

Chapter 11

Retreating to her room, Madelyn stripped off her soiled clothes and stood in front of her wardrobe, contemplating her attire. Through the thin wall dividing her from the outside world, Zach's voice carried in.

"I've got urgent business at the company this time. If I can wrap it up early, I'll rush back to you!" he said.

Understandingly, Jadie replied, "I'm fine, Zach. Go do what you have to. I'll be here waiting for you."

"Alright. If you get tired, you can sleep in my room. I just changed the sheets and blankets."

"Alright, I'll remember that."

As the footsteps faded away, Madelyn thought he had left. She was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the door to her room suddenly swung open. Startled, Madelyn's hand froze mid-air, holding her dress, her face flushed a fiery red. Her hands fumbled, clutching her clothes tightly around her. Zach, standing by the door, glanced at her bare silhouette. His hand, resting on the door handle, tensed, and his gaze quickly averted. For an eighteen-year-old, Madelyn's figure was truly on par with anyone her age.

Madelyn's eyes flickered with uncertainty. They had been married for years, shared countless intimate moments, bared their souls and bodies to each other; there was no part of her that Zach had not seen. But for some inexplicable reason, in that very moment, Madelyn's heart fluttered in disarray. It was as if she was meeting Zach for the first time, her composure slipping away. She was left wondering if he had caught a glimpse of her just now.

Without daring to turn around, she hastily slipped into her skirt, forcing herself to regain her composure. "Bro, do you need something?"

From his pocket, Zach pulled out a card and placed it on the table near her. His lips parted slightly, voice low and gravelly. "Here's a shopping card, a gift from our business

partners. If you need clothes, jewelry or anything at all, you can use it. You and Jadie each have one.”

“Thanks, bro.”

Zach lowered his gaze and closed the door. He stood still for a moment, swallowing hard. A primal urge, animalistic and restless, stirred within him. After a few seconds, he finally stepped away, gathered his meeting documents, and got into his car. As he turned the ignition, his hands tightening around the steering wheel, the brief vision of Madelyn’s tantalizing waist flashed across his mind and then disappeared as quickly as it came.

‘Madelyn? Only if I were out of my mind!’

Zach suppressed the turmoil within him, pressed the accelerator, and sped away from the Jent residence.

Madelyn had just completed her homework in the solitude of her room and was about to descend the stairs for a relaxing break when she swung open her door to find Jadie about to ascend. Their eyes met, two worlds colliding with no common language. Even though she carried a guilt over Jadie’s demise in their past life, making friends was a bridge too far for Madelyn. She decided on a path of courteous indifference, to simply coexist for a few years and then part ways forever.

In the face of the lingering awkwardness, Madelyn found her voice first. “Sis Jadie, you’re...”

Jadie offered a soft, fleeting smile, quickly saying, “I’m tidying up Zach’s room, clearing out things he doesn’t need.”

Madelyn nodded. “Okay, you carry on. I’ll head downstairs for a drink.” With that, she started her descent, the soft thud of her slippers on the staircase marked her retreat. As she was about to step onto the third stair, Jadie’s voice, as light as a drifting leaf, found its way into her ear.

“Madelyn, I know you fancy Zach. But don’t worry, I won’t compete with you for him.”

‘Even if you don’t, you’re still the girl Zach truly loves. Otherwise, why would he have rushed into the room, wanting to kill me right after your death? Why would he choose to divorce me and marry someone who bears a resemblance to you?’

Cecilia's prolonged stay by Zach's side could be attributed to her facial similarities with Jadie.

Without turning around, Madelyn nonchalantly replied, "I don't like Zach anymore. He'll always be just my brother. If the two of you can be together, I'd be happy." She meant every word; this life, facilitating their union, could be a path toward making amends for her past wrongs.

Madelyn continued her descent without further delay, reaching the kitchen and pouring herself a glass of ice-cold water. Her gaze inadvertently landed on a pile of discarded trash near the door. Among the refuse was the pink teddy bear she had gifted Zach for his birthday, a symbolic representation of herself. She had told Zach that the bear would forever accompany him when she could not. Her hand, holding the glass, trembled slightly.

"In my past life, it was Cecilia who discarded this bear. Now, it's Jadie. Maybe it's just fate," she mused.

Chapter 12

The leisurely evening breeze stirred outside the window, rousing Madelyn from her slumber as it rushed in, bringing with it the sound of hurried footsteps echoing through the hallway. She blinked several times, her eyesight blurry with sleep, noticing that darkness had already swallowed the sky outside her window. With Jadie's incessant apologies echoing around her, she found her sleepiness vanishing like smoke in the wind. Madelyn stepped barefoot onto the cold floor, making her way to the door, not yet fully aware of what had transpired. Squinting against the dim light, she saw a familiar figure standing at the doorway, which took her by surprise.

"Bro, have you finished your work for the day?" she asked.

Zach had returned an hour before she had fallen asleep, even taking Jadie for a stroll at the mall. But upon returning, Zach had noticed something amiss in their room, specifically the teddy bear—her birthday gift to him.

