

The Divorce 161

Chapter 161

"I'm impressed that you live up to expectations," he said.

Someone must have told him about me.

Graciously, I responded, "Well, I was just trying to be upfront with you. Given our situation, I'm grateful you're willing to consider us."

After seeing Damian off to the elevator, I went straight to Ryan's office and shared the story with him.

Ryan listened and playfully said, "That's cheeky of you."

I defended myself, saying, "Well, they came to us, didn't they? And I suspect there's more to this than meets the eye."

Ryan nodded in agreement.

"We'll have to be cautious," I said, settling on the sofa. "But a project involving duplexes totaling 50,000 square meters is an enormous opportunity for Tanum. We can't pass this up if the price is right."

Then I added, "If they try to pull tricks, we'll deal with it."

Ryan paused. "Since you've left room for negotiation, let us decide after learning more about Echelon Group. If the terms are good, we should take the job. We can cover salaries with the advance payment if

things go south."

He added, "Maybe they're also looking into you."

"Wouldn't Matthew know all about me already?"

"Well, he still doesn't know your ties with ATL Empire, does he?"

After a pause, I said, "I've already asked someone to help me look into Echelon Group."

Matthew might use the company against me, but if they offered me money, I planned to take it and

maybe even ask for more.

Chapter 162 An Unexpected Reward

After we made our decision, I talked to Ryan about the suppliers Benjamin had been working hard to keep.

I invited Benjamin to join us in the discussion to lay out a more flexible strategy. Of course, we could only make arrangements after confirming the project with Echelon Group.

That evening, Benjamin and Carol led all our employees to Gourmet Utopia, where they had reserved the largest private room available. It was fancier than my previous employee dinners, and all the staff were

excited.

Gourmet Utopia was known for hosting parties and banquets, so most of its customers came in groups, On my way there, I received a phone call from Atlas. He asked me where the dinner was, and I told him.

“Hmm...” He reminded me, “No drinking, okay?”

“Why do you care? I’m having a good time with my employees tonight.”

I was happy that he sounded jealous.

He asked, “Well, you’re mine, right?”

I giggled and could picture him smiling on the other end.

“Alright, I have to go. Don’t stay up too late,” I said. He hung up.

I was happy to hear Atlas claim me as his. It made me feel less alone.

Carol had preordered the dishes, and the waiters served us as soon as we arrived. I could tell that Carol ordered the reasonably priced ones to save me money. She had only worked for me briefly, but she had been a great help.

Her memory was as sharp as mine. She also excelled at shorthand, surpassing my skills. We seemed to have a lot in common.

Just as I wanted to order a few more expensive dishes, a waiter pushed over a food cart. It surprised us to see cheese–baked matsutake mushrooms and lobsters served at every table.

That alarmed Carol. "Hey, hey, stop! We didn't order these."

The waiter continued serving the dishes. "They're for you, ma'am."

"No, they aren't! You've made a mistake," Carol said. A lobster that big would cost a fortune. Who would

order them?

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+15 BONUS

Everyone also received a plate of nachos topped with Petrossian caviar. My employees looked at me, but I was as stupefied as they were.

so generous h

I

I couldn't afford to be before I could speak, the waiter said, "Don't worry, ma'am. They are from Mr. Atlas from ATL Empire as a reward for completing the project's initial phase."

What the hell? Was that why he asked me where the gathering was?

Others exchanged looks and stared at me. Damn it! Anyone could tell something was going on between

me and Atlas now.

Since I was speechless, Carol quickly said, “Oh, when I delivered the blueprints, I jokingly said they should reward us for meeting their expectations. I didn’t expect them to take it seriously. I guess they’re loaded,

aren’t they?”

She chuckled and said, “What are you guys waiting for? Let’s dig

Chapter 163 Not a Good Sign

Everyone burst into laughter. I knew Carol was trying to cover for me so people wouldn’t guess I was with

Atlas.

However, Ryan smiled at me, and I felt bad. Why did Ivanna tell me he liked me? Now, I felt like I had

done him wrong.

Ryan was thoughtful, so he only talked about work matters with me and asked nothing about Atlas’s

extravagant treat.

I

Carol went to settle the bill, but Atlas had already paid it. I wasn’t used to such special treatment.

As we went to our cars, my phone rang again. I knew who it must be and answered, “You’re not spying on

me again, are you?"

"Mm-hmm."

