so that you won't despair." She murmured, "Lina is that straw to me."

My wife is an ex-convict

## Chapter 11

Back then in prison, Grace was alone. If Lina had not visited her frequently to encourage her, Grace might not have walked out of prison alive.

There were days...too many of them when she'd contemplated ending it all.

It was Lina who had been giving her support over the past three tough years.

"The life-saving straw...?" Jason's eyes glittered. Lina seemed to hold a special place in Grace's heart. Jason asked, "Don't you find it funny to treat a person as such a lifesaver? What if they abandon you, won't you feel despair?"

"Lina would not do that," Grace replied confidently, showing her absolute trust in Lina.

Jason had no idea why he felt uneasy.

Over the next few days, Grace's workload increased tremendously, as the management staff from Sanitation Service Center would be coming over for inspection. Most days, she had to work overtime.



Fortunately, when she went home, Jay would have prepared dinner and he'd be there, a steady, calming presence waiting for her, and that warmed her heart.

She had told Jay before to go ahead and eat. He shouldn't have to suffer just because she would return home late. However, he insisted on waiting for her so they could eat dinner together.

Early in the morning, after cleaning the streets that she was assigned to, Grace returned to the Sanitation Service Center. After putting away her tools, she stood on the lawn in front of the entrance.

After a while, the inspectors from the Urban Management Bureau arrived. Everyone who was in charge of sweeping the streets stood on the lawn to welcome the inspectors, making it convenient for reporting.

Grace's skinny body stood out among the group of middle-aged women.

"You're Grace!" When the inspectors reached the Sanitation Service Center, a woman of about 28 years old shouted out when she saw Grace.

Grace lifted her head. The woman in the light-blue suit had her hair up in a bun. Her face was round and her eyes narrow. She was ordinary, but her makeup made her look good.

Grace was stunned for a while before she recognized her high school classmate, Mia Jenkins.

"It's you!" Mia looked at Grace in amazement as she asked, "Why are you here? Are you now... a sanitation worker?"

"Yes, I'm working here," Grace replied. She didn't look away from Mia's gaze. After all, it was unavoidable for one to meet their old friends. No matter how embarrassing that would be, she had to face it.

"Mia, do you know each other?" her colleague who had come along with her asked.

"That's right. Back then, Grace was the prettiest girl in the class and our valedictorian! She always topped in class. Many guys in our class liked her and but Grace was always focused on her education." Mia deliberately praised Grace to the skies.

The more she did that, the more it showed the contrast to Grace's current situation.

As expected, the colleague frowned, commenting, "Was she the prettiest girl in the class? You must be kidding!"

Mia smiled faintly, and Grace tensed. She wasn't ignorant of the undercurrents here. Back then in class, a lot of students were envious of her.

"Oh yes," Mia said. "Our Grace was quite the swan."

Right. And the ugly duckling was now the supervisor, while the swan was sweeping the streets.

When Grace's colleagues heard what Mia Jenkins had said, they turned to look at Grace with different expressions on their faces. Some looked surprised, some looked at her with sympathy, and some laughed.

The following day, after Grace had finished sweeping and went back to return the tools, a girl in the Supply Department asked her curiously

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"Grace, everyone overheard Miss Perkins yesterday. Is it true what she said, about you being the prettiest and smartest?"

Grace didn't reply. Farah Steele, another woman from the Sanitation Department, snorted. "What's the use of being the prettiest girl in the class or being super smart? Obviously, that couldn't be true—or she wouldn't be here."

The girl who had asked Grace the question looked at Grace with embarrassment, but Grace merely lowered her head. After she had signed her name on the logistics record book, she turned to leave.

Claire caught up with her and patted her on the shoulder.

"Don't take Farah's words to heart. She's venting her anger on you because she likes Chase from the fleet."

Grace looked puzzled, as she had no idea who Claire was referring to and what Chase had to do with her.

"Chase is one of our drivers and he seems interested in you. He always greets you," Claire explained. She was truly concerned about Grace as she said, "Chase is a nice guy, and the Center has plans for him. His parents have also bought him a house for his marriage. You may wish to consider accepting him."

Grace shook her head as she replied, "No thanks. I have no intentions of getting into a relationship."

"You're already twenty-seven years old. As a woman gets older, it will become more difficult to find a partner."

"In that case, I shall remain single," Grace replied. After she came out of prison, she no longer harbored any hope of love or marriage.

Back then, Sean had made several promises to her.

He'd promised to love and cherish her, to protect her forever.

And she saw how well that had played out.

Her 'true love' had watched as each of her ten fingernails was ripped out. As the bones in her hands were stomped and broken.

He had been the one to order the abuse.

“No, thank you, Claire. I’m not looking for love. Or a relationship. I’m fine, but thank you for suggesting it.”

Claire pursed her lips. “How is your ankle?”

“Much better,” Grace replied absently.

Claire shook her head. “It could be amputated, and you’d say the same thing.”

One corner of Grace’s mouth tipped up. “Complaining doesn’t change things.”

“Hmm. You’re right about that, I suppose.”

Claire tugged her down a hallway. “Hey, all joking aside...give yourself a chance, Grace. The past is in the past. You have paid enough for it. You deserve happiness, more than anyone.”

Grace patted her shoulder. “You’re a good person.”

Huh. It seemed she had a few good people in her life these days—Lina, Claire. Jay.

Her heartbeat accelerated.

Jay knew her past. Her failings.

He didn’t judge her for it.

He wasn’t boyfriend material, either, seeing as how they were in agreement about being the family neither of them had.

As a brother... it was enough.

But relegating him to that role did send a little pang of longing through her chest.

"I'm blessed, Claire. And happy with what I have. Wishing and hoping for more...that's the surest way to be discontent."

Claire rolled her eyes. "Fine. Fine. You win. I can't compete with all your zen sh\*t." She tightened her ponytail. "You're a disgustingly positive influence, you know that."

Grace laughed. There was a compliment in there, somewhere. "I'll take it."

On payday, Grace took Jay to the market to get a mobile phone.

"It's fine that I don't have a mobile phone," Jason said. He had not expected Grace to get him one.

"Nowadays, everyone has a phone. It will be more convenient for companies to contact you when you apply for jobs. You can't be distributing pamphlets all your life," Grace said.

"Moreover, if you have a mobile phone, it will be more convenient for us to inform each other if we would be home late."

The two of them arrived at a stall in the market that sold mobile phones. There were different models, but Grace could only afford the older ones. She had checked on the Internet

and selected a few models. She indicated the ones she'd researched.

“They’re not as fancy as the newer ones, but they still have wifi and most of the bells and whistles, so ...” She blushed. “When I can earn more money, I will...”

My wife is an ex-convict

## Chapter 12

"This model is good enough!" He cut her off. He lowered his head to take a serious look at the mobile phones.

Suddenly, a voice was heard from behind them, saying, "Oh, Grace!"

Grace lifted her head and saw Mia Jenkins and another woman walking toward them. They were out shopping.

When they came near, Grace saw that the other woman was another of her high school classmates, Maria.

"What a coincidence seeing you here! Is that your boyfriend?" Mia asked as she sized up Jay, who was standing beside Grace.

When Maria saw that Grace did not respond, she said, "Hey, Mia, don't spout nonsense. I heard that Grace has a rich boyfriend. This guy doesn't dress like a rich guy. What a cheap set of clothes!"

Wow. That was horribly rude.

Grace snuck a glance at Jay, but his expression was bland. Anyone watching would think he was oblivious to her classmate's catty comments.



Maria raised her brows. "Oh! Are you feeling awkward? I forgot that your boyfriend already has a new girlfriend and they will be getting engaged soon. Over the past few days, the papers were reporting on the engagement between Sean and Lilly. They are well-matched in social and economic status! By the way, does your new boyfriend know that you're sweeping the streets?"

Sigh.

"Why did you say that?" Mia commented.

Mia wasn't stupid. There were privacy laws and the gossiping she was engaging in with Maria could get her tangled up at work. If Grace bothered to report it. If the higher-ups cared to write up her supervisor. If they wanted to take the word of an ex-con.

"What I've said is true. Didn't you say that she is currently working in the Sanitation Service Center?!" Maria said arrogantly.

Grace looked coldly at Maria. Since Maria was out to humiliate her, she would ignore her, lest she becomes more aggressive.

She wasn't even angry for herself but for the cruelty toward Jay. Making fun of a man's clothes... how petty was that?

Grace turned her head away from the woman and asked, "Jay, which model do you prefer?"

"This one," he replied after choosing one of the mobile phones.

Grace told the cashier to ring it up and get a new unit for her.

"Go and sign up for a number," Grace said.

"All right. I'll get it done tomorrow when I pass by the service provider," Jason replied.

The two of them spoke as though they were the only ones around, disregarding Mia and Maria. Mia was not agitated, but Maria was fuming with anger.

She was insulting Grace, but she felt as though she was the one being humiliated!

When Maria saw Grace taking out her mobile phone to make the payment, she taunted, "What? Do you have to pay for the mobile phone? Grace, are you spending money on a gigolo? However, you don't earn much by sweeping the streets. That's why you're getting such a cheap mobile phone."

As Maria was talking, she was looking at Jay.

She felt that Jay was good-looking. Although his hair was longer on top and shadowed his features a bit, there was no disputing his perfect mouth or jaw, or those dark eyes.

"You don't have to be with her. Why don't you break up with her? I can get you a better mobile phone if you break up with

her. You can choose any of the mobile phones in this market," Maria said.

Maria's family owned a small business. Although she was not as wealthy as those influential people or the billionaire families in the city, she was richer than ordinary people.

Jason pursed his lips as he stared at Maria.

Maria reckoned that Jason was tempted and she continued saying, "What do you think of my suggestion? If you break up with her, we can be friends. I can take you for a spin in my BMW and introduce you to some of my friends in the film and television circle. Given your looks, you will have no problem becoming a star." Maria became more excited as she spoke. It would be the ultimate payback, to take this man away from Grace and see him shine.

"I'm not interested in becoming a star. As for your BMW, take good care of it," Jason replied casually.

Maria felt insulted as she said, "Do you know who I am? I can make you..."

"Oh? What can you do to me?" Jason asked as he looked at her coldly.

Suddenly, Maria felt a chill traipse up her spine.

Jason ignored the two women.

After Grace had made the payment, she and Jay walked away with the mobile phone that they had just purchased.

Mia tugged at Maria, asking, "Are you doing all right?"

Maria bit her lip and replied, "I'm fine!"

But she felt threatened by that man. Their gaze from him seemed to be telling her that he was superior and he could crush her at any time.

She'd thought she'd had the upper hand the entire time, and now...she felt like she'd made some grave mistake.

However, that man was some loser, dating an ex-con and wearing a cheap set of clothes!

She brushed the thoughts away. The man was beneath her. And that b\*tch Grace... she was finally getting what she deserved.

Mia pulled Maria along with her to shop and eat. After a while, when the two of them were at the car park outside the market, Maria received a text message.

At the same time, a man in a black suit walked over to her, saying amicably, "Are you Miss Martin? We have transferred 85,000 dollars to your account, which is based on the depreciation value of your new car. I believe that you have received the money."

Maria was stunned. The man had to be referring to the 85k that she had just received in the text message.

The man turned around and lifted his hand to make a gesture. Suddenly, a few men in black suits started to smash Maria's BMW with hammers.

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Maria and Mia were shocked. Maria screamed, "What are you doing? Call the police. I'm making a police report!"

"Miss Martin, you've received the money, thus this car no longer belongs to you. I have the right to smash it!" The man smiled.

"No. I have no intention to sell my car. You can't smash my car!" Maria wanted to stop them, but the few men ignored her and continued to smash the car. Within a short while, the beautiful car looked like a scrapper.

"You... you..." Maria was so angry that she started to shiver. She almost lost the grip of her phone.

"If Miss Martin wishes to make a police report, you may go ahead. However, I have records of our transaction." The man continued saying, "What can one do? My boss doesn't like your car. Miss Martin, please get a more pleasant-looking car in the future, lest it gets smashed again."

After saying that, the man and the few men who had demolished her Beamer left.

Many people crowded around to watch the scene. When Maria turned her head, she saw that Grace and the man by the name of Jay were looking in her direction not far away from her.

Maria felt rage beat at her heart, and she almost exploded. She had just flaunted her new car to them, but in the next instant, the car was smashed before their very eyes.

Maria was angered and humiliated. Her hands fisted at her sides and she shook with the force of her outrage. She immediately turned to leave with Mia following her. That was slapping her in the face.

Grace felt as if she were watching a show. The minute she stepped out of the market, she saw a few people smashing a car that seemed to belong to Maria.

"What happened? Has she offended someone and that person is taking revenge?" Grace asked.

"Who knows?" Jason replied as his eyes glittered.

"Anyway

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it's none of our business." Grace took Jason's arm and walked to the bus stop.

Suddenly, Jason stopped walking. Grace turned to look at him and saw that he looked pale.

"What's wrong?" Grace asked, looking worried. "Jay, are you okay?"

"N-nothing," Jason stuttered. He shook his head as if to clear it.

"You look like you saw a ghost."

His gaze cut swiftly to her.

The woman who stepped off the bus and disappeared into the market crowd...she'd looked too much like the woman who'd deserted her husband and son.

Surely, he was mistaken.

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Grace frowned at him as they got ready for bed. She didn't pry and he credited her for holding her tongue.

"Thank you for the phone," he said and forced a smile for her benefit.

Her smile wobbled a bit, but she nodded. It was obvious she was worried about him.

But he was fine.

As the lights dimmed, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

He could mark the exact moment that Grace drifted to sleep.

Her breathing evened out and she inhaled less frequently.

Sleep evaded him for a while, as bits and jagged pieces of memories floated through his psyche. His father sat him down in the library and told him, 'Jason, don't follow in my footsteps. Even if you were to fall for a woman, don't love her wholeheartedly.'

Later on one of his birthdays, Dad said, 'The most unreliable thing in this world is love. When she no longer loves you, it will be useless even if you were to kneel before her.'

Then he was in the living room. "Jason, one day, when you fall in love, you will realize that someone in this world has the power to control your emotions. She could make you live or die. However, if possible, Dad hopes that you will never get to experience that."

Jason blinked and tried to make sense of his surroundings. It was the mansion but the wall color was different and there was a crib. Was this some nursery?



"Stop saying these things to me. Don't stay here! It's cold... it's so cold... Don't stay here... if you continue to stay here... you will freeze to death!"

The dark-haired woman stormed out the door and he followed. He had to catch her. He couldn't let her leave.

"Jason, I'm leaving. I don't want to hear your father telling me how much he loves me and is yet unable to give me the kind of life I want! I've already done my best."

"Who's that, who's talking to me now?"

"Don't...go..."