Jadie stood there, her eyes red-rimmed and pitiful. "Madelyn..." she began.

Zach stepped in front of Jadie, his face a mask of composure, though his narrowed eyes held a hint of frost. “Madelyn, I’m sorry. I accidentally damaged the bear you gifted me. Jadie wasn’t aware. She thought it was something useless and threw it away.”

Rosario also stepped forward. “It’s partially my fault as well. I didn’t inform Miss White in time.”

Everyone awaited Madelyn’s tantrum, her wrath, her grand spectacle. But all Madelyn did was quirk an eyebrow, smiling with nonchalance. “Is that so? What a pity, that bear was a limited edition.”

In this world, the one who cries gets the sweets. It was not her fault; if Jadie wept, and Madelyn did not forgive her, it would appear as if Madelyn herself was in the wrong. In her past life, she had detested Jadie—detested how she had ensnared Zach’s heart, detested her weak and tearful demeanor. In this life, her feelings had not changed, but she just did not care anymore.

Zach stared at Madelyn, his expression chilling. He was about to say something when Madelyn cut him off.

“If you liked it so much, I’ll get you another one for your birthday this year. That way, I won’t have to fret over choosing a gift,” she said.

Jadie stepped up. “Madelyn, I’m truly sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Madelyn blinked, sweeping her gaze over Jadie’s face. “It’s just a small thing, and it wasn’t mine anyway. Even if it’s lost, there’s no need to apologize to me.” To divert the topic from the insignificant bear, she asked, “Rosario, is dinner ready? I’m quite hungry.”

“It’s been ready for a while. I was about to call you,” Rosario replied.

“I’ll just get dressed and come down for dinner,” Madelyn said, returning to her room. When she descended the stairs after changing, she noticed that their usual seats were empty.

“Rosario, where are Zach and Jadie?” she asked.

Rosario, bringing in the last bowl of soup, replied, “Mr. Jardin and Miss White left. They said they had already eaten, so they didn’t stay. Oh, and Mr. Jardin left some dessert for you. He asked me to remind you. He truly does care for you, you know.”

Rosario's final words were an attempt at consolation, and Madelyn could tell. Rosario served the strawberry mousse cake Zach had bought. Madelyn thought initially it was just a ruse to appease her. Knowing that Zach and Jadie had left the house, and staring at the cake Zach had purchased, her heart remained strangely steady, devoid of the usual chaos. At that moment, she realized she had finally found closure from her past. She sampled the mousse cake, finding it sweet but not cloying – just like the one from her favorite place.

“Rosario, you should stop fussing around. Sit and eat with me,” she said.

Rosario declined. “I’ve eaten earlier, and besides, it’s not appropriate for the help to dine with the mistress.”

Madelyn pulled Rosario to sit next to her, putting on a pitiful face. “It’s just us in this house. Please, have dinner with me. After all, there’s no one else left aside from you.”

‘Zach and Jadie might never return to this house,’ she thought.

Rosario had no choice but to comply. In her heart, she felt sorry for Madelyn, a child with no real friends by her side, doing everything all by herself.

‘Even Mr. Jardin, the only person Madelyn had leaned on, only had eyes for Miss White,’ she thought.

Madelyn had been resting at home for the past couple of days, recovering from her injuries. The stitches on her wrist had been removed and the wound was almost healed. As long as she did not get it wet, it would not reopen. Zach had not come home since he had left. Hayson, who was out of town, had been delayed by a storm, and his return would take some time.

With her mind becoming more active, Madelyn realized she needed to change her path. In her previous life, she had devoted all her attention to Zach, causing her to perform poorly in her final exams and attend a subpar local university. Now, being in her senior year, she decided to focus on her studies, aiming to attend a reputable university and carve a different path for herself.

Madelyn attended Vetrocloud High School, a private institution renowned for its stellar faculty and top-tier infrastructure. Naturally, the tuition fees were steep, costing at least six figures annually. The vehicles picking up and dropping off students were no less than luxury cars. Students studying there were either from affluent families or were

exceptionally bright students who had earned scholarships through their academic excellence. These high achievers were generally rewarded by the school with full scholarships and generous stipends.

The chauffeur dropped Madelyn at the school gate, reminding her. “Ms. Jent, please call me after classes are over.”

Madelyn nodded. “Alright.”

Chapter 13

Madelyn was dressed in her high school uniform, not the conventional baggy attire of most schools, but rather, a sophisticated, British-styled, black ensemble that screamed of authority. Even the shoes and backpack were not mere standard issue, but instead made of exclusive material to distinguish them from the common ones. Across the street from her prestigious Ventrocloud High School, was the public, but equally respected, Ventropolis High School. The students of Ventropolis were intellectual elites, the future leaders of the nation, whereas those at Ventrocloud often relied on family wealth and status. Two schools, two different social strata, and years of mutual disdain and rivalry.

In the sea of sleek black cars, Madelyn caught sight of a familiar Audi among the many vehicles. As it drew closer, it halted in front of Ventropolis High School. It was indeed Zach’s car, and out stepped Zach himself, along with Jadie.