A beam lit the path before me, and I squinted but couldn't see who it was. Even though it was dark, I knew

it was Atlas.

Had he waited for me again? Somehow, I was touched.

I walked over to his car, and he opened the door. "Get in.

Knowing I should not spend another night away from home, I paused. However, he held out his hand, and

I entered the car. "I can't stay with you tonight, okay?"

That's an idea. Come on, let's do it!" He said it cheekily,

"Hey, I really can't."

I blushed, and he teased me further. "Come on, you're a grown woman, right?"

"Cut it out." I lightly punched his arm.

He held my hand and pulled me closer. "Just sit with me for a while. I'll send you

"What about my car?"

“Give me the key. I’ll have someone drive it back,” he said.

home.”

Checking the time, I noticed it was still early, so I handed him my car key, and he passed it to his

assistant outside.

I remembered the topic of Echelon Group and wanted his opinion. He said, “Of course you should take it.

+15 BONUS

I never thought he would ask me to accept the job without hesitation. He was right, though. I was talking about my business, not his

It wasn’t a good sign to care so much about his opinion, and I reminded myself that I should keep a clear

head.

“In every contract, what matters most is getting paid. Don’t overthink the rest,” he advised.

I

“You’re right. I’m also looking into the company to see if there’s more to it. I mentioned

He looked at me. “You’re smarter than I’ve imagined.

I gave him a sidelong glance. "Of course

"Find out who initially won the contract and why it fell through it could provide valuable insights."

His idea resonated with me, and I realized what my next steps should be

He gently ran his fingers through my hair and said. The business world can be tough. Perhaps you should consider a different path."

I leaned into him. A different path? Once I stopped working I lost everything and I never wanted to do that again

The thought of losing him was also unbearable. I chastised myself for having these thoughts so early in our relationship. It was not a good sign, so I closed my eyes and tried to block those thoughts

"What's the matter?" he asked

"Thank you for the dinner and for paying the

He tightened his arms around me. We cruised along the busy streets, but I felt peaceful. Breathing in his scent, I gradually fell asleep in his arms.

When we reached my place, I looked at him with tired eyes, and he playfully pinched my cheek. "Have a good rest, okay?"

I reluctantly got out of the car and waved him off. When his car left, I suddenly felt lonely.

Chapter 164 Probing

Atlas became busy with work, and his calls and messages became less frequent. I felt lonely and wondered if he had forgotten about me.

However, just when I'd feel doubt, he'd reach out as if ensuring I didn't forget him, either. His sweet gestures reminded me he was still present in my life.

Before I could set up a meeting with Lauren, she called and asked to meet me. We seemed to know each other's thoughts. I had to admit that she was capable and had thrived in the "strange circles" in Foswood.

She could dig up dirty little secrets about any VIPs in town.

Lauren had discovered that Echelon Group was currying favors with local bureaucrats to secure the prized plot of land.

Matthew appeared to be their obedient lackey, and Melanie now led Ardora Construction. She used their

association with Echelon Group to win as many contracts as possible.

The duplex project appeared to be a real deal.

Lauren said, “Integra was the original contractor for the development, and the duplexes were added later.

Matthew had been competing with Integra for the project, and then Damian approached Tanum

Corporation after you had taken over. It must be connected to Matthew, I guess.”

”

With a smile, she said, “Let’s consider it as Matthew doing you a favor. He’s quite a fool, isn’t he?”

Lauren didn’t know that I had secured a substantial project from ATL Empire. No one knew who was

behind Hartz Construction, thanks to Urban Builders. When it was announced as the bid winner, people

tried in vain to find the owner.

I bet hell try to take credit for it.” I looked at Lauren. “But you’re right. Matthew must be involved. He’s

the only one familiar with our suppliers. He’s also investigating my ties to ATL Empire. They’ll do anything

for the land in Operose.”

Lauren gave me a half-smile. “So, is something going on between you and ATL Empire?”

“Not you, too! Business relationships are complex, okay?”

I didn’t distrust Lauren, but my relationship with Atlas was private to avoid gossip. I was a controversial

divorcee, and he was an industry leader. If our relationship became public, it would stir up a scandal.

Besides, Atlas had just taken over ATL Empire and was still trying to establish his authority. I didn't want to cause him any trouble.

Lauren giggled. "Then what are you going to do? Are you taking the job?"