Who's that talking about now? Oh, it's him. He's begging the woman. If she leaves, my father would...

"Don't go! Don't go!" Jason struggled to catch hold of her, but it was like trying to catch the breeze.

The surrounding area became darker and he was about to drown. He felt so terrible that he found it difficult to breathe.

He struggled to grab hold of something, even if it was only a straw!

Suddenly, he caught hold of something warm. A gentle voice rang beside his ears. "Jay, Jay, I'm not leaving, I'm not leaving. Don't be afraid, don't be afraid!"

"This voice... Sister. Grace, the woman who has asked me to address her as Sister!"

The minute Jason opened his eyes, he saw a pretty face. Her dark eyes were full of anxiety, her pink lips opening and closing as if she were talking.

She was telling him not to be afraid!

He swallowed hard and then nodded.

When Grace saw that Jay had awakened, she heaved a sigh of relief. "Jay, what happened? Did you have a nightmare?"

Jason frowned. He had not had that dream for some time. It'd been years, actually.

"Yeah, I had a nightmare." Jason realized he was holding Grace's hand tightly as though she was his lifeline.

What was that nonsense she'd talked about straws and lifesavers? He'd thought it so silly when she'd said it, but there was no discounting that her presence brought him peace.

In his dream, while he was about to drown, he had caught hold of something... her hand?

And it had saved him.

Jason immediately let go of her and the warmth he'd felt disappeared.

A dull ache spread in the pit of his stomach. He curled up on his side.

When Grace saw him move, she became concerned again. "Are you not feeling well?"

"It's nothing." He tried to suppress the pain. "It's just... stomach cramps. I'll be fine in a while."

"Does the pain come because of the nightmare?"

When Jason was young, he would suffer from severe stomach cramps whenever he tried to suppress his emotions. But that had been the reaction of a child, a boy too young to process his grief and forbidden to talk about it.

As an adult, he'd not experienced a physical reaction like this.

It was as if someone had reached into his abdomen and was twisting his organs out of alignment.

Grace poured a glass of warm water and helped Jason to sit up.

He managed to take a few sips.

Grace looked worried. She suddenly stood up, saying, "I'm going out for a while!" Before she left, she covered him with a blanket, afraid that he would feel cold and that would worsen his pain.

The door clicked as it closed. The sound of footsteps outside the house became distant.

Jason was left alone.

On the one hand, he was glad that she wasn't here to witness his pain. He could bear it, and he would, and it was better that there was no audience for his weakness. But part of him also felt saddened by her departure. Like she, too, was abandoning him.

He continued to shut his eyes, waiting for the pain to abate.

The loneliness was familiar.

Ever since his father passed away, Jason had been taken back to the Reed family. Although he had a grandfather and many servants around him, he still felt alone.

After some time, the door opened. Jason heard a familiar voice gasp for air before saying, "Jay, I've bought medicine for you."

Jason opened his eyes and saw her panting. Her hair was in a mess, and it was obvious she'd been running. Her pretty face looked worried. She had a cute nose and slightly red lips.

Although Jason had seen many women more beautiful than Grace, at that instant, he couldn't shift his gaze away from her.

He felt as though there wasn't another person in this world for him.

...

Grace poured another glass of lukewarm water and took out two tablets, according to the prescription. She helped Jay sit up and watched as he swallowed the pills and washed them down.

"If you still feel terrible, shut your eyes and try to sleep," Grace said. "If you're not well in a few hours, I'm taking you to the ER."

"It's... it'll pass," he said.

She wrung her hands together, obviously not so sure.

"Come up onto the bed," she said. And she guided him to lay out and rest his head on her pillow. The sheets and pillow smelled like her. Clean soap and a hint of citrus. She smelled like summer. As she was about to turn around, Jay suddenly caught hold of her hand.

"What is it? Should I call an ambulance now?" Grace asked.

He was in a daze as he looked at her. He had caught hold of her hand unconsciously, as he didn't want her to leave him.

After some time, Jay said, "Just... stay with me."

## Chapter 13

“Of course, I’ll stay with you. You’re not well, why would I leave?! I’ll lay right here beside you on the floor. Just say the word and I can get you anything you need.”

"This bed can hold two people. Come and lie beside me." Even he was unaware of the longing look on his face.

Grace bit her lip and hesitated for a while before nodding. "All right." She lifted up the quilt on the floor and lay down beside him.

She was astonished that she had agreed to sleep beside a man.

His scent enveloped her and his body radiated heat.

Not like a fever, just a warm, healthy body.

“Are you sure I can’t take you to the hospital?” She didn’t think he had insurance, but she could go on a payment plan. The cost was irrelevant, the only thing that mattered was his well-being.

“I’ll be okay,” he assured her. “Just stay with me.”

She held his hand and shifted on her side so she could hold one arm over his body in a loose hug. It was a novel feeling to comfort this man, and for her, it brought into acute awareness how long she’d denied herself any comfort or any connection to another human being.

Sure, she had her friends, and she loved them.

But this... this involved trust, and connecting to someone new. After all that she'd been through, she was glad she hadn't lost all of her humanity.

She switched off the light and then it was just the two of them, holding each other and quietly breathing.

"Sister, will you stay with me forever?" Jay asked softly

"Of course! In the future, when you get married and have a family, I'll still keep you company." Bonds could be forged that were stronger than blood. Hadn't she learned that? While her own father and half-sister had forsaken her, Jason had shown that he would be there for her. And she would be there for him.

Jason slowly shut his eyes. He felt assured by her voice and the pain gradually lessened.

"Get married...?" he mumbled. Ever since the death of his fiancée, Jason had never thought of getting married. However, Grace was already thinking about that.

"Sister, do you mean eyes. He felt assured by her voice and the pain gradually lessened.

"Yes," she replied.

He made a small sound and then allowed himself to fall asleep.

Early in the morning, when Grace awoke, she lifted her hand to touch Jay's face and forehead. No fever. And his body had stretched out during the night, which made her think that the pain in his stomach must have lessened. He looked peaceful and handsome. His strong, big body took up most of the bed, and though she'd tried to roll away from him to give him more room, even in his sleep, he'd pull her close again.

She edged away now, hoping to let him sleep a while longer.

"Morning." Grace believed that he was no longer in pain.

"Sorry, I woke you up," Grace said. "It's still early. Rest a little longer." As Grace spoke, she hurried off to wash up and get changed.

She set a pot of soup in the slow cooker and set out the medicine on the counter. "Try to eat something. And please don't forget to take your medicine. You have to take it three times a day."

After Grace had given the instructions, she hastily left.

Once again, Jason was left alone in the small apartment.

He buried his face in the spot where she had lain.

He could still smell her, and feel the residual heat of her body on the quilt.



This woman continued to care for him and asked for nothing in return. Only his friendship and company.

He breathed her scent again and his thoughts turned to darker things.

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Terrence saw his boss holding a cheap mobile phone. It was an old model, and it wasn't to his boss's usual taste. However

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Mr. Reed instructed him to go and get a SIM card. So he did.

Terrence was surprised. But he didn't question his boss's request.

He procured the SIM card in no time and handed it over.

After his boss slotted the SIM card into the mobile phone, he sent a text message. Shortly, the text message alert tone resounded, and his boss, who usually looked cold, smiled after reading the message.

Terrence blinked his eyes in disbelief. He glanced at the sender of the text message from the corner of his eyes and saw the name stated as Sister.

Sister? Mr. Reed was an only child.

Could Grace be the 'sister' whom Mr. Reed was referring to?

In the afternoon, the top management of the Reed Group conducted its quarterly financial meeting. When everybody was listening attentively to the report, Jason's mobile phone suddenly rang.

Everyone saw Jason take out a cheap, old-model mobile phone and answer the call. He put the phone up to his ear and listened to the person speaking on the other end.

"All right, got it. I will remember to eat," Jason said.

The top management was even more surprised than Terrence, by the way, their boss sounded so gentle over the phone.

"Who is the boss talking to?" William Sharf asked him.

Terrence pretended not to hear the question.

After the call ended, Jason suddenly stood up and said, "I need to go out for a while. Carry on with the meeting." After saying that, he walked out of the conference room, leaving the top management astounded.

All of them then looked at Terrence.

"Secretary Klein, what happened? Who called the President earlier...?"

Terrence smiled awkwardly. When the President answered the call, he was sitting close to him, so he heard the words "take medicine" on the other end of the line.

Terrence recalled seeing the bottle of medicine on the President's desk, and he reckoned that Mr. Reed had gone to take the medicine after receiving the call.

Terrence found it unbelievable.

Mr. Reed went to take medicine upon receiving Grace's call. In the past, Jason wouldn't have taken medicine unless he was in great pain. And even then, it would be because he felt like it, not because someone told him to.

"This is the President's private matter," Terrence said. "Let's continue with the meeting." Terrence nodded at the other board members and adhered to the schedule for the duration of the meeting.

Across town, Grace put away her mobile phone and continued to sweep the rubbish on the streets with Claire.

Claire caught her smile and asked, "Who did you call?"

"My younger brother," Grace replied.

"You have a brother?" Claire asked in amazement. "I never heard you mention it before."

Grace merely smiled.

After Grace and Claire finished sweeping, they went back to the Sanitation building.

A number of women were staring at the television on the wall, catching the news. It was official, the Stevens and Atkinson families would be united. It was hot celebrity gossip and her coworkers were eating it up. A picture flashed of the beautiful couple. Lily held out her hand, showing off a ginormous pink diamond ring.

“... the six-carat pink diamond ring is exceptionally rare and of the highest quality. The diamond costs around 10,000,000...”

"Lily is a winner," one of the women said as she stowed her tools. "Lucky girl. Not only is she pretty and rich, but her husband is handsome and wealthy."

Grace pursed her lips. Yes, they were both attractive and wealthy. But they'd ordered her torture and had stood by and watched as she'd had her fingernails ripped out and bones were broken.

They might be pretty on the outside. But inside, they were ugly.

## Chapter 14

Grace's body froze.

Seeing Sean and Lily, and reliving those hours in the prison... the pain, the terror. Not knowing if she'd live or die.

Her whole body shuddered.

And that stupid ring...Sean had taken her to that jeweler and she'd tried it on. He'd been ready to buy it and she'd laughed and said it was too extravagant. She'd told him to save his money. Her love didn't cost anything.

"Grace... are you going home?" a man's quiet voice asked.

Grace lifted her head and saw a man about thirty years old smiling shyly at her. He had short hair and wore the uniform of the Fleet.

She recalled that this was Chase, from the Sanitation Service Center's Fleet.

"Yes," Grace replied.

"I'm free. Let me take you home," Chase said.

His light eyes crinkled at the corners. He looked kind. A little bashful even.

Grace remembered Claire telling her that Chase was interested in her. That was sweet, but she had no intention of getting into a relationship.

"You don't have to." Grace turned him down.

"It's all right. I have a car. It's no trouble to give you a ride home," Chase said as he made a second attempt.

"Huh! Your car is too cheap. This is Grace Cummins—she only wants to sit in a luxury car. If you could buy her a six-carat diamond ring, maybe then she'd let you drive her around," Farah said.

Grace sighed.

She was not interested in Chase, but she had wanted to let him down gently.

Chase's face immediately turned red, not knowing what to say.

Grace glanced at Farah and said, "I think perhaps that's your dream. Because you only care about material things. Or maybe I have it wrong, and you'll go home with anyone who asks you?"

Farrah sucked in a breath. "You—you..." Farah was rendered speechless and she settled for glaring at Grace.

Grace turned to Chase. "Thank you for the offer. You're very kind. However, I live nearby and I'm used to walking home."

She left quickly after that, wanting to avoid a scene.

On the way home, Grace bought some lean meat and vegetables.

She'd never been one to enjoy cooking and had viewed it more as a necessity, but having someone to cook for... mealtimes had more significance now, and she took more care with her recipes.

After she returned to the apartment and started cooking, she settled into a comfortable routine. When Jay arrived as she was finishing up, she smiled. "Perfect timing."

He grunted and removed his shoes and hung up his coat. Then he came beside her to wash his hands.

His nearness had the oddest effect on Grace. It both settled and excited her.

But she knew not to let her thoughts turn in such a direction.

This was her friend, her 'brother' and she'd be wise to remember that.

"How are you feeling?" Grace asked.

"Better."

"That's good. But please continue to take the medicine for another few days. I'd hate to see that pain flare up again."

He nodded.

"Maybe you can look for another job. Something more stable so you can eat your three meals on time." Grace continued, "Shall I help you check on the Internet to see if there are any suitable jobs for you?"

"It's all right. I will look around," Jason said. "If you want me to get a stable job, I'll do that."

"Wonderful!" Grace lifted her hand and touched Jay's head, smiling happily.

She was really taking this sisterly role seriously.

Jason wanted to laugh. But he knew that would hurt her feelings, so he turned his head so she wouldn't see him smiling.

What would Grace say if she learned that he was the President of one of the wealthiest corporations in the city? That his job earned him revenues that rivaled some countries' GDPs.

He had money, power, and privilege.

As the head of Reed Group

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there was nothing denied to him.

He had everything that he had wished for, but he wasn't content. There was something that he desired.



He desired ... his gaze fixed on the person standing before him...

Grace's mobile phone suddenly rang.

She moved her away to pick up the call.

When Grace answered the phone, a stumbling voice was heard on the other end of the line.

"Is this Grace? This is Chase. Clare gave me your number. I just, uh, would like to... tell you not to take to heart what Farah said. I know you're not a materialistic girl. Although I'm driving a domestic car, I'll work hard and get a better car in the future!"

Before Grace could reply, Chase had ended the call.

Grace looked at her phone, appearing troubled.

"Who called you?" he asked. His tone was sharper than he intended.

"A colleague from the Sanitation Service Center," Grace replied as she put down the phone and resumed plating their dinner.

Jason glanced at the phone and asked, "A male colleague?" Although she had not put the call on speaker, he could hear the voice clearly.

"Yes."

"Does he like you?" Jason frowned.

"Maybe," she replied.

"What about you? Do you like him?"

Grace shrugged. "If he finds out that I've been to prison before, he will stay away from me. So it's not important whether I like him or not."

"Is there something wrong with you being in prison before? If he truly likes you, he will not mind that," Jason said.

Grace smiled bitterly. "Oh, I'm not so sure. Many people might not mind such things. Until...they do. Love is not so 'true' as the movies make it out to be."

Jason tilted his head. "What if that guy accepts that you were imprisoned before? Would you like him then," Jason asked.

Grace was stunned—was she open to a new relationship or the possibility of one, even? She wasn't sure. "If someone is willing to accept me, knowing that I'm an ex-convict...I suppose, maybe."

Jason looked unhappy. "Would you like him?" He was determined to get an answer from her.