‘Could it be that Zach is dropping Jadie off at Ventropolis?’ Madelyn wondered.

Zach felt a gaze on him, and following his instinct, he turned around. His eyes met with the cool, poised figure of Madelyn, draped in her black school attire and donning a short skirt, a ponytail swinging behind her. Madelyn, not expecting him to turn around, managed a curt nod and a faint smile as a greeting.

“Madelyn!”

Her focus was broken as a plump girl in glasses, with pigtails and black knee socks, dashed toward her. Out of breath, Serena Smith clutched a pile of books.

“Madelyn, you’re finally back. Heard you were sick. Are you feeling better now?”

Serena was the daughter of the director of the Department of Education. Both of them shared the same class, and in the circle of Ventrocloud High School, her status was no secret.

“I’m much better,” Madelyn replied.

“Huh, aren’t you wearing makeup today? And, you seem so serene, not like before. You used to be so hostile. It’s like you’re a different person now.”

Madelyn used to put on makeup to draw Zach’s attention, and she had found it rather burdensome, costing her an hour each morning, time she could have used to catch a few more winks of sleep.

“Do I need to snap at you to seem normal?”

Madelyn’s former temperament had indeed been volatile. She had often been irritable, preferring solitude over company. She had not liked making friends, and in their eyes, Madelyn was an oddball, a loner. Only Serena had consistently tried to converse with her, but Madelyn had usually ignored her due to her soft, docile nature.

Serena quickly raised her hands defensively. “No, no, not at all! I think you’re nice this way. And... you look really pretty without makeup.”

Madelyn was not particularly popular in school. Her family’s history, once revealed, had been a stain on their reputation. No one wished to associate with the Jents, a family that had built their standing on blood and crime within Ventropolis. Everyone who knew about the Jents was aware of their past, their ascend to power being far from noble. Only after significant legal repercussions did they choose a less conspicuous path. Her grandfather was a mafia boss who ended up behind bars. Put plainly, the Jents did not have a ton of money or influence, but no one in Ventropolis dared to cross them. Regardless of their rank, everyone bowed their heads before Hayson, not daring to provoke him. The Jent legacy meant that none of them were left untainted.

Zach watched her receding silhouette, before pulling back his gaze and glancing at his wristwatch. “We still have time. I can walk you in.”

“Was that Madelyn just now? She goes to Ventrocloud High School?” Jadie asked. She wore the ordinary blue and white uniform, her long hair pulled back, but on her, the outfit seemed anything but ordinary. Her lively eyes, full of purity and spirit, enhanced her charm. Jadie was a natural model, looking good in anything she wore.

“Mmm, after school, if I can get off work early, I’ll text you and pick you up.”

“That’s okay, I can take the bus home. The stop is right at the school gates, very convenient. I know you’re busy, Zach. I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Jadie, you’re never a bother to me. You know that, right?” His voice was low and sincere. They were family, ready to give and protect unconditionally.

Jadie nodded, her lips curving into a slight smile. “I understand, Zach.”

“Let me take you to the principal’s office to get your enrollment done.”

“Okay.”

Madelyn cast a glance back. Zach was undeniably striking, his handsome face attracting a lot of attention. He was holding Jadie’s bag, escorting her into the school.

‘He truly treasures Jadie, going out of his way despite his busy schedule to personally accompany her.’

As their figures disappeared from sight, Madelyn retracted her gaze and continued toward her classroom.

‘Now that Jadie isn’t attending the same school as me, I should be veering away from my past life’s fate, right?’

“What are you looking at, Madelyn?” Serena asked, following her gaze toward the crowd of students. ‘Nothing special to look at, unless... maybe a handsome guy?’

“Nothing. Let’s head back to class.”

Chapter 14

Class Six was on the sixth floor, with a designated elevator for students. At Ventrocloud High School, there was no early self-study session, and the classes began at nine in the morning, allowing for a relatively late start.

Returning to her classroom, Madelyn surveyed the familiar yet foreign faces of her classmates, able to name only a few. The bell signaling the beginning of class rang out, and Madelyn hastily resumed her seat, guided by memory. Just as she was about to set down her backpack, she noticed several students glancing her way, murmuring among themselves.

“That’s Forrest Arnold’s seat. She’s got some guts sitting there.”

“She was on sick leave for a few days. Did she go mad or something?”

‘What? Forrest?’ Madelyn looked at the clean, book-less desk in front of her, immediately standing up. ‘How can this be Forrest’s seat? I’ve always been in the second-to-last row. Am I not?’

As if by some cruel twist of fate, there stood Forrest at the entrance, clad in an untidy school uniform, his tie loosely done. He held his bag in one hand and stared defiantly at Madelyn. He clicked his tongue against his back teeth, his eyes icy cold. His stare alone was enough to give Madelyn goosebumps. Right behind him were his faithful sidekicks, Timothy Johnson and Adrian Mitchell.

Forrest, her sworn enemy, was the school bully that no one dared to mess with, dominating the school in his own bullish manner. Madelyn rarely had any interaction with him. But when she did, it was always because Forrest had a bone to pick with her. No specific reason, just that he simply disliked her. Yes, that was it—he simply disliked her.