"Of course I am! Not only will I take it, I'll do a good job." Why should I miss this golden opportunity just because Matthew was probing?

Lauren gave me a thumbs-up. "You go, girl! But you must keep an eye on Matthew, okay? He's capable of anything. And be prepared in case the rivalry between Echelon Group and ATL Empire intensifies."

I'll be affected even if I don't take the job. If Echelon Group targets me, I may never escape trouble."

"You're right," Lauren said with a sigh. "This is why I've avoided getting into physical businesses at all costs. I'm alone, with no children or family to work so hard for."

It saddened me when Lauren said that. Over our recent meetings, I had gotten to know her better. After her parents passed, she was alone in Foswood.

"You're doing just fine, and I admire the exciting life you've built for yourself," I said, trying to console her.

However, my words seemed to trigger something within her, and Lauren burst into tears.

Chapter 165 Each Has Her Pain

I was stunned. Why was Lauren crying?

I handed her some tissues. "What's the matter? Was it something I said?"

Lauren quickly waved off my concern. It saddened me to see her carefully applied makeup start to run. She had always appeared graceful and friendly, much like a flight attendant. What could cause someone who cared about her looks to cry in front of me?

She took the tissue paper and blotted her face. Her red fingernails were eye-catching, but that didn't stop

me from noticing ho

shoulders were shaking as she sobbed.

I promised to be a genuine friend to Lauren. Before this, I had resentment toward her and doubted her friendship. Instead of saying anything, I let her vent her frustrations

When she pulled herself together, she dried off her remaining tears. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Hey, we all have our pain. Some solve them privately, while others must do so publicly—for instance, me. Everyone knows about my goddamn divorce," I said. "They labeled me an abused wife dumped by a cheater. But life goes on, and if you don't mind, I'll be like your sister."

Lauren looked up at me, dumbstruck.

"We can support each other and deal with problems together," I said. Her red-rimmed eyes made me feel

bad for her.

Lauren got choked up again, smiling as she wept. She eventually said, "Thank you, Chloe. I appreciate it."

Seeing her vulnerable side contrasted with the woman who had uncovered Matthew and Melanie's affair

during the anniversary.

"Chloe... you're closer to me than my family," she confessed.

She held my hand and said, "After all these years, no one has understood or cared about me. I know what those men want better than anyone, and I prioritize survival over chastity. But I have my dignity, and I'm

not content with how my life is heading."

I understood her feelings.

"So, you're wrong, Chloe. I'm not enjoying my freedom and don't lead an exciting life. It's miserable not

having a clear goal," she admitted. "So, you must build your career. If you ever need help, Just let me know. I'll do anything for you."

I held her delicate hand. "You've already helped me so much, and I haven't repaid you."

She smiled, letting out a bitter laugh. "I'm like your older sister, aren't I?"

"You are indeed." I returned her smile and added, "I should introduce you to my parents."

“Really?”

I knew she was upset about something, but I did not pursue it. I knew she would let me know when she was ready.

A week later, I signed the contract with Echelon. The terms were favorable, and we set the price high

There was even a 30 percent deposit. Adrian was also very thorough with the contract details.

The signing of this contract left our competitors envious, especially Integra. They tried to compete with

Matthew by offering an absurdly low price, but the project still ended up in my hands. To add insult to injury, the price was surprisingly high.

Before I could celebrate it, Matthew called me and said, “Honey, how’s that? You have me to thank for the

project. Now you know how much I care about you.”

Disgusted, I hung up without a word.

The phone rang again. Thinking it was Matthew, I picked up the call and said, “Don’t you feel ashamed?

You disgust me.”

“Excuse me?” It was a female voice.

Chapter 166 The naughty Woman

The unexpected female voice startled me, and I quickly looked at the caller ID. I was puzzled when I noticed it was an unfamiliar number.

“H—I’m sorry! I—I was just.” I blushed as I started to explain myself, realizing my previous words were harsh.

I don’t recognize your voice. May I ask who this is?”

The person on the other end didn’t answer my question, Instead, she asked in a distant but authoritative.

tone, “Is this Chloe?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

*Prepare some steel window designs and bring them to ATL Empire’s Design Division,” the woman’s voice was cold and commanding, leaving no room for doubt. “Come in person.”

“All right.” Although I agreed, I couldn’t shake off my unease. I wondered who the woman was she was so cold.

and why

I rushed to the technical department and got them to print my designs. Then, I brought the quality

inspection certificate and other validation documents before driving to ATL Empire's Design Division.