"No," Grace replied, "I'd treat him like any other colleague." Moreover, she had no desire to get into a relationship.

When Jason heard what she had said, he smiled. "In that case, continue to treat him like any other colleague."

His smile deepened as he asked, "Do you like me, Sister?"

"I like you," Grace replied without hesitation.

"I like you too. I like you very much," Jason said. It had been ages since he had last found someone who could interest him.

## Chapter 16

Jason stared at Grace's sorry figure.

She was just a target in the game, but why... why did he feel uncomfortable when he saw her being treated like this?

It was because... even if she was a target in their twisted games, he could not allow others to touch her. Even if he wanted to torture her, he was the only one who could do it. No one, no one else was allowed.

This is what he told himself.

After a while, he turned around and left.

Sean who was standing not far away looked at Grace's back and a thoughtful look flashed across his eyes.

Lily, who was next to him, gnashed her teeth in anger. "Grace is really lucky. Greg, that idiot, can't he be less ostentatious? He just had to disturb Jay!"

Sean shrugged, but his gaze remained on Grace.

Terrence greeted Manager Wang.

Terrence stared at Greg as if he was looking at a dead man.

They were all the same, these wealthy young men. Too much money, too little control. Always someone to clean up their messes. But Gregory, he had gone too far today. And the

foolish man was about to pay the price for provoking someone under Mr. Reed's protection.

It was a coincidence that Mr. Reed happened to be at the club today, and had seen what had just happened.

What might have befallen the young woman had they not been here?

What would befall Gregory if he'd successfully followed through with his assault on her? Terrence had heard the commotion—the 'disturbance' as his boss had called it—and he'd seen the Stevens heir and several other people watching on while Miss Cummins was nearly drowned in a decorative pond.

Of all the things...

He considered himself a master at his role and as the direct liaison to Reed Group's President, Terrence took his job seriously.

What would Mr. Reed do?

He knew exactly what his young boss would expect.

Terrence said to the security guard at the side, "Whatever he did just now, do it again."

The security guards immediately heeded the order. Two strong and powerful guards dragged Greg directly to the side of the

pool, grabbed the back of his head, and dunked him into the water over and over again, just like Greg had been doing to Grace before!

As for those ex-classmates who came out to spectate, as well as Sean and Lily, they were all a little dumbfounded.

Who would have thought that things would develop like this?

The security guards seemed to have no intention of going easy on him. Manager Wang had no intention of pleading for Gregory either.

Good. They all knew who the real muscle was in this city.

After all, the Anders family was only one of the shareholders of this club. At present, merely the son of a shareholder had been sacrificed. Manager Wang knew the other shareholders would want to be on the right side of Jason Reed.

Terrence turned his head and his gaze fell on Sean and Lily.

Lily was the first to come to her senses. She smiled and said, "I'm sorry for letting Mr. ReedMr. Reed wait. We'll go to see him now."

"No need," Terrence said calmly. He'd overheard every word this young couple had said to Grace. "Mr. Reed said that he won't have time to meet the two of you today anymore. The both of you may go back."

With that, Terrence left without waiting for the two to react.

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Grace returned to the Sanitation Service Center, still shaken.

"My goodness, girl, why are you drenched? Did you fall into the river?" Claire asked. Then she saw the state of Grace's torn clothes, and her teasing tone evaporated. "Did something happen when you sent the documents?"

Grace took a deep breath and slowly said, "The documents... never mind, just now... I accidentally fell into a small pool."

"It's such a cold day, you need to go home and change out of your clothes—and dry your hair," Claire said.

Grace nodded.

Claire stood by awkwardly while Grace grabbed her purse and phone from her locker. "Hey, I'm not sure this is even the right time, but Chase asked me about you. He's interested. And he's a nice guy, Grace."

Grace slammed her locker closed. "Claire, I've said that I don't want to be in a relationship now. Why don't you help me with Chase and instead of encouraging him, why don't you tell him not to put his hopes in me anymore? It'll only be a waste of time."

Claire sighed. "If you really don't have the heart to take a chance on him, I will tell Chase. But I want it noted that I think you're wasting a great opportunity here."

Grace nodded. She was too tired to argue.

"Seriously, Grace, that is no way to live through. You don't really want to be alone until you die!"

Inexplicably, a handsome face appeared in Grace's mind.

She'd have Jay. Well, not in the romantic sense. But they'd be family. And that would be enough.

"I appreciate you, Claire," Grace said before starting her long walk home.

In the evening, when Grace returned to her apartment, Jay was already there.

"I, uh, I'll get dinner started in a moment. I just need to shower first."

Jason grabbed hold of her hand. "You're soaking wet and it isn't raining."

She bit her lip.

He reached out gently and touched her shirt where it was torn.

"How did this happen?"



The question was delivered in an even tone, but she sensed the emotion coursing in him.

Jason's eyes burned into hers. "Sister, did anything happen to you today?"

"What would have happened to me? I've just been sweeping the road like I usually do," she said. She did not want to tell him what had transpired. What could he do?

And with his stomach, what if news of her assault upset him?

"Oh, it's nothing."

She tried to move past him into the bathroom, but he caught her by the hand.

She winced.

Jason rubbed the wound.

A dime-sized hole that was swollen and bleeding.

Compliments of one well-placed stiletto heel and a hundred and ten pounds of force.

"What about this?" Jason said. "Is this an occupational hazard too?"

Grace looked at the back of her right hand, at the spot where Maria had stepped on today.

"Today, when I was working, I accidentally hit it. It's nothing

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" she said casually, not wanting him to worry.

"Is that so?" Jason stared fixedly at Grace. "Sister, if someone bullies you, just tell me and I will stand up for you."

He would make those people pay the price. In the future, no one would dare bully her.

For a moment, her heart pounded quickly. It was as if he knew everything. Was he ...testing her? She didn't want to lie. Not to him. But she didn't want him to worry either.

Especially when he couldn't help her.

He was poor and broken down like her. And if he were to take on one of those privileged assholes, it'd only end badly for him.

And she wouldn't let that happen.

"I can protect myself," she said.

"What if you can't?" he asked.

If that were the case, it would still be useless to tell him, but Grace did not say that. She didn't want to prolong this conversation.

"Don't you want me to protect you?" He stared at her with his dark and deep eyes.

She bit her lip. "You already saved me once, remember? Now it's my turn to try and protect you. And I'll try my best not to let others bully us."

There was a flash in his eyes, but he did not say anything in the end. Instead, he simply replied faintly, "Okay."

After dinner, Grace took that shower she'd been waiting for. Underneath the hot water, she tried to channel all of those terrible feelings and fears out of her and right down the drain.

She only partially succeeded.

In law school, she'd studied and strove to always protect the innocent, and yet... what had she learned? That there were many people above the law. And being innocent didn't mean you couldn't lose.

What happened today was proof of that.

She shuddered.

What if that man on the second floor hadn't intervened? What then?

Would that bastard Greg have abused and drowned her? And what of Maria and Mia, two 'classmates' who'd stood by and watched the assault...

If she were to press charges, they would be accomplices.

If... she wasn't a convicted felon. If their families didn't have enough money to buy entire juries... if anyone actually cared about her or the pain they'd caused her.

She knew seeking justice was pointless.

It would never come for a person like her.

It's okay. You're okay.

Tomorrow is a new day.

She said it over and over again, but deep down, she knew it wasn't true.

Jason found it hard to bite back the words he wanted to say.

On the one hand, he knew why she remained silent. His 'sister' was hellbent on protecting him. Which was just ridiculous.

Maybe she was holding back because of his physical sickness from the other night. If that was the case, well, f\*ck that. He'd been in pain, yeah. But it was bearable.

He'd allowed her to mother him because he'd sensed that was what she needed to do.

Grace sat back down at the kitchen table.

She wore a fluffy bathrobe over her pajamas and she worked in the dim light of the kitchen lamp to sew back together the uniform shirt that Gregory had torn.

Jason's hands clenched into fists.

Grace hummed some nameless tune.

She had her head lowered, and her long hair was hanging loosely over her shoulders. Her hair seemed to lack some shine due to malnutrition. After three hard years of imprisonment and the recent exposure to the wind and sun, her skin was not fair at all. Even though she had a comely appearance, she still looked weathered, and given all that had befallen her in the short time he'd known her, it was obvious the hardships in her life were taking their toll.

However, at this moment, she was sewing her clothes, stitch by stitch, and... she looked beautiful.

The quiet and elegant way about her was unusually attractive.

In the circles he moved in, he seldom saw women sewing clothes like this. The very notion was laughable. The women he knew wore couture clothes that cost more than Grace would make in a year.

He had never thought that one day, such a simple and plain woman would capture all his attention.

Grace finished sewing and looked up. She met Jay's gaze.

His eyes were so focused that her face turned slightly red.

"What's wrong with you?" she whispered. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I just think that you are really beautiful," he said.

Grace laughed. She knew how big the gap between her and her past self was. At most, she was not ugly.

"You're sweet," she said.

From her tone, he knew she was patronizing him. But the blush in her cheeks and lingering smile told him she liked the compliment.

"By the way, when I was free earlier during the day, I saw something for you on the internet. Have a look, do you like it?" She took out her mobile phone, opened the shopping website, and clicked on a sweater in the shopping cart. Then she handed the phone over to show him.

Jason looked at it. It was particularly attractive and expensive. From the reviews, he could tell that tens of thousands of pieces had been sold.

"You only have one sweater for winter," Grace said. "And you don't even have a spare one. I think the reviews for this are rather good so it seems worth the price, and you should look good wearing this color..."

"If you like it, I will like it," Jason said.

"Don't think about what I like. You should like it yourself. If you don't like it, I will find you another one in a different style."

"That's okay, this one is good," he said.

"Okay then, I'll buy it for you." Grace started the online purchase.

She was staying up late into the night to stitch back her own clothes but was going out of her way to buy him something new. He looked at her and suddenly asked, "... why are you so good to me?" The coat and clothes, the phone and food. He knew she didn't make much money. She couldn't afford to buy him these things.

"You are like my younger brother. Of course, I have to be good to you," she said as if it was given.

However, for some unknown reason to him, the whole "younger brother" was a little hard for him to hear. Had she really forgotten that he was actually still a man?

## Chapter 17

After losing face in the club, Greg was beaten into the hospital by his father, who valued business over family.

Even so, several of the Anders family's businesses related to the Reed Group had been affected. For the Anders family, the loss could not be said to be small.

The people who took part in the alumni gathering that day either lost their jobs or their families suffered. In short, every single person who ignored Grace's plight paid the price for it.

When Mia Jemerged from the personnel department, both of her legs were trembling, and she could barely stand.

The personnel department directly gave her a termination letter, saying that they would dismiss her and let her finish the resignation formalities within a week.

Dismissed! She had never thought about it before.

Her family had expended a lot of effort to get her into the Urban Management Bureau. It had not been easy for them to pull so many connections to secure her such a job. What's worse, she'd been on a series of dates and blind dates, and her job was an advantage. She'd been elevated by the political position that she'd been afforded at the Urban Management Bureau. One of those guys caught wind that she'd been fired... it was doubtful they'd want to continue pursuing her.



If she was dismissed like this, not only would it be hard to find a new job, but also she would lose face in front of her relatives and friends. And her family...would be devastated.

When she asked the personnel department why they had fired her or what exactly she had done wrong, the staff simply said, "It's an order from the superiors. You'll be given compensation for the dismissal, but you'll never be employed here again."

Mia panicked and called Maria. "Maria, what should I do? I'm being let go from the Urban Management Bureau. You... Didn't you say that you have good relations here? Can you help me think of a way? Find someone who's on good terms with our director and plead for me."

Usually, since Mia was obedient enough, Maria would be willing to help her. They'd been friends a long time, and there were few people Maria trusted. Mia had proven her loyalty over the years. But at this time, Maria couldn't care less about Mia. She had her own problems to contend with.

Maria could not even protect her own family.

The bank loan that had originally been agreed upon was suddenly rejected, and the family's capital flow was about to stagnate. As she took this call, her whole family was scrambling to borrow money from people.

However, they were in trouble. No one wanted to lend them a dime. And she knew their names had been tarnished—in ways they might not recover from.

Maria held the phone away from her ear as Mia prattled on.

Damn it, her family was on the verge of bankruptcy. She didn't have time for this.

"I can't help you. Go find someone else!" Maria said.

"You... How can you say that? I've always done everything you've asked me to. You said that you wanted me to lure Grace into the private room for the alumni event. I did it, and I didn't hesitate at all. Now, I'm asking you for your help with something, and you refuse!?"

At this moment, Mia hated Maria to death.

She had a good relationship with someone in the personnel department who had secretly told her that it was related to a misuse of power. It was something to do with the person from the Sanitation Service Center.

The only thing she could think of was asking Grace to send the document. However, on this matter, Maria had been the true mastermind!

"I didn't force you to do it. You wanted to see Grace get humiliated

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that's why you were willing to agree. At most, I just gave you an idea. It's your own doing. It has nothing to do with me," Maria said coldly.

The two of them began to attack each other like rabid dogs.

After Mia fell out with her best friend, her family also gave her a hard scolding. However, in the end, they still spent money and made use of connections for her. They tried to find someone to intercede for her, but the money and gifts could not even be sent out.

Even those they did manage to send away, all came back in less than two days, returned by their recipients.

Finally, it was an old acquaintance who had had a good relationship with them for many years who secretly said, "Who on earth did your daughter offend? The backing of that person seems to be very strong. I heard from the director of the Urban Management Bureau that in the future, your daughter will find it difficult to find an ordinary job, let alone this kind of secure one."

Mia's parents were stunned when they heard that. After returning home, they questioned their daughter about what kind of big shot she had offended.

Mia was confused. What big shot could she have offended? In her usual work and life, she did not come into contact with any!

The reunion gathering came to mind. Because what had happened with Greg was pretty hard to forget. And Jason had been furious to have his dinner disturbed by the commotion they'd been causing with Grace.

Wait.

Could it be... that the big shot behind Grace was Jason Reed?

This idea flashed through Mia's mind, but it was immediately shot down.

Grace had crushed Jason's fiancée, Jennifer, in a drunk driving accident. The Stevens family, the Reed family, hell, the most prominent families in connection to them had all wanted her head on a platter.

So who else could be supporting Grace?

Grace was only a sanitation worker—and a convict. Was it even possible? Or had her parents received bad information?

Nonetheless, after thinking about it for a while, it seemed that the only person she had offended was Grace.

The next day, Mia hurried to find Grace.

As soon as she saw Grace, she said with tears in her eyes, "I'm really sorry for that day. It was Maria's idea to ask you to come to the reunion, so I asked you to send me the documents. Since then, I've been regretting it. It's all my fault that you suffered such an insult. I'm sorry."