Catching sight of Serena’s pointed indication—second desk from the window in the first row—Madelyn finally realized that the seating had been rearranged during her leave. Wincing at her mistake, she quietly slid into her actual seat. Forrest was a notorious jerk, known for his violent temper. He approached his own desk, kicked it with a swift stroke, sending it toppling into the corner. Even the metal stool was not spared, its leg bent inward from the force of the kick. The loud crash startled everyone in the class, a few unfortunate souls near the scene flinching from the commotion.

“Forry, you just got to school. Where are you off to now?”

Adrian slapped Timothy’s shoulder. “Where else? He just doesn’t want to see her.”

Timothy approached Madelyn’s desk, giving her stool a kick. “Madelyn, why couldn’t you just stay home? Why’d you have to come and be an eyesore? Once I graduate, I’ll be

the first to investigate the Jent family. Just wait, you'll end up spending the rest of your life in prison with your bumpkin dad." He adjusted his tie smugly after his pronouncement.

Madelyn lifted her beautiful, sparkling eyes to scrutinize the two.

The reason Timothy could strut around so brazenly in front of her was because his father was the chief of the National Investigative Bureau, a man so incorruptible that even Hayson was helpless against him. Over the years, the Johnson family had been hounding Hayson relentlessly, ready to bring him down the instant they found a grip on him. As for Adrian, he hailed from a renowned legal family. His father was one of the most internationally authoritative judges, and his mother was a pioneer of the legal industry and a globally recognized attorney. These two were Madelyn's natural nemeses.

Faced with Timothy's rage, Madelyn's expression did not waver in the least; instead, she nodded in approval. "Well said, such ambition! I too think Hayson is a scumbag, and I'm rooting for you. Push yourself to rise to the challenge and take him down!"

Timothy blinked, his face turning dark with anger as he pointed at Madelyn, speechless for a moment. Seeing that Forrest had nearly disappeared, Adrian quickly grabbed the miffed Timothy and hurried to catch up with Forrest. These three were notorious for skipping classes, and the teachers were helpless. Even parental involvement rarely solved anything. Therefore, the teacher turned a blind eye to students who disliked attending classes. After all, this class was considered the lowest performing among the six classes in the senior year. The students were distributed across these classes based on their academic performance, with each class consisting of 30 students. Notably, Class One stood out as the class comprising exclusively of elite students.

In her past life, Madelyn truly had no idea where Forrest's abhorrent attitude toward her originated. From the start of the school year till now, she had always refrained from provoking others. If someone provoked her for no reason, she would not hesitate to give them a taste of their own medicine. She had a fiery temper, equally as bad as Forrest's. But the Madelyn of now was a far cry from the past. She had shed her irritable nature and her prickliness was long gone.

The first class of the day was mathematics. Shuffling through the pile of math papers in her desk, Madelyn pulled out a test paper scored only eight out of a total of a hundred and twenty points.

‘Well, I really scraped the bottom there.’

Upon a retrospective glance at the paper, she found the problems were not that difficult. She realized she could actually solve many of them with ease.

Madelyn pulled out a red pen and started working through the incorrect problems one by one on a piece of scratch paper. Then she filled in the correct answers. Her gaze unintentionally landed on the toppled, unattended desk scattered with books and thought, ‘There’s still one chance to switch classes this semester. Let’s see if I can get good grades in the final exam and change classes.’

When it came to college entrance exams, she already had a university in mind.

Chapter 15

Each class stretched out to 45 minutes. When the bell finally signaled the end of the lesson, Madelyn, almost with a sense of doomed acceptance, walked to the back of the room. She quietly righted Forrest’s knocked-over desk and gathered the scattered books from the floor, tidying them neatly into his drawer. Her actions elicited a flurry of astonished whispers from her classmates.

“No way! Madelyn, who’s always acting high and mighty, is actually picking up books for Forrest? Did she hit her head or something?”

“Can’t believe what I’m seeing. Madelyn, who couldn’t be bothered to speak, is now serving her arch-nemesis Forrest? Holy cow, I must be hallucinating!”

Someone had discreetly snapped a photo of Madelyn’s surprising act of humility and anonymously uploaded it to the school forum.

Madelyn ignored the buzz around her, focusing on straightening up Forrest’s desk. Despite everything, she was just too good-natured to hold Forrest’s temper against him.

Meanwhile, in the grimy alley behind the school, Timothy was debating about which bar to hit that night. Adrian was engrossed in his phone when a headline suddenly popped up.

[Shocker of the Century! Madelyn actually...]

Before he could finish reading, Adrian saw Madelyn's name and clicked on the link. A photo loaded, revealing Madelyn crouched down, books cradled in her arms. "Holy smokes! Look, Forry, look at the school forum, Madelyn is picking up your books again!"

"What the...?" Timothy doubted his hearing for a moment.