Design Division was in the main building but was an independent department. Everyone knew ATL

Empire's Design Division was highly authoritative. When I arrived on the designated floor, I explained my purpose, and the receptionist led me to the Chief Designer's office.

There, I met a composed middle-aged woman in professional attire. As soon as I entered, she scrutinized

me from head to toe before finally settling her gaze on my face. Her gaze was cold and sharp, and she

seemed sure of who I was. She spoke without pleasantries, "The design,"

I politely handed over the designs I had brought. The woman wasted no time in taking them from me to

review them. Soon after, she said, "Okay, you can leave now."

I was displeased by her attitude and couldn't help but stare at her. She seemed to sense it and shifted her

gaze from my designs to meet my eyes. Her tone grew increasingly unfriendly as she asked, "Is there

anything else?"

I wondered how to respond for a while. I cleared my throat and finally said, "The current designs cover

the most commonly used styles and sizes. If you have special requirements or unique structural shapes,

please communicate them to us. Design adjustments may take about three to five working days to be complete.”

“Got it,” she replied decisively.

“In that case, I’ll take my leave,” I said, not wanting to engage with her further. After all, there was no need to interact with someone who didn’t appreciate it. Respect should go both ways.

I was still trying to process the encounter as I left the room and entered the elevator. I was sure she was the one on the phone earlier. This woman was unlike anyone I had ever met. She was arrogant and event

hostile.

I was surprised to run into Nick when I reached the ground floor. We both paused, and I took the initiative to greet him with a smile. “Long time no see, Mr. Nick.”

“What brings you here today, Ms. Chloe?” he asked, his refined demeanor intact

“I came to deliver a set of steel window designs to the Design Division,” I replied truthfully.

He hesitated for a moment before returning a polite smile to me. “Oh, but why did you come in person?”

I smiled, being deliberately subtle, “They requested that I bring them personally. How could I refuse?”

Nick looked curious this time but maintained his gentlemanly demeanor, saying, “I see. Well, thank you for

going through all the trouble.”

I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. "Mr. Nick, is there an issue?"

After a pause, he replied, "No, but if there are any issues, we can always communicate."

"All right then. I'll take my leave," I said with a smile, bidding Nick farewell as I left ATL Empire.

However, I couldn't shake the unease in my heart.

Chapter 167 Something's Brewing

I didn't rush back to the company after leaving ATL Empire. Instead, I visited Ivanna. Since our schedules had been hectic, we had no time to meet. Ivanna looked surprised to see me. "What brings you here?"

I glanced at her and replied, "I don't just drop by for no reason.

"It's hard to tell," she replied mischievously, "I thought you forgot about me and only cared for your new lover."

"Stop with the sarcasm. If you have something to say, say it," I retorted. I knew Ivanna's expression she had something on me. Otherwise, she wouldn't be so bold.

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did it

Sure enough, she smirked and leaned in closer to me. She locked eyes with me and said, "You guys

already, right?"

I blushed and tried to avoid her probing gaze. "Mind your business! Don't make things up!"

"Am I? I saw how he escorted you back the other day. Am I still your best friend if I can't tell you have something going on with him?" Ivanna teased, "If I didn't have some evidence, would I interrogate you like

this?"

"I haven't decided what to do yet. Stop talking about this. Why are you so nosy?" I shot back.

"Is it nosy of me? You attract the most gossip as a divorcee. Don't blame me for not warning you. Ivanna's tone turned serious, "Chlo, it'll be your downfall if someone exposes anything about you at a time

like this. I'm just looking out for you."

I fell silent when I realized Ivanna was right. I knew she had my best interests at heart.

When I didn't respond, Ivanna continued, "Remember, there were some loose ends during your divorce proceedings. He's a prominent figure now, and countless people are watching him. I'm not against your relationship; I'm just giving you a heads-up. Be careful!*

I nodded, and Ivanna said, "All right, enough about that. What's going on?"

"Can you get me a list of Echelon Group's clients? Preferably those related to their current land deals in the city?" I asked Ivanna.

Ivanna exclaimed. "Chloe, what are you planning?! That's a dangerous thought you have. Do you

understand what you're doing?" Then she said hushedly, "That counts as a business crime, do you know.

that? It's not as simple as investigating Matthew."