Grace looked at her coldly. Like she did not believe a word of what Mia had said.

"Grace, can you forgive me?" Mia seized the opportunity to ask.

Grace said calmly, "Why should I forgive you?"

"Huh? I... I've already admitted my mistake. Won't you forgive me?"

Grace felt that this was ridiculous. "It's normal for you to ask me to send documents. There was nothing wrong with it. Naturally, I can't talk about forgiveness."

Mia was dumbfounded. What... what was she supposed to say? Did she have to say that she had been wanting to see Grace get humiliated and make a fool of herself, and so she had set her up to deliver the document?

## Chapter 18

“But I... I made you lose face in front of everyone, and even Greg...”

“That’s what they did. It had nothing to do with you, right?”

“It had something to do with me!” Mia shouted in her heart. This was the first time in her life that she desperately wanted to take responsibility for something. But the words wouldn’t come.

“Well, if there is nothing else, I still have to work,” Grace said, ignoring the bitter look on Mia’s face. She went around Mia and walked to the other side of the road to sweep the ground.

Although Grace did not know why Mia had come to her today, she did not intend to forgive her for what had happened that day.

Just as Grace was sweeping, a figure suddenly appeared in front of her. She looked up to see that it was Chase from the fleet.

Chase’s face was slightly red, and he said with great courage, “Grace, Claire said that you don’t want to be in love now, but... but... I’m sincere. I’m willing to wait for you. When... when you do want to be in a relationship, you can look for me.”

After saying this, he seemed to feel that something was amiss. He quickly corrected himself and said, "It's not that you can look for me, but that I can line up and wait for you..."

Grace stared at him in a daze. "You can find someone more suitable for you. I am just a street sweeper. I don't earn much, and my job has no future. I am not good wife material."

"But I like you." After saying this, Chase's face seemed to turn redder. "Claire said that you don't have a boyfriend now. I will wait."

"But I..." She just wanted to refuse again, but when she saw his flushed face and somewhat nervous expression, she was a little stunned. At least this man, at this moment, seemed to be sincere to her, and as Claire had told her, he was an honest person.

Such a man, generally speaking, would be a good husband and a good father.

But... if this man knew that she had been in prison, he would probably stay far away from her.

At this moment, a voice suddenly sounded behind her. "Sister, won't you introduce us?"

Grace turned around and saw a familiar figure walking towards her. The black down jacket, black trousers, and sneakers were all from discount stores, but on him, they looked stylishly good.

However, his expression was a bit more, she wasn't sure, but predatory came to mind. He didn't outwardly reflect any anger, but something told Grace that Jason wasn't nearly as calm as he appeared.

"Of course," she replied automatically. "This is my colleague.

Jay, why are you here?" she asked.

"I finished work early today, so I came to see you," Jason said as he held Grace's left hand, he rubbed his palms over hers. "Your hand is a little cold."

"It's okay." Working in the chilly winter, her hands would be blown by the harsh wind. Obviously, they would get cold, but she was used to it. She didn't wear gloves most of the time because they made it harder to work.

However, Jason held her hands with both of his, warming them up gently. He rubbed them with one hand and then changed over to the other.

Chase stared at the intimate interaction between Jason and Grace, his frown deepening. He could not help but ask, "Grace, is this... your brother?"

"Yes." Grace nodded.

Jason glanced at Chase and lazily put his hands around her waist. "When do you finish work?" he asked her.



“In half an hour. I’ll be done after sweeping this road,” Grace said.

“Alright.” Jason smiled. “I’ll wait for you.”

He glanced at Chase. “You should let her finish,” he said. “Have a good day.”

Seeing that Grace was trying to finish her work for the day, Chase shook his head. “Excuse me. You’re right. I’ll go since you’re busy.”

Watching Chase leave, Jason suddenly grabbed Grace’s chin with his fingers and half-forced her to face him straight. “I don’t like you seeing other men like this. He doesn’t look trustworthy.”

Grace burst out laughing. “What are you thinking? I don’t have any intentions towards him.”

“Does that mean he doesn’t have those kinds of feelings towards you?” he asked back.

She was at a loss for words.

“Is he the colleague who likes you?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ve already asked my friend Claire to help discourage him. He’s a nice guy, and he means well. I’m just not looking to get into a relationship. I didn’t expect him to approach me today.”

“If you don’t like him, you should refuse him directly,” Jason said. “He’s not worthy of you.”

Grace laughed. “You probably think too much of me. It is me that’s not good enough for him. He has a house, a car, and a steady job. In our workplace, many girls like him.”

“You are worth much more than that,” he said quietly.

In his tone, there was a desire for possession that he had not even noticed.

After Grace cleaned the road and was preparing to pack up tools to return to the Sanitation Service Center, Mia suddenly rushed up from the side of the building and said to Grace, “Can you please forgive me? I really can’t lose this current job. This job is very important to me! I beg you, tell our director that you forgive me and ask him to cancel the order for dismissal, okay?”

After thinking about it for a while, Mia still felt that Grace was most likely the one that she had offended.

Grace shook her head. “You’re mistaken. I have no power here. I’m not sure what you did or why you’re being let go, but it has nothing to do with me. I have no connections with your director either.”

“That’s impossible!” Mia said anxiously. “You’re the only one I’ve ever offended. Could it be that Sean saw you like that and

couldn't bear it, and so he avenged you? Is that why I was condemned?"

Thinking it over

Advertisement

there was only this possibility.

Only now did Grace finally understand the reason for Mia coming to her and begging her for forgiveness. "Mia, you're chasing shadows. Sean ... he has no regard for me. He has not forgiven me, and I can assure you, he'd not exert his influence to lift a finger for me!"

"You need to fix this," Mia argued.

Really? Grace was the victim of this bitch's machinations, but somehow Mia felt like she owed her something!? That was rich.

"Look. I don't know what the hell you're talking about. And if you think Sean is to blame, then you should take it up with him," Grace said coldly, then she pulled Jason's hand and went around Mia.

Mia still wanted to chase after her. However, when Jason turned around and gave her a light glance, she suddenly stopped in her tracks.

That line of sight suddenly caused her to feel a sense of fear. It was like if she continued to chase Grace and pester her, then her fate might end up even worse than it was now.

What... what was going on? The man's face was mostly covered by too-long hair, so she couldn't really see his appearance. However, the eyes of this man scared her to the extreme.

On the way back with Jason, Grace suddenly said, "Jay, do you know Sean?"

"The president of the Stevens Group?" he asked.

"You know him too then. Yes, he's the guy who's been in the news recently. Well, I suppose it's more Page Six gossip than anything really newsworthy. He's the groom in the marriage between the Stevens family and Atkinson family, and... he's also..." she paused and hesitated for a moment before saying, "my ex-boyfriend."

Jason also stopped walking and stood quietly by Grace's side, looking at her.

Perhaps some words or some emotions had been bottled up in her heart for too long, so she could not help but want to spit them out.

"Don't you think it is incredible that someone like me was once that person's girlfriend?" She laughed bitterly. "At that time, I was still a new lawyer who had just graduated, and I thought

that he and I would get married. But then there was the accident. I swear to God, I wasn't drinking. I rarely drink and when I do, I never drive! Then they charged me with vehicular manslaughter. Sean broke up with me. I got sentenced to three years, I supposed I was fortunate to get out in three years for good behavior..."

"What was it like being in jail?"

She paused for a while and did not continue to talk about the nightmare-like situation in the prison. She shook her head. "I ... can't."

Jason regretted asking. He watched her flex and curl her fingers, and knowing what had happened all those years ago, he could see the scars. The bones that broke that hadn't been set correctly. Her joints were swollen.

"Forget it. It's nothing. It's all in the past." She tried to smile for him and failed miserably Jason pursed his lips. She hadn't told him what transpired while she'd been incarcerated, but the information on her that Terrence unearthed had made everything clear.

When he was looking at those documents, he had not felt anything. He'd read and processed the accounts as if he were looking at data on a quarterly accounting statement.

But to hear her talk about it-or more appropriately, be incapable of talking about it, of dredging up those memories... it had something tightening in his chest.

Did he feel sorry about what she had experienced? When had he, Jason, ever been sad about a woman?

She took a deep breath and continued, "From then on, I told myself not to trust the so-called love between a man and a woman. A person can love you one day, but tomorrow, you can be thrown away like garbage."

She punctuated the sentence by kicking a pebble into the street.

"I wouldn't throw you away," he suddenly said.

She unexpectedly smiled. "I know, Jay."

She paused and continued more cheerfully. "So now I don't think about dating, and I don't think about who I'm going to marry or have children with. For me, these are unattainable things. So why waste time dwelling on them?"

He frowned as if he did not like her words.

"It's just like looking at that advertisement." She pointed to a big projection ad not far away. "This ad was put up by Sean for Lily. It's great PR, right? The charming couple, the perfect quote

about foregoing ninety-nine lives to wait for one lifetime together. It's very romantic, isn't it?"

Jason made a noncommittal sound.

"But it's nonsense. No one really means those things." She laughed. "I wonder how Lily would feel if she knew that Sean had said those same words to me. So you see, whether to love someone or change a lover, that's also very easy."

Jason studied the ad. It was a striking picture and a total publicity campaign by both families to drive up their stock values.

Jason looked at the slender woman in front of him. On her face, there was a kind of calm resignation that came from a withered heart. It was as if she had already seen through everything, and there was nothing else that could stir her heart now.

His chest tightened. What about him?

He raised his hand and covered her eyes, which were fixed on the billboard. "Sister, if you don't like this ad, how about getting it removed tomorrow?"

When she heard this, she just took it as a joke. This had been specially made by the Stevens family and the Atkinsons for the express purpose of announcing their marriage alliance. Who would dare to take it down?

It was dark in front of her eyes. His hand touched her skin, and heat radiated from his touch.

After a while, she pulled his hand down and looked up at him. "Jay, thank you."

She thought that he was trying to comfort her by saying these things. "Alright, let's go. Let's go home for dinner." As she spoke, she held his hand and walked in the direction of their residence.

He glanced at the big projection ad and then followed her steps to leave.

Back at the apartment, Grace went to the security office in the community to retrieve an express delivery. It was the sweater she had bought for Jay.

She opened the package, took out the sweater, and touched the material. It wasn't bad. She'd been worried. For that price, the quality was quite good.

"Jay, come and see if this sweater suits you," she said.

The sweater had a blend of blues and greens. When Jason put it on, Grace's eyes lit up. "Oh, you look so good!"

Suddenly, as if she had thought of something, she said, "Jay, bend down a little."



Jason did as she asked and leaned down. Grace held a comb and pulled his hair back.

Whoa.

## Chapter 19

She had always known that he was good-looking, but now that she could really take in all of his features, he was ridiculously handsome.

Far too good-looking for someone like her.

“My brother is really attractive.”

Her word “my” seemed to please him.

She could not help but sigh. “If you were to tie your hair back like this when you’re handing out flyers, you’ll have scores of girls chasing to snatch them from you.”

He laughed.

“How about we go to the hair salon to tidy up your hair later? It’s a pity that your beautiful eyes are always covered by it,” she muttered.

“What’s there to feel sorry for? My current state will only be available for you,” Jason said. “We are family, after all.”

Grace burst out laughing. “You can wear this sweater tomorrow. Get changed and I’ll wash it for you.”

“Alright,” he asserted.

She took out her phone and took a picture of him in the sweater, then moved her finger and updated her Facebook.

Speaking of which, there were almost no friends in her socials. There were actually only two people. One was Lina, and the other was Jay.

“Let Lina look, I’m sure she’ll be so jealous that I have such a handsome younger brother,” Grace said.

Sure enough, after a while, Lina “liked” the post and followed up with a sentence: “Nice sweater. Send me the link, I’ll buy one for my dad.” Then: “By the way, your new younger brother is just like a clothes rack. He should try to be a model. There aren’t any real requirements besides being hot. And he checks that box.”

Grace thought about it and agreed. She then asked Jay, “What do you think about being a clothes model?”

“Not much,” he said.

“Models make a good living.”

He stared at her. “Sister, do you think I make too little money?”

“Ah, no!” she said quickly. “I just want you to have a better life.” Perhaps this was all there was to her life, but she wanted something better for him.

“I will have a better life. When the time comes, I can give you whatever kind of life you want,” he told her seriously.

This was just a game for him, but at this moment, he really wanted to give her a better life in the future.

For him, it would take nothing more than a snap of his fingers. If he said it, it'd be done.

Grace laughed. She did not think he could give her the life she wanted. However, she did not want to hurt his feelings, so she said, "Okay, okay, then I'll wait until you earn a lot of money- and then you can take care of me. That way, I'll be able to live comfortably as someone who knows nothing except for relying on you."

He snorted at her sarcasm. "Great. Glad we're agreed."

The next day, when Terrence went to the break room, he heard some colleagues talking. "Have you seen Mr. Reed's sweater today?"

"No, what's wrong?"

"It seems to be one of Amazon's items."

"Are you sure? How is it possible for Boss Reed to be wearing such mainstream clothes?"

"I don't think it's possible either. Could it be some branded clothes that were imitated? "Nonetheless, it looks different when it's worn by Mr. Reed. Seems like I should buy it for my husband too."

“Hey, why don’t you send me the link for the sweater later?”

Terrence’s body trembled and he silently exited the coffee room.

He did not have the nerve to tell the two colleagues that Mr. Reed’s sweater today was really a cheap sale item. He had even seen someone in the company wearing the same one as Mr. Reed.

Mr. Reed had not said anything, just glanced at the colleague calmly.

As for that colleague, he looked shocked. It seemed that he could not believe that his big boss was wearing things like him.

Terrence returned to the president’s office and looked at his superior, who had taken off his suit jacket and was reading some documents in front of his desk.

With his hair tied back as he normally wore it, the sweater actually made him look more scholarly and less ruthless.

This piece of clothing was most likely bought by Grace.

Normally, before Mr. Reed got to the company, he would change out from the clothes he had been wearing at the apartment. Those clothes were dry-cleaned and prepared for him so he could change back into them when he left for the day. Today, however, he had not taken off his sweater.

What does this mean?

Also, how much longer would Mr. Reed continue going back and forth to this woman's home?

However, naturally, Terrence did not dare to ask these questions.

"Mr. Reed, this is the purchase proposal you wanted." Terrence set the file he was holding on the desk. When he was about to leave, he suddenly stopped.

"Do you know that Sean has commissioned a publicity campaign with engagement photos throughout the city?"

Terrence was flustered. He had never thought his superior would suddenly ask such a question.

"Yes, sir. I know. I've seen them."

"How many of those ads are running in the city?" Jason asked.