Forrest's eyebrows raised ever so slightly as he peered at the photo Adrian shoved his way. A girl crouched on the floor, her skirt pooling around her. The camera captured Madelyn's smooth, elegant profile perfectly. Light streamed in from the window, illuminating her, her eyelashes cast in shadow like the feathers of a raven, one hand clutching books, the other picking up a textbook from the floor. The photo exuded an unexpectedly serene ambience.

'Well, I'll be damned.'

Madelyn skipped the cafeteria at noon. She usually brought her own lunch due to her selective palate and her aversion to cafeteria food. Now alone in the classroom, she quietly savored the caramelized pork that Rosario had prepared for her, while working on her incomplete test paper from the last exam.

An hour passed and the other students gradually returned from their lunch. Madelyn was still struggling with the final math problem. The noise of chatter and footfalls grew louder as it approached the classroom. Startled gasps echoed down the hallway.

"Oh my God, it's Forrest. He isn't coming back to settle the score with Madelyn, is he?"

"Most likely. Let's head over and grab a front-row seat. I've had it with that lowlife girl. I can't believe she got into this school."

"People like her are a menace in this school. It was her dad who nearly cost my dad his life over a plot of land. People like them who can't compete fairly always resort to dirty tricks. Those Jents are bound to meet a nasty end."

"You better watch your mouth. My dad said the Jent family are big fishes in Ventropolis, getting on their bad side always spells trouble. Don't let your anger lead you into trouble."

Indeed, such words were only ever whispered behind Madelyn's back. Many in their class had parents whose businesses had suffered at the hands of the Jent family, and those dealings were always shrouded in shadow.

Madelyn had just begun writing a formula for the major math problem when a shadow loomed over her. In the next instant, a hand swept across the desk, scattering her books to the floor. She looked up into Forrest's face, a tumultuous storm of rage swirling within his eyes.

She asked calmly, "Can I help you?"

"Who gave you permission to touch my stuff? Looking for trouble?" His sneer was cruel, his gaze threatening to consume her alive.

'So, just because I picked up his books, he has come to settle the score?'

Madelyn had only done so because she had accidentally taken his seat and he had gotten upset. She thought cleaning up for him might serve as a sort of quiet apology. She had never imagined that simply tidying his things would provoke such a strong reaction from Forrest.

Onlookers from her class and even the neighboring one had gathered to witness the spectacle.

Madelyn turned back to her work, twirling her pen. She spoke with icy coolness. "You've just messed with my books, too. We're even. Besides, it's my turn for cleaning duty today. If you're unhappy with it, I won't touch your stuff next time."

Forrest jammed his hands into his pockets and kicked at Madelyn's desk. "What's your game, Madelyn? Who are you trying to impress?"

She gave him a puzzled look, quickly gathering her textbooks and stuffing them into her bag.

"Impress? There's no one here worth impressing. Since my good deeds are an eyesore to you, I'll make sure to stay out of your way. You can have the classroom; I'll go to the library. There's another class reshuffle coming up in three weeks after the final exams. I'll do my best to stay out of your sight."

With that, she gathered the books from the floor and walked out of the classroom, just as the bell signaling the start of the next class rang out. Madelyn was exiting through the back door when she ran into the English teacher coming in.

“Madelyn Jent, where are you headed during class time?”

Madelyn remained silent.

“Whoa, Forry,” Timothy crowed, “Madelyn doesn’t seem to give a damn about you.”

Adrian chimed in. “It’s truly astonishing. She’s second from the bottom of the class and she’s thinking of changing classes? Why doesn’t she just drop out?”

Forrest’s fist slammed onto Madelyn’s desk with a thunderous crash.

‘She should count herself lucky that she fled so fast, or I might have broken my rule of not hitting a woman,’ he thought.

Chapter 16

Madelyn was grateful that her past-self had nurtured a love for learning, for otherwise she might not have had the courage to leave the classroom to study in the library. With her current knowledge, she was confident she could tackle high school exam questions, securing a spot in a decent university, and with a bit more determination, perhaps even in a top-tier institution. Her liberal arts subjects were solid, but her grasp of sciences and mathematics was shaky. Alas, there were simply not enough hours in the day to focus on these subjects—after school, she still had to attend cooking and piano classes.

Seated by the floor-to-ceiling window in the library, Madelyn appeared despondent. Annoyed, she absentmindedly ran her fingers through her hair. Mulling over her problems seemed like a waste of time when she could be memorizing more vocabulary words. Brushing aside her nagging thoughts, she returned her focus to the task at hand. The library was usually quiet, frequented by only a handful of students from Class One

and Class Two. During class hours, she was practically alone apart from the librarian. This suited Madelyn perfectly—she had always enjoyed her own company.

Meanwhile, someone emerged from the teacher's office. Spotting Madelyn through a second-floor window, the person snapped a quick picture and promptly posted it to a popular online forum under a pinned thread.

[Look! Madelyn's hiding from Forrest in the library.]

In less than a minute, a response came: [Ha, good for Forrest! He managed to drive her away. Now we won't have to put up with her in class anymore.]

Another chimed in: [Mark my words, she'll be back in two days.]

Someone replied to this with [No chance.]

[Why not?]