I sighed and explained, "I've also secured a contract with Echelon Group for a project. I just want some

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Ivanna warned, "Can't you ask Johnson? Besides, big companies like Echelon Group are meticulous. It would be bad for us if they catch wind of any investigation. You should lay low!"

"I'll ask Johnson, then," I reluctantly agreed.

After leaving Ivanna's place, I pondered her words. She was correct; I needed to ensure the project's success and quality completion while minimizing risks. I pulled over to the side of the road and called

Johnson.

He didn't answer, so I waited in my car, thinking it might be inconvenient for him to talk now. However, it didn't take long for Johnson to call back. "Ms. Chloe, what's up?"

"I've signed the contract with Echelon Group," I informed him.

"You signed it? Did it land in your basket just like that?" Johnson sounded surprised.

"You didn't know about this?" I asked.

“Matthew has always eyed this contract. He put a lot of effort into getting it. I find it hard to believe he would let it go so quickly,” Johnson replied with a hint of skepticism, “That must be why I saw Melanie so

furious in his office this morning. No one knows what happened.

“Can you find out more for mean

have to be cautious,” I requested. 1

“That’s not a problem. I’ll try, but I can’t guarantee Matthew will reveal anything. He has become very cunning lately and seems determined to forge a close partnership with Echelon Group,” Johnson

cautioned.

“By the way, there seems to be hope for us for the land in Operose. I’m not sure what ATL Empire is up to. Well, maybe they’re just having some internal issues. Did you perhaps ask Mr. Atlas about it?”

I gave a faint smile. “I don’t want to ask too much about these things.”

My answer was impeccable. On one hand, I didn’t deny my relationship with Atlas. On the other, I didn’t

admit I couldn’t afford to make a wrong move. 1

“All right, I’ll gather some information,” Johnson agreed, seemingly more enthusiastic now. “Wait for my update.”

I revealed a faint smile as I hung up the call. I could sense something was brewing from Johnson’s

response. I just had to make someone go crazy to find out what it was.

Chapter 168 Happy Birthday

I smirked, knowing dealing with Melanie was a piece of cake. However, I decided to keep a low profile after signing the contract as it would make anyone envious. It wouldn't be wise to stir the pot at this

sensitive time.

As for using Melanie, I would have to wait for the right moment.

Although Tuesday was my birthday, I might have forgotten it if my mother hadn't prepared a special breakfast. Ava woke up early and sang a birthday song with her childlike voice. Her voice was so heartwarming that I felt an indescribable mix of emotions.

Matthew was supposed to be away on a business trip on this day last year. However, he returned in the evening with a necklace, a complete set of makeup items, and his wishes. We even went to Al Dente, a well-known restaurant, for dinner with the whole family.

Looking back now, I wondered if he had been on a business trip or if he had been spending time with

Melanie.

I chuckled bitterly, feeling a lump in my throat. I lowered my head and bit into a waffle, saying, "Mom, I know it's my birthday today, but you've sacrificed so much to raise me. Let's go out for dinner later."

My father chuckled and raised his hand in agreement. But my mother hesitated, asking, "Why don't we

cook at home?"

My father laughed and pointed at my mother, saying, “Chlo says it’s your ‘suffering’ day, and you still want to cook at home? You’re indeed a good wife who likes staying at home. Getting you to relax is

impossible.

“Yeah, Mom! Please don’t cook today. You’ve worked hard enough. I’ll reserve a table and invite Ivanna, Ryan, and a new friend to join us. Let’s have a good time and relax.”

Ava clung to my arm and blinked her innocent eyes. She asked earnestly, “Mommy, are we going to a

restaurant?”

“Yes, sweetheart, do you want to go?” I looked at my beautiful daughter and was touched. I kissed her

chubby cheek and said, “My baby loves going to the restaurant, doesn’t she?”

“Great! Let’s go to the restaurant!” Ava clapped and jumped a couple of times. Then she paused, “But will

Daddy.

She stopped herself from saying more, and my heart skipped a beat. I knew she wanted to ask if her dad

would be there.

+15 BONUS

“Daddy won’t be there. From now on, I’ll take you to restaurants. You can order whatever you want to eat.” I hugged her and spoke earnestly. I didn’t want to fabricate lies and deceive her like divorcees who made their children wait indefinitely.

I knew there were times I couldn't shield Ava from these things, and she had to learn to face them.