"There should be ninety-nine," Terrence said. He remembered that there had been media interviews in which Mr. Stevens had said that there would be a total of ninety-nine projection ads, representing the love of ninety-nine lifetimes.

"It's been quite the campaign, sir. And it has certainly elevated Ms. Atkinson. She's a popular actress, but it's been reported that she'll have several leading roles in the next year."

Remove all of them,” Jason said.

“All of the ads?” Terrence was surprised.

“All of them,” Jason repeated with certainty.

“Okay, sir. I will do it.” Mr. Reed  
Mr. Reed suddenly wanted to withdraw the ads of the Stevens family. Had Sean or maybe Lily offended Jason in some way? Terrence thought hard about what might prompt this. When Jason had been engaged to Jennifer, it had marked a strong political marriage, with the promise of incredible financial gains for both. Of course, the Stevens had far more to gain. Reed Corporation didn’t need them or their assets. But Mr. Reed had made no comments about the Stevens/ Atkinson wedding, he had even accepted the engagement invitation from Sean’s family.

Terrence was puzzled. Suddenly, he shivered and thought of a striking possibility.

Could it be that Mr. Reed wants to withdraw the engagement ads because... of Grace?” Terrence was shocked by his own idea.

Would Mr. Reed do that for a woman? Not even for the sake of Jennifer, who was going to be Mr. Reed’s wife, had Jason ever offended anyone in the business world.

What did this woman

## Advertisement

Grace, mean to his boss? Grace had driven the car that ended Jennifer's life.

Terrence could not understand.

Evelyn stood in the corridor of the hotel and looked at the man wearing a suit and leather shoes. He looked handsome and had the air of a scholar.

"Sean... I know. You and my sister's story is already history."

The Stevens Group was going to shoot a large-scale film. After Evelyn learned of it, she eventually managed to find out that Sean was going to have a meal in this hotel, and from there it was a matter of prudent planning and plotting to find the opportunity to meet Sean.

Since Grace was still unwilling to go and beg Sean, she had to come on her own!

When Sean heard the word "sister" he was slightly stunned. The scene involving Grace in the club a few days ago came to his mind.

Although that woman had once been the woman he loved, it was also because of her that the Stevens family had nearly been destroyed.



If it were not for the fact that he had broken up with her in time, and that the Atkinson family had helped the Stevens family, perhaps the Stevens Group would have become a third-rate company now!

He recalled seeing her at the country club-they'd dined there many times when they dated-and when she stood there in her ugly navy blue uniform, with stains on the ankles and her hair in some sloppy ponytail, all he could think was 'my, how she'd fallen.' He hated Greg, but not enough to champion his ex-girlfriend.

Grace had been brilliant and hardworking. She was on the fast track to becoming a senator. She had the brains and the looks for it. Until...

Seeing her at the bottom rung of society, literally learning garbage and sweeping streets, He could hardly believe it. Thinking of this, the scene of her climbing desperately towards him with her nails being pulled out flashed through his mind.

She kept saying that she had been wronged!

He almost believed her, but there were both witnesses and material evidence. How could she have been wrongly accused?

This woman, in the end, still refused to admit her guilt!

And he hated her for it.

She deserved every bit of evil that came her way.

“It’s good that you understand,” Sean said coldly.

Evelyn continued, “Well... I’m now the only one in our family that can be counted on. I hope that I can be responsible for some important roles and earn more money to support my family, but it’s just that I don’t have any background, and my sister has been in prison. It will be difficult for me to get a good role.”

Evelyn tried her best to frame the current situation in a miserable way, hoping to garner sympathy.

However, Sean’s expression was still frosty. Evelyn kept trying and said, “After all, my sister once enjoyed living a good life. I can’t bear to see her being too down and out. I hope I can make more money and give her a better life now. I don’t know if you...”

“Nerve you saying that!” A voice suddenly rang out. A beautiful and fashionable woman dressed in a brown coat approached them. She laughed coldly when she noticed Evelyn. “I was wondering who this is, but I recall you now. Turns out, you’re that murderer’s little sister.”

Evelyn’s expression immediately turned unpleasant. She recognized that the woman standing before her was Lily, Sean’s current fiancée.

Lily approached Evelyn with a disdainful gaze. "I remember you're just some B-list actress. So, you've come to find Sean today and persuade him in the hope that he will give you a leading lady role? Have you no dignity?"

Evelyn was extremely embarrassed by the scolding. It just so happened that other people were coming and going along the corridor at that moment, staring at them as if they were watching a play.

Evelyn could only curse Grace internally. "If she hadn't killed someone while driving, I would already have gracefully become a popular celebrity and not have to suffer this punishment."

Evelyn had completely forgotten that the several good roles she had first gotten were by virtue of Grace's relationships.

"What? Are you still not leaving?" Lily asked, displeased.

Evelyn could only smile as she looked at Sean. "If I just left now, wouldn't I have wasted a trip today?"

"You have wasted a trip. And you should leave. Your sister and I have nothing to do with each other anymore," Sean said.

"But..." Evelyn still had more to say.

Lily huffed coldly and said to Evelyn, "If you don't leave now, I'll ask security to kick you out!"

Evelyn bit her lip. She had no choice but to leave and planned to find more opportunities in the future.

Lily looked at Sean. “You can’t still be thinking about Grace, right? Just now, Evelyn kept chirping. Aren’t you afraid of Jason getting word of it? Don’t forget, your sister almost married him once.”

The statement sounded like a warning.

Sean’s gaze darkened. “How could I possibly forget? The name ‘Jason’ is like a sword hanging over the head of the Stevens family. For three years, the Stevens family has not had a peaceful day.”

“Exactly! And the initiator of all of this is Grace! The meeting with Jason which we put so much effort into planning was also shattered because of her.”

“Grace served only a three-year sentence. She got off easily.”

“Don’t get me started.” Sean shoved his plate away, his appetite gone.

“Be careful, future husband,” Lily warned.

“Give me a break. All right. I understand. I won’t pay any attention to Evelyn, she was just trying to pull strings. I also told her that Grace and I have nothing to do with each other!” Sean pulled Lily toward him and kissed her hard. “A few days ago,

when Grace was harassed by Gregory Anders, did I lift a finger?  
No. Of course not.”

Lily shrugged. “That was quite the spectacle.”

Grace had nearly been raped in front of a roomful of people.  
‘Spectacle’ was putting it mildly.

Then... that whole debacle with Gregory. The man was a Grade  
A Asshole, but even still, seeing him humiliated like that, and in  
one of his own clubs, no less.

It left an uneasy feeling in Sean’s stomach.

“Come,” Lily said. “Our friends are waiting for us.”

She flashed him a practiced smile.

Sean nodded.

Only then did Lily’s mood improve slightly. She guided Sean  
back to a private room where their friends were waiting.

He’d been too preoccupied to wait to eat, so he’d dined alone,  
but now he’d have to sit through several courses and who knew  
how many drinks.

He steeled himself for a long night.

“This is for us,” Lily reminded him. “A pre-engagement party  
before our actual engagement party.” She nudged his shoulder.  
“Try and smile.”

Sean grinned and slid into business mode. These people were in his same social circle and some of the guys were from upstart tech companies. He knew to play his cards right. Any one of these young men might someday be chairman of billion-dollar industries.

He made small talk and like a good host, he made sure each guest felt engaged.

Suddenly, someone mentioned the 99 three-dimensional Projection Ads Sean had commissioned throughout the city.

Lily basked in the attention. Guys ribbed him for setting the bar too high for any of them to compare, while Lily smiled like such a vow of love was her due.

“Hey,” Annabelle Sanchez said, drawing their party’s attention. “We’re here!”

What? Sean didn’t know what she was talking about. The young actress clapped her hands and ran over to the windows.

“Come!” she said, snapping her fingers at the waiters waiting in the corners of the room. “Open these curtains,” she told them. “The art gallery is opposite this hotel... and it has a massive billboard 3-D projector... We can enjoy the show right now, right here.” She lifted her glass. “Cheers!”

“Here! Here!”

Glasses were raised all around as the curtains were drawn open.

Lily stood at the head of the table, glowing and giggling. "Oh, you guys..."

However, after the curtains opened, moments passed and there was no appearance of the ad. The wall opposite the hotel was lit only by ordinary lights.

"What happened? Could the Projection Ad be broken?" Annabelle asked in astonishment.

## Chapter 20

Lily frowned and glanced at Sean. After all, the ad was being projected by the Stevens family.

Sean stayed calm, "Let me ask about the situation..."

He had barely finished speaking when his phone rang suddenly. He strolled out of the dining area and picked up the call, his expression abruptly turned unpleasant.

"What? What do you mean, taken down? They were all taken down? Aren't they afraid of paying the penalty fees?"

"The order stated that even if they have to pay the penalty fees in full, the ads must be removed.

"Who the hell authorized this? Fine. Replace the ad agency, and get them back up. Immediately."

The manager in charge cried as he reported through the phone. "President Stevens, we rushed to contact other companies but none of them were willing to project these ads."

"Who is it that's trying to go against the Stevens family?" Sean asked, his face ghastly pale. He was flooded with equal parts of rage and fear.

"It's the Reed family," the manager replied. "This issue was personally handled by the Reed Group's secretary Terrence



Klein.”

Sean was stunned. Terrence ... That’s Jason’s personal secretary! Does that mean, this was done by Jason? Was it Jason who

wanted to take down these projection ads?

What does that mean? Did Jason object to the Stevens and Atkinson wedding?

And how far would he go to stop it? As he thought of that, Sean broke out in a cold sweat.

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The projection ads placed by the Stevens family in ninety-nine spots around the city had been taken down in a single day, generating heated discussions within the city. There were plenty of people debating online about whether the relationship between Sean and Lily had changed.

It was a bad omen, others said.

One gossip column ran with the rumor that Lily had called off the engagement.

That night, Sean and Lily made a joint statement affirming the solidity of their relationship. The projection ads had been taken down due to the time limit, but their love would never expire.

This statement was upheld by Lily's many fans.

Back at the apartment, Grace scrolled through the webpage and

came across this news. She could not help being taken aback. She had just mentioned the projection ads to Jay yesterday and they had all been unexpectedly taken down today.

"The ads have been taken down. Sister, are you happy?" Jay's voice suddenly rang through the room.

She snapped out of her trance. She didn't know when he had walked over to stand by her side and it seemed as if he had noticed the article on her phone. He looked at her, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

For a split second, she had a wild idea that this incident was related to him as if he was the one who had taken down the ads.

But that was ludicrous.

She laughed out loud. "Well, it was a bit of a surprise to see their publicity campaign end so abruptly." She shrugged.

"But...?" he pressed.

She shrugged again. "There isn't actually anything to be happy or sad about. What happened between Sean and me is in the

past. I have no feelings for him anymore, so whoever he marries or loves has nothing to do with me,” Grace replied.

“Really, sister, you don’t care about him at all?” He stared at her with a burning gaze, as if those beautiful eyes of his were trying to see through her.

“Would you care about a person who abandoned you?” she retorted.

Another female figure suddenly appeared in his mind. That woman I call mother, did she not also abandon me?

She abandoned me without reservations. Even when I knelt down and begged her, she never once looked back.

The smile around the corner of his lips deepened. “You’re right, that was a dumb question. Who would care about a person who abandoned them?”

She stared at him, beginning to better understand his moods and feelings. If she’d not spent so much time with him, laughed with him over a cup of coffee in the morning, listened to him talk about his day, and then tucked into bed with him sleeping beside her...she might have missed it. But she saw it, the flicker in his gaze.

He’d been hurt. Abandoned.

She recalled him saying he had no family.

She caught the barest glimpse of his pain and realized it was always with him.

He was just really good at hiding it.

As she thought of that, she raised an arm and wrapped it around his neck, pulling him towards her.

Jason's body tensed slightly but he did not resist. He lay his head on her shoulder and felt her smell enveloping him.

Her scent with its faint fragrance inexplicably gave him a feeling of contentment.

It was as if being by her side allowed him to relax completely.

"Jay, didn't you say that you would never abandon me? I vow the same, I will never abandon you. No matter what happens in the future, I will stay by your side."

Her voice was a whisper in his ear.

"Would you really stay by my side no matter what happened?" he mumbled.

"Of course," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Won't you be scared of me?" he asked.

She chuckled lightly. "Why would I be scared of you? My Jay..." She leaned back to smile at him.

My Jay... there she went again with that wording. Like he belonged to her. Oh, he wasn't averse to hearing it. He might even be happy about it.

But right now he was thinking too much and when he raised his head suddenly their faces were only inches apart. The tips of their noses were almost touching.

And he stopped thinking entirely.

Her face flushed red, and when she instinctively backed up, he looped his arm around her waist, stopping her from moving away.

Grace froze. It felt like all the blood in her body was rushing to her head. When Jay was this close to her, she felt lightheaded.

The arm wrapped around her was strong. She could feel the thick muscles that he held in check.

His eyes were nearly black, the pupils were blown out making her wonder what could affect a man like this.

Surely not her, with her scars, baggage, and worthlessness. But in his arms, she didn't feel so insignificant. She felt seen.

As something more than an ex-con.

As a human.

As a ... woman.

She stayed there, suspended in his arms as her gaze darted between his eyes and mouth.

“Still see me as your brother?” Jay whispered.

No. There was nothing brotherly about him at all.

His big body was strong and he cradled her like she was something precious.

And his face. When his dark eyes crinkled at the corners and his mouth turned up in a knowing grin

Advertisement

she realized that he saw straight through her.

She was attracted to him. The way a woman wanted a man.

And he saw it.

Jason’s phone rang and the moment was shattered.

Or maybe she’d been saved by the bell, so to speak.

Grace wasn’t sure how she felt about the whole ‘near kiss’ moment with him.

Part of her thought she’d cooked up the intimate embrace and that she was reading too much into it.

The other half of her felt... alive. Like her mind and body were coming back to life after years of being dormant.

It was probably just his good looks. He was so attractive that she'd have to be dead to not respond to him in some way.

"Grace, please sweep the rubbish next to the garbage can. The garbage truck is coming in a while," Claire said.

And just like that, she was jolted from the memory. "All right," Grace said.

She caught a glimpse of Chase coming into the center and she shot a quick glance at her friend. Nice of Claire to take her out of Chase's path. For a while, she wasn't sure if Claire was going to

respect her decision or if she was going to keep trying to convince Grace to give Chase a chance.

He was a nice enough man.

But... he deserved better than her!

So did Jay for that matter.

Grace frowned.

She cherished his friendship. She tried to imagine her apartment without him in it. If she came home one day and he wasn't there.

It sent a pang through her chest.