[Because... Forrest just threw all of her desk and chair out to the classroom doorway. The janitor has already carted it off—probably to be sold as scrap.]

Accompanying the comment were photos of Madelyn's textbooks discarded in a trash bin, covered in an unidentified nauseating substance.

Meanwhile, Madelyn was oblivious to the discussion taking place online about her. Having finished her practice tests, she was preparing to head back. As she was exiting the library, a text arrived on her phone: [Don't come back right now.]

She slowed her pace, perplexed, and texted back: [What's happened?]

The reply came swiftly: [You should check the school forum.]

A wave of foreboding washed over Madelyn. She seldom paid attention to school gossip, but this time she decided to check the school forum. Top threads revealed photos of her desk, along with her practice books, thrown into a trash bin. Her lunch box, which had been in her drawer, was seen kicked into a corner. The lunch box had been a gift from Rosario, who had also painstakingly hand-sewn the accompanying bag. With determination mounting in her stride, Madelyn set off toward the classroom.

After a moment, someone stood up, spotting a figure approaching in the distance. “She’s here. Madelyn’s here.”

“I can’t believe she has the nerve to come back,” someone snickered.

“Oh, this is going to be good. She’s going to lose it,” another added.

“Who does she think she is, strutting around like that?” yet another chimed in.

Forrest, who had been dozing off, angrily hurled a book across the room. “Shut up! Keep yapping and I’ll throw you all out!”

Instantly, silence fell. Forrest saw the approaching figure through the back door. All eyes in the room turned, eager for the show about to unfold. They all wanted to see Madelyn’s mortified face as she confronted Forrest, then got put in her place.

Madelyn appeared at the back of the classroom, but she was not visibly angry as they expected. She did not seek out Forrest but walked calmly to the trash bin to retrieve her comical lunch box, dusting off the dirt. She unzipped the lunch box to check for damages when suddenly, she let out a piercing scream. A bloody rat tumbled out from the lunch box she dropped to the floor. Madelyn turned pale with fright, her body trembling. Seeing her afraid, the class erupted into laughter—the prank had worked.

Still chuckling, someone pounded the desk. “I’m dying, just look at her!”

Serena held a book in her hand. Despite her concern for Madelyn, she did not dare to speak up. She pretended to read, avoiding eye contact. Nobody dared to cross Forrest, not even the principal, who treated him like a VIP.

Just then, the class teacher walked in with a book in hand. Jasmine Manning's curious gaze lingered on Madelyn before she retracted it, opening her book.

“Enough, you little brats! Bullying classmates again? We're nearing the final exams—can't you focus? This class is falling behind. Madelyn, what are you standing there for? Hurry back to your seat. Class is starting.”

She picked up her phone, pretending to check the time, then subtly snapped a photo of the scene and quickly sent it to a contact with a black silhouette as the profile picture.

Madelyn turned around and silently observed the mature, confident woman. Her attire hinted at a mature sexiness. After her reincarnation, seeing Jasmine again, Madelyn regarded her with an unreadable gaze. This woman was not just her class teacher but was also destined to become her future stepmother—the only woman who managed to marry into the Jent family from Hayson's harem.

And the connection between Jasmine and Zach was intriguingly complicated—unclear but suggestive. How suggestive? In her previous life, not long after Jasmine arrived, Hayson mysteriously died within three years. Even the doctors could not determine the cause of death. On the day of Hayson's funeral, Madelyn had seen Jasmine emerge from Zach's room.

Madelyn frowned slightly at the thought.

‘Zach is truly formidable, managing to manipulate any woman he wants.’

Chapter 17

Jasmine strutted in, her high heels clicking rhythmically on the floor. Long, curly locks cascaded over her shoulders, sashaying with every step she took.

“Why are you standing there all dazed, Madelyn? Are you going to tell me what happened?” she asked, reaching out.

Madelyn shrank back, a slight frown crossing her face. Picking up her lunchbox from the floor without uttering a word, she turned and walked away.

As Madelyn made her way down the silent corridor, her face wore an expression of unnatural calm. Yet, inside, she felt a suffocating sensation like never before. Upon reflection, she realized that everyone around her had ulterior motives. Not a single soul had been genuine with her. First, it was Zach, who had manipulated her love for him, conned her out of her will, and unceremoniously discarded her once he had achieved his goal. Then came Jasmine, who had showered her with unwarranted attention at school, heard her woes, provided counseling, and wormed her way into Hayson’s attention, eventually gaining entry to the Jent family, only to conspire with Zach and quietly kill Hayson. Cecilia, the third, whom she had once considered her best friend, was no different.

‘Everything is fake. Everything around me is a lie,’ Madelyn realized.

In another building, she opened the lunchbox and washed it thoroughly, the metallic, blood-like smell assaulting her nostrils—a smell that would etch itself permanently in her memory. As the tap water gushed forth, soaking her injured wrist, she felt a sharp, piercing pain. Madelyn remained impassive, as if she did not feel the pain at all. By the time she finished cleaning up, her wound had turned a sickly white, and fresh blood was seeping out. It was a gruesome sight.