"Daddy is bad. He kissed Aunt Melanie and not Mommy. Bad Daddy! I don't want to eat with him anymore!"

She looked at me and said thoughtfully, "I saw it!"

Her words shocked me. I never knew she saw such a thing. Still, I couldn't tell Ava he wasn't bad or encourage hatred to grow in her heart. Hatred was dangerous and difficult to remove once it took root in

one's heart.

My parents and I exchanged helpless glances. Then, my father comforted me, "Hey, don't think about such unpleasant things. Today's a day to be happy. You'll meet someone who truly cares and loves you. You have nothing to regret. There's no need to compromise, either!"

"I don't want Daddy too! I want a good daddy, not a bad one!"

"Ava, listen to Mommy. He's not bad, he's just--"

"He's bad! He even hits you and screams at you, Mommy! He made you cry, too! Bad Daddy!" Ava looked at me, her little face contorted with anger. She said with determination, "I don't want him!"

I held Ava tightly. Daughters typically cared for their mothers more; my daughter was no exception.

My heart still felt heavy when I reached my office the following day. I didn't want Ava to harbor such hatred at a young age. Still, I could do nothing to defend Matthew."

At that moment, I started to miss Atlas even more. It had been days since I last saw him, even though I knew he was busy after reclaiming his company. He probably had many things to manage. Moreover, I felt

he didn't come from a simple family.

I held my phone for a long time. Finally, I could no longer hold back from calling Atlas. It took some time before he answered my call, and I heard his low voice, "Yeah?"

Chapter 169 A Heartwarming Family Dinner

"Are you busy?" I asked.

"What is it? Go ahead," Atlas sounded somewhat unhappy, making my heart race slightly.

"Where are you?" I asked, feeling a bit uneasy.

"Quillbrooke," he hushedly spoke, sounding like he was in a meeting.

I felt even more awkward. "I was just...wondering what you're up to right now. I'm fine, so you can call me

ack when you're not busy.

I quickly hung up but couldn't hide my disappointment. I wanted to tell Atlas I missed him but knew the

situation prevented it. Since he was a business tycoon, being with him daily was impossible.

Perhaps choosing him meant not living an everyday life. I chuckled, wondering why I was so sentimental

since it was only my birthday. Soon, I composed myself because I had many important things to handle. I couldn't afford to dwell on my emotions and had to face reality.

That afternoon, I called Lauren and Ivanna to invite them for dinner. Ivanna knew it was my birthday and always remembered it each year.

Before leaving work, I went to Ryan's office and saw him buried in his work. He didn't stop working when I

entered, so I waited. Without looking up, he said, "Give me ten minutes."

I sat before his desk and watched him work tirelessly. I couldn't help but wonder when I became an evil capitalist. Ten minutes later, he finally looked at me and said, "Go ahead."

I was annoyed that men always sounded so indifferent and direct. I calmly said, "Let's go for dinner together."

Ryan smiled and stood up, saying, "Wait a moment."

He continued discussing work-related matters with me until he received a call. After the call, he said, "All

right, we can go now."

As we headed downstairs together, he stopped at the front desk for something before coming outside

with me. Soon after, I drove to Al Dente while Ivanna fetched my parents and daughter.

They were already in the private room when I arrived. I saw a massive two-tier cake on the table and my daughter staring at it with widened eyes. It was adorable.

Ryan didn't seem surprised when we entered, appearing like he had anticipated this. However, my parents

Ivanna told me she had already ordered the dishes and asked if I was satisfied. Thinking about the lobster from the company party, I ordered an extra one and added a soup of the day for everyone

Before long, someone knocked on the private room door, and I rushed to open it. When Laura entered, she looked surprised and asked me, somewhat awkwardly, W-What's going on here?

I replied. "I just wanted you to meet my parents and daughter

She pointed at the table. "What about that?"

"Oh, today's my birthday!" I smiled at her.

"Chloe, this isn't right!" She looked at me disapprovingly

"Oh, what's wrong? I just wanted you to meet my parents. My birthday isn't that important. I treat it as a

family gathering—everyone here is dear to me. That's why I invited you."

I introduced everyone to Lauren, and she sat beside my mother. I told my mother. "Starting today, you have another daughter."

Lauren's eyes welled up with tears. I knew it had been long since she had experienced such a family.

gathering. It was a joyous meal, especially for Ava. After all, her loved ones surrounded her and treated her like a princess.