More of her coworkers were gossiping about the Stevens ad drama. She meant what she'd said to Jay, she didn't care one way or the other about him. If she still had feelings for Sean maybe she would've enjoyed seeing him embarrassed. It was nice, don't get her wrong, it made her believe that maybe karma did work. But if she subscribed to all of that then she'd have to think that she'd done something to earn all the turmoil and pain

she'd experienced.

It's okay. You're okay.

Today is a new day.

She walked to the garbage can and started to sweep the surrounding area.

Suddenly, a pair of Dior high heels came into Grace's view.

She had once seen plenty of luxury brands and was aware that these particular shoes cost more than she'd make in several months.

She then lifted her head and Lily's beautiful face came into sight.

Grace had not been expecting to come across Lily again so quickly.



Lily looked the same as when Grace had met her for the first time all those years ago.

She was tall and thin in the way only actresses could be. Her skin had a perfect glow. Meticulously applied makeup, haute couture clothes, expensive designer handbag...

She looked every bit the actress and fiancée to one of the richest men in the city.

If not for either of those things, she was still the only daughter of the Atkinson family and a socialite in her own right.

Even then, when Lily permitted others to rip out her nails, she was still dressed exquisitely. Her expensive and branded clothes stood out in the dark prison.

She looked so radiant and glamorous, then. And now.

It was also this city socialite, highly esteemed by everyone else, who'd made it her goal to see Grace tortured and abused.

There was a moment when Grace understood Lily's plight.

Jennifer, Lily's sister, had died. But it was an accident!

Lily hadn't even been close to Jennifer. They were related, but for Lily to be so vengeful, so focused on hating Grace at every turn, even years later, it made no sense.

Maybe if Grace had been unrepentant. But that wasn't the case. She deeply regretted the accident.

Annabelle, who was accompanying Lily, also noticed Grace and immediately sneered. “I was wondering who this is. Isn’t she the perpetrator who killed Jennifer? This sure is karma. I can’t believe she’s now here working as a sanitation worker.”

Grace’s complexion paled and she remained silent. She lowered her head and continued to sweep up the rubbish that had fallen around the dumpster.

“She sure is thick-skinned,” Annabelle said. “If it were me who had killed someone’s sister, I’m afraid I would cry bitterly as I knelt down and begged for forgiveness. I can’t believe that some people would see it as not a big deal,” Annabelle taunted further.

Grace took a deep breath and slowly raised her head. She looked at the two of them and said, “I’ve already paid the price.” She held the broom in front of her, a physical barrier to encourage these two women to keep their distance.

There were surveillance cameras all around the building— it was a government building-but government officials could be bought, as she’d learned in the course of her trial and when she’d been tricked into delivering the papers to Mia.

“I was incarcerated for three years over an unwarranted accusation and my lawyer license was suspended. I suffered

through all sorts of hardships in jail and could only be a sanitation worker after being released.”

“Oh, poor you,” Annabelle mocked. “You have a shit job. Big deal. You’re alive, aren’t you? While Jennifer is dead!”

“You think you’ve paid the price? It was only three years in prison and you think that’s the price?” Lily asked coldly. “It should’ve been a life for a life.”

“What do you want now?” Grace retorted calmly. “I’m already living the worst life possible. I have no family. No friendships. Everything I’ve worked for was taken from me. Did you come here to gloat? I can now say that I have nothing to my name, and therefore I have nothing to lose.”

Lily stared at her, making a sweep from the top of Grace’s messy head to the bottom cuffs of her neon orange sanitation worker uniform.

In three years’ time, the woman’s originally dark and long hair had withered and yellowed.

Lily could still recall the first time she had met Grace and had been surprised by her hands. They were smooth and fair, and the nails were meticulously manicured. They had seemed even prettier when holding a pen.

However, this pair of hands were currently not holding a high-quality fountain pen but a rough and dirty broom.

“It seems like your hands have not been completely crippled!”

Lily said, huffing coldly. “We were too gentle with you last time.”

Grace tensed, her hands clutching the broom and tightening.

“Grace, you have nothing to do with Sean anymore. Do you understand me? Don’t let your younger sister make a fool of herself by trying to get close to him again. If she does, you’ll both pay the price for it. And next time, I’ll see that you don’t even have hands to hold.

it happens again, don’t think of holding anything with your hands ever again!”

Lily thought of the projection ads that depicted Sean’s proposal being taken down, and she resented Grace with all her heart.

When they had found out that the person behind the ads being taken down was Jason, the Stevens family had been like birds startled by the mere twang of a bow-string. They were unsure if Jason had done it because of Jennifer’s death and was still taking his anger out on them. They had originally thought that when Jason had agreed to attend the two families’ engagement dinner, he had not minded the marriage between them, but now they were not so sure...

## Chapter 21

Grace found the statement laughable. “Then you can say those words to my younger sister but not to me. I still need to work, so if you could excuse me.”

Annabelle replied angrily, “If it weren’t for you, why would the projection ads of Sean proposing to Lily have been taken down? You killed Jason’s fiancée and he’s taking it out on Sean and Lily’s families, and yet you’re just fine, casually sweeping the streets here.”

Grace was stunned. The thought had not occurred to her that it had been done by Mr. Reed.

Mr. Reed...as a matter of fact, it was also because of him that she was able to escape from Greg the last time.

The Reed family was the most powerful and the wealthiest in all of the city. Mr. Reed controlled the huge Reed Corporation, and that meant that he could have whatever he wanted.

Grace had found that out the hard way.

In the beginning, when Sean was rushing to break up with her, not a single lawyer in the city was willing to handle her case. Wasn’t that also because of Jason Reed?

All the pain she suffered in prison was ignored by the prison guards, wasn’t that also because of him?

Because the person she killed was Mr. Reed's fiancée.

There was even a time during her imprisonment when she'd nearly been drowned in the bathroom sink. She could still recall almost suffocating and the fear of death enveloping her-much as it did with Gregory at that awful reunion party.

And the reason behind her treatment in jail was just because someone had heard that the Reed family had given orders to punish her there. Those who wanted to curry favor with the Reed family had hastened to stomp on her several more times, torturing her.

Grace continued to sweep, ignoring Annabelle's scolding.

Annabelle was angry beyond belief and rushed forward to slap Grace but was stopped by Lily.

"Lily! Grace has no respect for anyone, I want to teach her a lesson!" Annabelle jerked her hand free.

"Why bother?" One corner of Lily's lips suddenly tugged up.

"One of my rings has gone missing. I'm not sure if it fell around here and then got swept up like rubbish. It seems like I'll have to trouble the employees of the Sanitation Service Center to help me look for it."

Annabelle was stunned but she immediately snapped out of it. She also smiled and said, "Yeah, they do need to look for it

properly. Your ring isn't cheap. They will have to go through all of the garbage in this dumpster lest they miss it."

As Annabelle spoke, she turned toward Grace and continued, "Since you were sweeping here just now, you must know where it is. You've probably already swept the ring into the garbage bin, so hurry now and look through the bin to find it."

Grace stopped what she was doing and stared at her coldly.

"What are you looking at? Go and find it! If you can't find it, it means that you must have stolen it!" Annabelle responded maliciously.

Claire, who was sweeping across the street, noticed the commotion and walked over to ask what had happened.

It was at that moment that Grace noticed Lily dialing a number. Sure enough, it was not long before Claire received a call from the director, stating that they had to find the ring Lily had lost, no matter what.

Grace pursed her lips tightly. She was aware that today's incident was just Lily deliberately making things difficult for her, and now she had no choice but to find this non-existent ring.

A few moments later, their group leader also rushed over. When he heard that Lily's ring was worth hundreds of

thousands of dollars, he immediately turned to Claire and Grace. "Hurry and look for it in all of the places that got swept just now and in the garbage bins that were just filled. You must find the ring!"

"Oh, thank you, Director." Lily held a hand to her heart. "I would be gutted if we didn't find it!"

It was a pathetic performance.

Grace's boss assured her it would be found.

Lily nodded appreciatively. "Then we'll wait in the car. If you find the ring, inform us," Lily ordered gracefully and turned to leave.

"Ah? In the car?" The group leader was clearly stunned. He was surprised that a ring worth hundreds of thousands of dollars had been lost and that the two women had decided not to supervise the search.

"After all, our Lily is a popular celebrity. If she were to stand here and watch you searching for the ring, it would probably only be moments before she got surrounded by movie fans," Annabelle said.

The group leader thought so too. And probably didn't want any bad press for the Sanitation Center. "You're right. Please about your day. We'll contact you the moment we find something."



Lily's car was parked nearby. Even if she sat in the car, she could still easily see Grace, digging through the garbage, looking dejected and insignificant.

"She's only qualified to go through rubbish," Annabelle said cruelly with a smile. "Despite how she was so smug moments ago, she still has to wade through a garbage dump now."

Lily calmly replied, "Let's leave after a bit."

Grace's current appearance was making her seem not as threatening.

Even though this woman was once loved by Sean, in the end, she was also abandoned by him.

And yet, back in the prison, even when all ten of Grace's fingertips had been bleeding, all fingernails ripped out and all of the bones in her fingers had been broken, she still insisted that she was framed and that she was innocent!

Why did that woman suffer through such pain and still insist that she was innocent? Did she actually think that if she persisted in proclaiming her innocence that she would not really be guilty? Or that they'd somehow believe her and go easy?

Jennifer was dead!

The law looked at the evidence!

“Oh right, best to commemorate it,” Annabelle said and took out her phone to take a picture of Grace inside the huge dumpster, hefting broken bags and sifting through all kinds of refuse and rotting food.

Annabelle shook her head. “You’re right. I’m glad we’re in the car and going to leave. Can you imagine that stench?”

Grace did not know when this farce would end but it was clear that it would be impossible to get off work at her usual time. She had also gotten Claire and several other coworkers in trouble by making them stay behind with her to look for a non-existent ring.

Grace removed the plastic gloves she was wearing and reached for her phone to dial a number. “Jay, it’s me, today I’m... there. are some issues at the center, I’m afraid I’ll not be back until very late. Make a little something for yourself for dinner, you don’t have to wait for me.”

A strong male voice rang out from the other end of the phone. “What happened?”

“Oh, it’s you.”

Just hearing his voice brightened her spirits.

“It’s just... uh, some work-related issues. Anyway

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you don't have to wait for me," she replied. She saw that the group leader was glaring at her and she hurriedly ended the call. She put on her gloves again and continued to look through the trash.

In the president's office of the Reed Group...

Jason gave an order to his secretary. "Terrence, go and look into what's happened to Grace at the Sanitation Service Center."

"Yes, sir." Terrence agreed dutifully and left the president's office.

Contemplation flashed through Jason's eyes. In the call just now, he could clearly sense that she was hiding something, but... what was she hiding?"

Terrence was able to uncover the incident with minimal effort.

"Lily is alleging that she has lost a ring worth hundreds of thousands. She called the director of the Sanitation Service

Center, and he ordered Miss Cummins to go through the rubbish then and there to look for the ring."

Terrence called Lily by her full name but addressed Grace respectfully, which proved both of their statuses within Jason's heart.

Jason's eyes narrowed immediately. "Go through the rubbish?"

The iciness of his tone made Terrence freeze. "Yes."

"Is it worth going through rubbish for one stupid ring?" Jason laughed coldly. He muttered to himself momentarily before continuing. "Since Lily likes searching for rings so much, then let her look for it properly until she's had enough of it!"

Terrence had been at Jason's side for many years and was aware that his employer had lost his temper.

This was so rare.

Throughout these years, there have only been a few incidents that have angered Mr. Reed. And at this moment, he'd never seen his boss more furious.

Lily and Annabelle seemed as if they had had enough of looking at Grace's dejected form searching through the rubbish and decided to drive away.

Annabelle asked, "How long are you going to let her look for it?"

Lily replied casually, "Let her look for it till late at night, just before I go to bed. Then, I'll call the director and tell them that it's fine if they can't find the ring. I'll just acknowledge my misfortunes."

“Heh, you let her off easily,” Annabelle said. “If Sean saw her now, I’m afraid he’d vomit. Grace is not worthy of people like Sean. Only a socialite such as you can match him.”

Just as the red Maserati started its engine, several police cars suddenly drove toward them. In the blink of an eye, the Maserati was surrounded by the police.

A policeman stepped out of one of the cars and knocked on Maserati’s glass window.

Lily lowered the window and heard the policeman say, “We received a report that a ring worth hundreds of thousands was lost here. We’re going to lodge a report now to investigate if the ring was lost or stolen.”

“Lodge a report?” Lily and Annabelle were both stunned.

“But we didn’t call the police!” Annabelle shouted noisily.

However, the policeman paid them no mind and continued, “Anything worth over a hundred thousand dollars is considered a major case. We would appreciate your cooperation and we also hope to help the two of you recover the ring.”

But the problem is... no ring was lost! The two of them exchanged looks. Lily spoke through clenched teeth, “I don’t want to investigate the missing ring further. It’s fine if it can’t be found.”

“If this is a theft, then the value of the item qualifies it as a criminal case and we have to lodge a report to conduct an investigation. If you could please get out of the car and confirm the general area where you realized the ring was lost.” The officer handling this case wasn’t taking any chances.

“We’re going to do this by the book, ma’am.” He opened the car door for Lily. “Now, if you’d please step out of the car. We’ll take a statement from each of you, separately...”

personnel who was handling the case said insistently.

Lily and Annabelle exited the warm car and were welcomed by a cold blast of air. They walked to the spot where they had been speaking to Grace just then. However, the place was now covered with piles of rubbish.

A large mass of rubbish that had originally been in the bins had now been poured out. The piles had been placed out in the open

to facilitate the search for the ring.

The stench of the rubbish drifted over ceaselessly. Lily and Annabelle were both dressed flashily and stood out even more in the midst of the piles of rubbish. And yet, the personnel handling the case was not willing to let them leave, insisting that they stand still as they recounted their experience.

Their recounting was an ordeal. After they finished, they thought they would be able to leave but the personnel said, "Since we're already looking for the ring, then would the two of you just stand here and wait a moment? If the ring is found, you'll be able to immediately confirm if it's yours."

"Stand here?" Annabelle asked with surprise.

"Yes."

"But it's so dirty and smelly here..."

Just then, an alarming voice suddenly rang out nearby, "Oh my god, that must be Lily! I'm actually getting to see a huge celebrity!"

Immediately after, a large crowd of people gathered around them.

"Why is she standing in the middle of a rubbish pile?"

'Are those police standing next to them? Are they filming a movie now?'

The surrounding crowd erupted in wild discussions.

"I think it's best if I leave now. I will let my assistant and lawyer assist the police regarding this matter," Lily said, mentally wishing to leave the place as soon as possible.

“Miss Atkinson, I know you’re a celebrity, but the sanitation workers are currently working hard to find the ring for you. You’re the party concerned and your role is to just stand aside and wait, can’t you even do that? Or do you think you’re better than everyone else?” the policeman retorted righteously.