Just as she was about to leave, her vision turned black. A black plastic bag had been thrust over her head, followed by a tremendous force that pushed her against the tiled wall. A surge of pain coursed through her. She felt kicks at her back and punches on her face, one after another, each leaving her writhing in pain. She could not see anything or determine how many people were involved. When they had finally had their fill, they left

her semi-conscious and dragged her into the bathroom, removing the plastic bag from her head. Her consciousness was fading, her spirit feeling completely drained.

Her ears were filled with the sound of laughter from several individuals. The wound on her wrist had split open again during the struggle, staining the floor with blood—an awful sight. Summoning her survival instincts, she managed to dial the one contact stored in her phone—Zach.

Beep. Beep. Beep

Her call was met with the sound of the dial tone. Zach stopped in his tracks, pulling out his phone. Upon seeing the caller ID, his eyes narrowed slightly in irritation. He hit the mute button and tucked his phone back into his pocket.

“Zach, who was that?” Jadie asked with a glimmer in her eyes. “If you’re busy, you can ignore me. I can manage alone.”

“It’s a sales call, nothing important.” Zach dismissed her concern. He suspected Madelyn had lost her patience and was resorting to her usual tactics of bothering him.

“Okay,” Jadie replied with a sweet smile, offering one of the two ice creams she held in her hand. “Here, Zach. I got this for you. Try it.”

Although Zach did not particularly care for sweets, he accepted the treat. Jadie took a bite of her own, the creamy ice cream melting instantly in her mouth.

“You should be careful with cold food.” Zach warned, a hint of concern creasing his forehead. “You don’t want a stomachache.”

Jadie responded with a playful stick of her tongue. “Zach, I really appreciate you taking me to the movies. But are you sure it won’t interfere with your work? You don’t have to accompany me every day; I can manage on my own.”

She was surprised that Zach, despite being so busy, would wait for her outside school and even take her to the cinema.

Zach glanced at his watch, noting the time. “Work isn’t too hectic lately, and nothing’s more important than spending time with you. Come on, the movie’s about to start.”

Upon spotting the two movie tickets in Zach's hand, Jadie pursed her lips. "Zach, isn't Madelyn coming along?"

"Madelyn has some after-school extra-curricular activities. She won't be joining us," Zach answered.

"Alright! Let's go then." Jadie smoothly linked her arm with Zach's naturally.

The film they watched was a romantic one, albeit with a bitter ending. The male protagonist died, leaving the female protagonist alone in the world. In the end, she chose to grow old alone. Seeing Jadie's pained expression, still engrossed in the aftermath of the movie, Zach took her on a shopping spree. They bought a plethora of clothes, all the latest trendy styles, till their hands could not hold anymore. The remainder was sent back home by the store's delivery service.

By the time they had finished shopping, it was eight in the evening. Night had settled, the road was alight with lamplights, the streets were bustling with traffic, and the view was beautiful.

Jadie, thrilled, settled into the passenger seat. "Zach, that arcade was so much fun. Let's go again next time."

Zach did not refuse, his soft laughter in agreement. "Sure, whenever you feel like going, I'll try my best to accompany you."

As Zach leaned in to fasten Jadie's seatbelt, he caught a whiff of her unique scent, a contrast to Madelyn's. Jadie smelled sweet. Suddenly, Zach found himself recalling Madelyn's slender, enticing figure.

Despite having grown up with Zach, Jadie still felt a surge of nervousness when he got close to her. She held her breath, her heartbeat quickening. Zach, noticing this, withdrew himself and checked his phone, discovering dozens of missed calls from the Jent residence's landline. All calls went unnoticed due to his phone being on silent. As he was about to return the call, another one came through.

Picking up the call, Rosario's anxious voice came from the other end. "Mr. Jardin, is Miss Jent with you?"

"No. What happened?" Zach's voice was calm yet filled with concern.

“Ah? Miss Jent isn’t with you? Where could she be?”

“What? Madelyn’s missing?” Zach’s expression turned grave in an instant.

Chapter 18

“Yes, when our driver went to pick up Miss Jent today, she didn’t come out of the school. I’ve checked all her usual after-school activities, and she didn’t show up anywhere. I’ve already called the police. Mr. Jardin, what do we do? Nothing could’ve happened to her, could it?” Rosario’s voice was steeped in worry.

Zach handled the steering wheel while punching numbers on his phone. “It shouldn’t have. Madelyn called me a little while ago, and I missed her call. I’m going to start by checking out her favorite spots. Once I find her, I’ll let you know.”

“Alright, alright.”

Rosario hung up, and Zach set his phone aside. Jadie, overhearing their conversation, was alarmed. “How could Madelyn just vanish? Do you think something happened to her?”

“Most likely, she’s gone off somewhere without telling anyone. You don’t need to worry. I’ll drop you off first.”

“I can come with you to look for Madelyn, Zach.”

He shook his head, his voice edged with frost. “No need. I might know where she is.”