I discovered that Ryan had stopped at the front desk earlier to pick up the gift he had gotten me. It was a

necklace he had ordered from Lexington. He said he had never forgotten my birthday.

Ivanna gave me a watch every year. All my watches were gifts from her. Finally, I realized Lauren had

settled the bill, leaving everyone surprised.

Ava fell asleep in my arms before we reached home. She still had cream near her mouth, making her look

adorable yet beautiful. I hugged her and kissed her cheek while silently apologizing to her.

I didn't know how disappointed her little heart must have been for not seeing her dad on such an

occasion. The car stopped, and I struggled slightly to carry Ava out, only to notice someone waiting there.

Chapter 170 Can I Take Her Out?

He stood by the car as I got out with Ava, and he approached us, saying, "You're back!"

My dad had a strong impression of Atlas, mainly since the latter had visited my dad at the hospital twice. My mom said, "Hello, Mr. Atlas, please come in! I'm sorry if we kept you waiting."

"That's okay, Mrs. Laura. I just arrived," he said with a smile. When he saw me carrying Ava, he asked,

"Can I help?"

I was surprised as I stood rooted, not knowing what to say. However, Atlas had already approached me,

saying, "Let me hold her."

His gesture made me feel like crying for some reason. He reached out for Ava, but it seemed he didn't

know how to take her from my arms.

"I can manage," I said.

"You can give her to me. You look like you're struggling," Atlas insisted, and I could only pass Ava to him.

From his stiff and awkward posture, I knew he had never held a child. Still, he was earnest, like he was

handling a delicate item. I almost laughed at his awkwardness and went to help adjust his posture.

After I placed Ava's head in the crook of his arm, he finally relaxed and smiled slyly at me before

following me inside. Soon, he carried Ava to her room with my guidance.

I

Immediately after, I carefully changed Ava into her pajamas and tucked her into bed. Meanwhile, Atlas.

stood behind me to watch me take care of everything.

When I finally finished and looked at him, he leaned down and kissed my forehead, which startled me.

Soon, I took him downstairs, where he conversed with my dad.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I asked, "Weren't you in Quillbrooke? Why did you come back?"

As soon as I asked, I realized it was a rather inappropriate question.

"I found out it was your birthday today, so I rushed back. Perhaps I'm a bit late," Atlas replied candidly, his

eyes meeting mine.

Meanwhile, my dad gazed at Atlas's face as if examining his intentions. My mom also looked surprised. I

was amazed at how even a reserved person like my mom could understand the meaning behind Atlas's

words and actions.

I couldn't help but blush and glance at my dad.

“Mr. George, may I take Chloe out to celebrate?” Atlas asked. “I’m afraid I’ll have to return to Quillbrooke tomorrow for a crucial meeting.”

As soon as he said that, I felt like a guilty child who had done something wrong. I glanced at my dad, my heart racing as I gulped nervously.

I inwardly criticized Atlas for being too bold. I wondered how my dad would perceive this situation. I had just gotten divorced, and now a man was at my doorstep, boldly inviting me out. His earlier words indicated that I meant a lot to him, and he had rushed back just to celebrate my birthday despite having an important meeting tomorrow,

With all his years of experience, my dad had indeed encountered various situations. Additionally, he had worked as a school principal, so he wouldn’t be oblivious to Atlas’ intentions.

My dad responded smilingly, “You did come to celebrate Chloe’s birthday despite your busy schedule. That’s kind of you.”

“Well, that’s because today’s special for Chloe. It’s a meaningful birthday for her, so I hope to spend it with her,” Atlas’s words touched me, but I was still nervous.

I looked at my dad, who subtly nodded at me. “Go ahead.”

Atlas stood up upon receiving permission. “We’ll be back later. I promise to keep her safe.”

My dad nodded again. “Thank you, Mr. Atlas.”

I wasn’t sure how I walked out of the house with him as my mind was a mess. When he held me, my heart gradually calmed down. I tried not to overthink and hoped to make the most of our time together.

He softly said to me, “Time is running out. We can only go to the hotel. I promised your dad to send you back later, and I intend to keep my promise.”

Atlas's words filled me with a sense of comfort. He understood the importance of respect rather than being overbearing

Still, I blushed, considering he had boldly come to my house to pick me up. I dared not guess what it meant, and I didn't want to imagine what my dad's opinion might be.