Even if Lily really thought she was indeed better than everyone else, she was unable to say it out loud as the crowd gathered around her had gotten bigger.

Lily grew even angrier, especially when she saw that some of the gathered people had taken out their phones to record them. And yet, on the surface, she still had to maintain her composure.

It was not long before more Sanitation Service Center workers, along with people sent by the police, arrived to help look for the ring.

This was ridiculous!

It was freezing cold and she and Annabelle were surrounded by onlookers as they were interrogated by the police, all while standing next to piles of garbage and breathing in waves of noxious fumes.

Needless to say, the ring was ultimately not found. When the police finally allowed Lily and Annabelle to leave, the two of them were close to vomiting from the stench.



“Lily, what do we do? This incident has been blown way out of proportion. They’re deeming it a criminal case,” Annabelle said nervously when they were back in the car. She didn’t mind the occasional prank or joke, but having the police involved was never a good thing. “Who on earth reported the case? ”

“I’ll handle it. It’s not like the case can be resolved,” Lily said, her face grim.

## Chapter 22

Lily was less worried about the criminal case and more concerned about her self-image. She was a celebrity who was often photographed in high-class venues and she'd spent the last hours beside piles of garbage. Between the fans, workers, and police, there were plenty of people at the scene recording her and she was afraid it would turn into a trending topic. That was all she needed Ugh! She hurriedly called her agent and publicist to suppress all related news.

Grace's body was engulfed in the stench of the garbage.

Although she'd worn gloves and had washed her hands multiple times, a faint odor still lingered on them. As for her body, even after changing out of her uniform into her day clothes and jacket, the smell still clung to her skin. "These rich people are too much. They just lose a ring and suddenly, we're the ones tortured for it!? If it's such an expensive ring, why didn't they look after it more closely themselves?" Claire grumbled.

Grace gave her a few words of comfort, then took her bag and left.

After Lily's farce, she went back home later than usual. The street lamps had already been lit. The Cold wind blew at her face and pricked her.

Today, she once again sensed the difference between her past and her present.

When Lily had asked for the ring to be searched for, she had not even an ounce of strength with which to fight back.

Because she needed this terrible job. No one else would hire her.

Her past self could have given up on this kind of job and still have found plenty of other opportunities, but it was extremely hard for her present self to find even this one posting.

If she wanted to survive, stay warm, and eat well, she could only continue on.

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks and stared dazedly at the nearby figure standing by the gate of the apartment complex.

Jason!

He waited for her to come back!

The light from the street lamp shone on him and his handsome face was the balm she needed.

My present self is different from my past self, at least. I'm no longer alone.

"Jay." Grace quickly ran toward him but right before she reached him she hurriedly halted her footsteps.

He lifted his pretty eyes to stare at her confusedly. "Sister?"

"I... There's a strong stench on me now, so don't come too close to me," she said. "It's been a hell of a day," she said and managed to laugh about it now. "I stink. Let's go in. It's cold out here."

As she spoke, she started toward the building, thinking if she got there quickly enough, she could jump into the shower and wash her clothes before she stunk up the room.

But a pair of arms looped around her from behind and in the next moment, she was pulled into a tight embrace.

"Jay!" she cried out faintly.

Jason hugged her.

He lowered his head and gently placed his cheek against her neck. She wasn't kidding about the smell, but beneath the sharp. garbage scent, her skin smelled like her.

Lily had intentionally made things difficult for her today and he'd hated that she was not only upset by Lily's antics but also forced to labor so terribly. She leaned against him, tired and weak. And he hated that too.

"Sister, no matter what odor you have on your body, you don't have to stay away from me."

“But...” Grace squirmed with embarrassment and Jay didn’t know if it was because of the way she smelled or his hug.

“Since we’ve already promised to depend on each other, then what is there to avoid? Does it mean that one day if I smell or sweat, you will deliberately stay away from me?” he retorted.

Grace remained silent for a while. She then took a deep breath and said, “All right, I understand. I won’t do it again.”

He nodded victoriously. “Come, it’s cold.” He held her hand and return to the cramped apartment.

“You go shower and change, I will make dinner.”

She tilted her head at him, no doubt wondering if he could cook. And she wasn’t wrong, he had virtually no experience in the kitchen, but cooking was based on measurements and cooking times. He was an engineer by nature, he understood numbers.

“Go,” he insisted, pushing her forward.

Grace went into the bathroom and closed the door.

He rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

She stayed in their close to an hour. And though he’d done a decent job of cooking the meat and rice, by the time she came out and sat across from him, the food had cooled.

Grace didn't seem to notice and she ate with relish.

"What happened today?" Jason asked.

Grace hesitated and she chewed slowly before setting her fork down.

"It's silly, really. And today's event has been blown out of proportion. But given all the people and all the workers and police involved, I'm surprised you didn't hear about it already on social media."

"I don't want to hear about it online, I want to hear about it from you."

"Okay," Grace said and then she recounted the whole story for him.

Jason listened to her in silence. Once she was done narrating, he asked, "Aren't you angry?"

She chuckled at the question. "There's nothing to be angry about."

"She hadn't really lost a ring, she was just making trouble, wasn't she? Why aren't you angry?"

"Because there's no point in getting angry," she replied. "Do you know Jason Reed?" she asked suddenly.

His expression was a little stunned and his eyes flashed as they studied her. He shifted and his hair covered his face

“He’s pretty much the most powerful person in this city. Of course

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he’s rich. A billionaire or something, and either for his money or influence, people want to curry favor with him,” she said.

“What about him?” Jason said neutrally.

“When I was still incarcerated, because I was charged as the driver who caused his wife’s death, there were plenty of people who ingratiated themselves to him by hurting me in prison. If I got angry over everything, then, other than ultimately angering myself to death, there would be no other benefit from it.”

She said this offhand while scooping more rice into her bowl. It might have been said dismissively, but his heart suddenly started to twinge.

Even if she didn’t spell it out explicitly, he could guess what she went through in prison. Just as she said, there were too many people trying to curry his favor.

There were even some who’d actually mentioned to him how they had “taught her a lesson” in prison. How did he respond?

He probably dismissed them with a laugh.

After all, this was a very trivial issue for him.

And yet now, he was suddenly feeling somewhat regretful. If he had known then that she was this kind of woman if he had known he would have crossed paths with her, and maybe even gotten along with her like this, would he have let anyone lay a finger upon her in prison? No. Absolutely not.

He might even... not have let her be imprisoned at all!

“Are you okay?” It was as if he had stared at her until he was entranced. She raised a hand and waved it before his eyes.

He abruptly grabbed her hand and felt the rough callouses on her palm.

“Did you suffer in prison, Grace?”

She swallowed hard and looked away. She shuddered and her hand trembled in his as she recalled those horrors.

When she turned back to him, her expression was clear. Grace smiled faintly. “It’s all in the past.”

And yet the more indifferent she acted, the more his heart ached.

What kind of suffering did she endure to be so dismissive when recounting these experiences?



“In the future, if anyone hurts you, I won’t let them get away,” he said as if he was making an oath.

She rubbed his head of black hair. Treating him very much like the younger brother she professed him to be.

But he knew better. He’d gotten close to her and saw how she responded to him.

She might try to keep him at arm’s length, but they were far past that.

“Jay, I’m a big girl, and I can take care of myself. Don’t keep saying stuff like that.” She smothered a yawn. “Hurry up and eat.” As she spoke, she lowered her head and continued eating the food before her.

A spark flashed through his eyes as if he was thinking of something.

The incident had indeed been blown out of proportion and yet it did not occur to Lily that her company would be unable to suppress this top search.

There were simply too many sites and too many people talking about the event.

And while her people could bribe some news outlets, there were simply too many and the scene of her standing at the

roadway while an entire dumpster of garbage was opened and sorted... that was sweeping the world and trending.

Damn it!

Between the missing ring and speculation of what it cost and looked like, and the sanitation workers going through the trash looking for it, there was more than enough fodder to keep people talking.

The corresponding images were especially publicized. In it, she was dressed flashily as she stood beside the rubbish piles, and next to her were several sanitation workers bent over the trash looking for the ring.

Such a contrast immediately generated the ire of many. They all accused her of being morally flawed and putting on airs.

The 'rich bitch' who watched while others labored.

There were even some online who stated, "She lost her own ring and still wanted the sanitation workers to find it. They have already been working hard sweeping the roads for the entire day. Why didn't she look through the rubbish herself?"

"So she's better than everyone just because she's a celebrity?"

"Who is she to hog the city's resources? She doesn't pay the sanitation workers' salaries. Why does she need so many people to help her look for a ring?"

Even if Lily's fans worked hard to clear their idol's name, they were unable to curb those negative comments. There had been plenty of people at the scene and many of them had recorded videos of the incident and uploaded them online.

It was a PR nightmare!

"Why can't the top search be taken down?" Lily saw that the negative comments online had increased and she was no longer able to sit still.

"There's nothing we can do. I don't know what's wrong with these key influencers. We're reaching out and asking them to stop posting. We're offering to compensate them. But they just aren't willing to take down all of the related content."

"This is absurd!" Lily shouted. "Offer them more money!"

"We have," her manager said. "And we have to be careful not to push too hard because that could blow up in our faces. We don't want them to start saying that we're trying to buy them. or silence them. Free speech and all that." There was some rustling on the other end of the phone as if he was covering the mouthpiece. "Not for nothing, but if you'd called me immediately, instead of just your agent and publicist, I would've told you to keep your money and to lavish it on the workers. Or to forget about the ring and go buy a new one-it would've cost a

fraction of what we're spending now on damage control. Damn it, Lily, you could've spun this way better, if you'd rewarded those poor people or if you'd actually gotten your hands dirty yourself."

Lily sucked in a breath. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just run your mouth at me," she said icily.

But his words struck a chord with her.

She could've handled this better.

Better if she hadn't started this farce in the first place.

The manager relented. "Sure. Fine. Hopefully, we won't run into a situation like this again." He was quiet for a moment. Then: "Lily, did you offend someone, I mean not the public or those workers today? I mean someone big..."

"Why do you ask?"

"Because money cures most everything, and this situation...we aren't able to pay to sweep it away. So I'll ask again, who did you piss off?"

"Who could I have offended?" She pondered over it. "I'm an Atkinson, and I'm engaged to Sean. Everybody else should be afraid of offending me, unless..."

Lily froze. Could it be Jason Reed?

There were very few people more powerful than her family or the Stevens-family. And it would take a lot of power and money for her to be refused. The ones who were capable of hiding the truth from the masses and who would be able to influence those key opinion leaders and the media...were few, and Jason was one of them.

“Could it really be that because of Jennifer’s death, he was taking out his anger on her and Sean?”

There had been no change, and their businesses had continued as usual with Reed Group. Jason had accepted their wedding invitation.

And yet, as Lily thought of the previously taken-down projection ads, she was suddenly not so sure.

“Oh no,” her manager whispered.

“What!? What is it?”

“Turn on your television.”

## Chapter 23

Lily flipped on the tv. It showed aerial footage of the Sanitation Center and people sweeping the street and spraying it down where they'd emptied the dumpster to sort through the garbage.

Then the scene cut to security footage photos of her, with closeups of her hand.

"Police in the city launched this investigation in a matter of hours. And they made a shocking discovery...' the reporter said.

'A composite of a series of security camera footage to prove that Lily had not lost a ring.' The reporter shook her head at the camera. 'It's clear from the photos that she wasn't wearing it. The cameras show that she had only been wearing a pinkie ring. Other than that, there had been no other ring.' The reporter shrugged. "The ring in question was purported to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. She frowned. 'Perhaps Miss Atkinson just misplaced it.'

At that line, the co-anchor arched a brow. "Oh, yes, Joann. I can see how hard it must be to keep track of millions of dollars of jewelry."

The sarcasm was brutally effective.

In the blink of an eye, Lily was utterly hated on the internet. The fans who had originally defended her were powerless against such circumstances.

What else could they say? The police had already issued a detailed investigation report.

There was even a large number of fans declaring online that they were going to leave the fandom, and swore to hate Lily forever.

Meanwhile, several of Lily's loyal fans expressed their disbelief and suspected that there had been a mistake made during one of the investigative stages.

Similarly, Lily was also skeptical.

The police had actually issued an investigative report, and yet she had found out about it at the same time as the other online users.

A shiver ran through Lily's body. How could this be?!

Did it mean that the public image she had built up these past few years and the career she fought so hard for would be ruined in a day?

And yet, the worst had yet to come...

At the Reed Group, Jason's personal secretary, Terrence directly called both the Atkinson and Stevens families to inform

them of his employer's non-attendance at their engagement dinner.

Everyone naturally associated it with Lily's current negative press.

When Grace saw the police-issued investigation report, she was somewhat surprised.

She had not been expecting it to be released so quickly and that both Sean and Lily had been unable to brush this under the table.

"That Lily sure is detestable. That day, she wanted so many of us to look for the ring, and ultimately, she hadn't really lost anything!?" In the Sanitation Service Center, everyone was wildly commenting on the incident.

"It's no wonder this is going viral-she's heinous."

"But this really doesn't make any sense. I mean, she's such a huge celebrity, why would she claim that she lost a ring and want us to look for it?" Someone asked confusedly.

"She has nothing better to do."

Claire pulled Grace aside and asked, "That day... I noticed Lily speaking with you for quite some time. Do you know her?"

Farah Steele, who happened to be walking past at that moment, heard the question and mockingly replied, "Claire, are



you joking? Grace might know Lily, but how would Lily know Grace? She's a socialite from a respected family."

"But I saw Lily and Grace talking the day of the incident."

"Maybe Grace offended Lily. That's why such a huge celebrity would intentionally claim that she lost a ring," Farah replied.

Then, she continued as if she had captured the culprit, "Well done, Grace. It turns out that you were the one who dragged everyone into looking through the rubbish with you."

Farah persisted in finding fault with Grace because Chase had a crush on her.

"That's not true nor is it fair," Claire said. "Why would you blame this incident on Grace?"

Grace's cold gaze swept across Farah. "So if someone is being deceitful, you don't shame that person but blame someone else for hurting that deceitful person? Your perception of right and wrong sure is interesting."

Farah's face turned red and she had no way of refuting. She could only glare at Grace with hatred before stomping away.

In the Atkinson family mansion, Lily and her father stood with bated breath in the large hall as they waited for Jason.

"You immature girl, how could you have stirred up such trouble? Grace is currently just a sanitation worker. There's

such a huge difference in both of your social standings. What is there to compare?" Harold blamed his daughter.

"Why did she have to murder my sister? If it weren't for her, Jason wouldn't have taken his anger out on the Stevens family. It's all her fault! And what about the projection ads that Sean commissioned -did you forget about those? Jason Reed had all of those taken down too!" Lily shouted.

Harold's expression shifted. His lips moved slightly but he ultimately remained silent.

"Dad, you must really miss Jennifer too," Lily said. "It's really laughable how when I saw Grace that day, she had no hint of remorse for Jennifer's death."

"All right, don't speak of that woman," Harold replied.

As they spoke, they could hear footsteps from the stairs. The father and daughter duo raised their heads to see Jason coming down the stairs.

"Did you come to see me for something?" Jason asked calmly as his gaze swept across the two people before him.

As Jason's cold eyes took in Lily, she could feel her body tensing slightly. There was a time when her sister had been madly in love with this man!

Lily still remembered her sister talking to her with a dreamy expression on her face. “I once thought that I could never get a man like Jason in this life. He’s too cold, too logical, and even if you hug him, it’s as if you can’t feel any of his warmth. We can be together in a room, and he’s still a hundred miles away. He’s just like exquisite and beautiful porcelain. You can see his surface but you can never see what’s beneath.”

“Yes.” Lily thought so too. Every time she saw Jason

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she was unable to see the man clearly. In hindsight, her sister’s choice of a husband may not have been the best one. Oh, for political and

financial reasons, Jennifer couldn’t have done better, but there was something glacial about Jason.

Something cold and callous.

It’s why Lily had never tried to make a go of things with Jason, neither before nor after the accident. Even though Jason was very good-looking and backed by the large Reed Group, capable of doing anything within the city, the man was too scary and too cold.

Her sister may have been head-over-heels in love with Jason and had finally gotten his consent to marry, but Lily doubted the feeling was reciprocal. She didn’t think Jason had ever loved

Jennifer.

Not because Jennifer wasn't wonderful in every way.

But because this man was incapable of love.

At her sister's funeral, Jason did not shed a single tear.

"Jason, My daughter made a grave mistake, Lily is an impetuous child, who caused an incident that impacted us negatively. I've already scolded her. We hope that you can still attend Lily's and Sean's engagement dinner. Lily is Jennifer's only sibling, and I'm sure Jennifer would wish that you could attend Lily's engagement dinner," Harold said with a sincere expression.

Jason looked at Harold with a forced smile. Harold felt as if his throat was turning dry and he could not finish what he wanted to say.

Harold had-mingled in the business sector for many years and yet now it was as if his entire person was being stifled by someone who was almost his son-in-law. He felt as if Jason could see through his every thought.

"She really is quite indignant. And petty, I think. I was quite surprised that she would cause so much trouble. Lying about jewelry and then forcing minimum wage workers to search for some imaginary ring." Jason shook his head. "I mean, even if she had lost such a ring, so what?"

Harold nodded. "Yes, Jason. This was handled very poorly."

"Harold, you raised quite a daughter," Jason said with a faint smile. "Children should be blessings, not burdens."

Harold smiled embarrassedly.

Lily flushed repeatedly. She was the darling daughter of the Atkinson family and also a celebrity. People chased after her the world over. When had she ever had to suffer such mockery?

Jason's dark eyes cut to her. He knew what she was thinking. He smirked.

Then he glanced back at Harold, all but dismissing Lily. "If you want me to attend the engagement dinner, it's not impossible," Jason said. "Since your darling daughter is so fond of looking for things, then there's no harm in her helping me look for something."

What does that mean?

Harold and Lily looked at him and then at each other, clearly confused.

They watched as Jason walked to the other end of the hall to open a sliding glass door. Outside the door was an artificial pond. It was large and deep, with algae-covered rocks and an assortment of koi. Jason threw the ring in his hand straight into

the pond, then spoke to Harold, "Once your darling daughter finds the ring, I'll attend the engagement dinner."

Harold's mouth opened but no words came out.

Lily looked dazed.

He wanted her to... find a small ring in this pond?! Is he kidding?

Jason ordered a nearby servant, Keep an eye on them. Miss Atkinson has to find it herself. The moment the ring is found, then that's when they can leave. Of course, if they have to leave no matter what..."

He paused for a while before glancing at the two people, who were still dumbstruck. "Then don't let them step into this house again."

Harold rocked back on his heels in shock and Lily immediately shivered.

Jason's words were undoubtedly telling these two that if they left

without finding the ring, it would mean severing all ties with the Reed family.

Seeing that Jason had left, Harold and Lily looked at each other in dismay.

Although the pool in front of them was not too deep, it was still about 100 square meters. Even worse, the bottom of the pool was covered with mud and algae, so it would not be easy to find a small ring.

Lily was about to cry. “Dad, what should I do? Do I really have to go down and look for the ring? Can’t we call someone or try and reason with Jason? This is ridiculous!”

“The man doesn’t give a shit about your excuses, Lily. Whatever trouble you’ve caused, you have to solve it yourself. If the Reed Group really breaks ties with our family, you no doubt know what

will happen to us in the future!”

Since it was related to the future of his family, even though it was

his daughter, Harold could not tolerate any resistance.

Lily was silent. Of course, she knew that many of the big businesses in her family’s holdings relied on the Reed Group. If Jason turned hostile, it would be a devastating blow to her family.

## Chapter 24

Lily felt helpless and could only walk into the pool step by step. It was so cold and the water smelled like a swamp. She began to look for the small ring, bending down and feeling along the bottom.

She winced and screamed several times. When she scraped against rocks and god-knew-what.

What if there were turtles? She could lose a finger.

She had not expected Jason to take revenge for Grace.

And now that he had, she wondered what else he might do to her next.

When Jason returned to the apartment, he saw Grace washing clothes.

Her hands were soaked in ice-cold water and they had already turned red from the cold.

“Why don’t you use hot water?” he asked with a frown.

“Hot water needs to be boiled, which will use a lot of electricity.

Besides, if you wash with cold water for a while, your hands will start to heat up.” Grace said. She soaked the clothes again and wrung them out to dry.

He took her hands in his. They were so, so cold.



“Next time, use hot water when you wash clothes. Just use the electricity, and I will earn the money,” he said.

She could not help laughing. She raised her hand and patted his shoulder. “It’s alright, I should save money whenever I can.

There’ll be many places to spend money in the future. How was dinner with your colleagues tonight, was it enjoyable?”

“Not bad,” Jason replied. Dinner with his colleagues had been his excuse tonight. If he had guessed correctly, then Lily would still be looking for the ring in the Reed family’s pond.

He wondered how long Lily would spend.

“It seems to have grown a little longer,” Grace muttered, bringing Jason back to reality. He saw the person before him raising her hand to gently press his hair back.

“Jay, why don’t I trim your hair for you? When it’s long like this, it’s got to be annoying, getting in your face and whatnot.”

He laughed.

His hair was tied back during the day, and he only left it down around her and while in her environment so people wouldn’t recognize him.

She ran her hands through his hair again. “I think it will look so good,” she said as if already envisioning it.

He stared at her with a bright glint in his eyes. Moments later, he slowly said, "Alright."

Grace only had simple tools-a comb and a pair of scissors. Then, she took a piece of cloth and wrapped it around Jason's neck.

She combed his bangs gently with a comb, then began to trim the hairs on his forehead bit by bit. All of her attention was concentrated on the task at hand.

Jason watched her. The way she studied him, so focused on her task.

That singular focus had served her well in her life-first with her education and graduating top of her class at University and later at Law School. And then in surviving prison.

Guilt stabbed at him.

He saw how she'd been abused in the time that he knew her.

What must her life be like behind bars, with no one to champion or protect her, and countless criminals coming after her all in the hopes of pleasing him?

She sucked in a breath and he hung on to that little sound.

Her mouth was pretty. Full lips, a bright smile.

She didn't smile enough, he realized.

Her skin was still red, likely from the wind and cold, and though it pinkened her cheeks and nose, it only enhanced her beauty.

If he looked hard enough, he could see that she'd been beautiful once.

Her features carried symmetry and character.

But it wasn't the outward appearance that drew him, but rather

what came from within.

This woman... she'd been the one to fight for him. To sacrifice so that he could have a roof over his head, warm clothes, and something good to eat. She'd asked for nothing in return.

And knowing that she appreciated him for him... awakened something inside him.

"It's done." After an unknown amount of time, her voice suddenly sounded in his ear.

"Oh, already?" he asked. It was as if time spent with her passed extremely quickly.

"Mmm." She smiled, took two steps back, and carefully looked at him for a while. "My skill isn't too bad. In fact, it's rather good, and we've saved twenty dollars."

She smiled as she spoke. Then, she took out a dry towel and flicked off the fine strands of hair that were stuck to his face, neck, and on his clothes.

“Alright, go take a shower,” Grace said.

Jason took the change of clothes and walked into the narrow bathroom. Knowing that she wanted to conserve energy and keep their bills low, he didn’t set the shower to hot as he normally would. Warm water rushed over his body as he stepped in and lowered his head to rinse away any shorn hairs. As he glanced down, he saw the scar on his chest.

With time, this scar had grown very shallow. However, every time he saw it, he would think of that woman.

The woman who had abandoned him and his father.

Perhaps this wound was the only thing he had left of her.

He recalled her pushing him away as he knelt and begged her not to leave, and not to abandon him and his father.

The woman had shaken her head and pried his hands free.

When she shoved him aside so she could leave, he’d fallen on a bit of rebar. Jason’s memories didn’t remember the construction or the details of the day, aside from what she wore, how her

beautiful smile had transformed into a snarl, and how he'd been unable to breathe when the metal he fell on pierced his chest.

The doctors had said that the metal had gotten very close to his heart. He was lucky, a centimeter to the left and they would not have been able to save his life at all.

At that time

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he had told himself that that woman was no longer his mother.

He walled himself off.

After his father's death, he stopped having expectations of anyone.

As long as he did not have expectations, he would never be disappointed.

It was just that...

Jason turned off the tap, wiped his body dry with a towel, and put on his clothes. When he walked out of the bathroom, his eyes fell on Grace. She was sitting at the table and seemed to be looking at something.

Since when had he started having expectations of her? He was looking forward to seeing her smile, looking forward to her happiness.

He lived for those moments when she looked at him with gentle eyes and smiled. Her smile lit up the whole room.

“Jay”.

Even the sound of his name on her lips brought him joy.

“Jay, you’re done washing up? I’ll help you blow dry your hair,” she said as she stood up to get the hairdryer.

He walked to the side of the table and saw some documents placed on the table by her side. They were... copies of the record of her original case.

His eyes flashed. “What are you looking at, Sister?” he asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“Some of the related information from my case back then,” she said. “Lina helped me collect them.”

“Why are you reading this again?” he asked.

Yes, why? Grace had asked herself the same question.

It had been three years, and she could not reverse the verdict. She did not even know where the witnesses from that year were now.

What else could she do just based on her status as a sanitation worker?

But could she really give up and accept her false conviction?

She knew what the evidence said, but she also knew it wasn't true. She had not been drinking. So there must be some kind of mistake. It simply wasn't possible for her tests to have shown a high level of alcohol in her system. Because she hadn't consumed a drop.

"Perhaps... this case, there are still some things that I don't understand," Grace mumbled.

And she was determined to get to the bottom of them...

She also did not understand why Jennifer's car had been rushing

toward her.

What made her even more confused was why those witness statements were all targeted at her.

She could not explain. All the witnesses and evidence at that time had proven that she was the perpetrator.

Admittedly, the accident had been traumatic and some of the details surrounding the investigation that followed were still murky. She'd been in shock.

But she couldn't for the life of her understand how there was so

much security or camera footage. Almost every street in the city had some kind of traffic camera. And the people who'd been

witnesses, they'd all had the exact same version of events.

But as an attorney, she knew that rarely happened either. People always had different perceptions, based on their physical position in relation to a crime, their age, sex, and perspective.

Even something as simple as running a traffic light could be interpreted in different ways, depending on who you asked.

Could it have been something else entirely?

Jennifer had been about to marry Jason Reed, President of the Reed Group. She had been in the prime of her life and there had been no reason for her to want to commit suicide by crashing into

a car.

"Grace, do you want to appeal the case?" Jay asked.

"Somehow, I don't think that will do me much good." Grace



laughed self-deprecatingly. "I just feel a little unreconciled. I know I'm innocent, so it's hard for me to let it go."

Jason grunted.

"Besides," Grace said, closing the folder. "It's not easy to overturn

a case. I'm out now. I should be thankful for that and just look forward. No one ever said life would be fair, right? Well, let's not talk about this anymore. I'll blow dry your hair."

As she spoke, she put away the documents and then used a hairdryer to help him dry his head of wet hair.

Jason's eyes gradually deepened...and a plan took form.

The next day, Terrence saw the dramatic change to Mr. Reed's hairstyle. Gone was the drawn-back ponytail, and in its place were layers that while still maintaining some length, were short enough to frame his face. He didn't remember scheduling an appointment with a hairstylist, and he knew Mr. Reed's schedule inside and out.

"What's wrong?" Perhaps it was because he had been staring at him for a long time that Jason asked.

Terrence tilted his head. "It seems you haven't had a haircut for a long time. Do you want me to arrange an appointment with the stylist?" Terrence asked.

“There’s no need. Grace helped me trim my hair last night.”

So it had been Grace! However, what surprised Terrence, even more, was that Mr. ReedMr. Reed had actually... allowed Grace to cut his hair.

Mr. Reed wasn’t vain but he did insist on the highest quality products for everything in his life, and that included having his hair maintained by a top-tier hairstylist.

Grace was... Now she was just a street sweeper, but even in the past, Grace had been a lawyer, not a hairdresser.

“The trim isn’t too bad, huh?” Jason fiddled with his bangs, seeming quite satisfied.

The corner of Terrence’s mouth twitched. “I like it.” Mr. Reed had always been very picky. If the top-tier hairstylists that had been specially chosen by him found out that they could not compare to the skills of a street sweeper, what would they think?

At noon, Lina took time off to meet up with Grace.

The two of them found a small restaurant near the Sanitation Service Center to eat at.

“Lily made things difficult for you that day and asked you to go through the garbage for a long time. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lina complained. As a good friend, she had only found out about this matter through the news.

“It’s not a big deal,” Grace said with a faint smile.

Looking at such a good friend, for some reason, Lina’s heart ached. “It is. It’s not fair to you, Grace. You’ve been through enough!”

Back in the earlier days of their friendship, Grace seemed to have been blessed by luck. She had made great strides in her studies and had always been the top student in school. Once out in society, she had gotten into the best law firm in the City and even began a relationship with Sean-the most eligible bachelor around.

Almost everyone envied her. If she was being honest, even Lina had her days of envy. She was always happy for her friend, but admittedly, sometimes she’d wanted some of that good fortune for herself.

After everything that happened to Grace, she felt extra guilty about that now.