‘Madelyn with her arrogant and headstrong ways is used to getting what she wants, probably just annoyed that I ignored her call. It won’t be the first time she’s pulled such a stunt,’ Zach thought, irritated by her actions but knowing he would be the one who would have to take the initiative. He was not overly concerned; in fact, a part of him thought her disappearance might be a blessing.

As the length of the night unfurled, the car eased to a stop in front of an upscale high-rise in the city center. Zach got out, carrying shopping bags, walked around the front of the car, and opened the passenger door. Jadie stepped out, a vision in her light blue floral dress, long hair cascading over her shoulders, a tall and graceful silhouette under the streetlights.

“Zach, you

should go find Madelyn. I can get up to my apartment on my own.”

Zach handed her the shopping bags, not too heavy, filled with the latest designer clothes.”
Alright, just remember to get some rest. Don’t wait up for me.”

“I understand, Zach.”

“Go ahead, I’ll watch you go.”

Feeling the heat rising in her cheeks, Jadie turned away under Zach’s gaze. At that moment, her heart felt like a fawn had taken residence, bouncing wildly against her chest. The cool breeze did nothing to quell the warmth on her face. Ever since returning from her recovery abroad, their relationship, save for the intimate parts, felt akin to a normal couple’s—**eating** meals together, saying goodnight before sleep, and Zach picking her up after work.

‘Zach and I...‘

Jadie could not bear to think about it. With Madelyn in the picture, her chances with Zach were

slim.

She was unsure whether her feelings for Zach were out of dependency or genuine affection. Zach had been **her** only family throughout her life. They had weathered the toughest of times, sleeping rough on the streets, fighting off vagabonds—they had done it all.

‘If... just if, my feelings for Zach are more than friendly... Does Zach feel the same?’

Her steps quickened as if fearing being halted by the man behind her. She could never hide her thoughts from him. They knew each other too well.

Zach watched until the living room light turned on in her apartment. He settled back into his car, activating the Bluetooth, redialing Madelyn’s number. He called and called until the line auto-disconnected, over and over, until his patience wore thin. He sent off a series of messages to Madelyn, a dark scowl on his face.

[Enough with the games, answer the damn phone, Madelyn. Not everyone has the patience for this!]

[Call back, Madelyn!]

[Whatever it is, we can talk privately. Don't make us worry!]

[Madelyn, what are you so angry about?]

The messages were dispatched one after another, but she remained silent. Zach drove through the bustling streets, a sharp look in his eyes. Normally, she would respond before he even had to send a fifth message, but now his words fell into a void.

‘What are you up to this time, Madelyn?’ he wondered.

Chapter 19

Madelyn had not seen Zach's messages. Right now, there was not a single part of her body that did not ache, the pain piercing to her very bones. Through the haze, she could vaguely make out the hum of voices around her.

“Lucky she was brought in when she was, or the outcome could have been unthinkable. Her fractured ribs have been reset. For the next few days, it's best that she doesn't leave the bed. A few days in hospital would be prudent...”

There was a moment of silence.

“Also, in terms of her diet, try to keep things light.”

“Alright, thank you, doctor.”

As the doctor departed, the man in the suit's phone started to ring. The bodyguard promptly answered, respectfully addressing the caller.

“How is she?” The young voice from the other end was icy.

The bodyguard relayed Madelyn's condition in meticulous detail. "That's the situation, Miss Jent is out of danger now."

"Find out who did this, quietly. Don't alert anyone. In three days, bring me the culprit, whoever it is. They will pay."

"And how do you intend to handle this?"

"I'll take care of it."

"Okay."

Once the call ended, Madelyn thought she heard Ethan's voice. But after a moment, his voice faded again. Consciousness did not hold her for long, and she slipped back into unconsciousness. By the time Madelyn awoke again, three days had passed. Her injuries were severe. Several ribs broken, her wrist slashed, blood pooling around her, a severe blow to her head. When she was found, she was on the verge of shock. If she had not been discovered, she would have either died from the pain or bled to death.

At 10.00 pm in the evening, Madelyn's thoughts drifted. In her haze, she heard the sound of sobbing close by.

"My poor child..."

Madelyn's fingers twitched, her initially blurry vision gradually cleared, and she uttered in a weak voice, "Rosario... I... it hurts!"

The pain felt like every organ in her body had been smashed, her bones seemed shattered, the pain was everywhere.

Surprised and relieved, Rosario looked at the awakened figure on the bed, taking hold of Madelyn's hand gently, careful not to squeeze too hard. Tears welled in her eyes as she said, " Madelyn, just hold on a bit longer. I'll call the doctor right away."

The anesthesia had worn off, and Madelyn was indeed awakened by the pain. Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes, mingling with her hair. 'Am I being too dramatic? Even back then with terminal cancer, the doctors had said I wouldn't last a week, yet I toughed it out for

three months.'

The doctor arrived swiftly, giving Madelyn a thorough examination. "Her wounds have been healing fairly well over these past few days. Try to keep her still as much as possible to avoid her wounds from reopening."

"Alright. Can she eat now that she's awake?"

"She can, but the food should be soft and light."

"Thank you, doctor."

After changing Madelyn's IV and leaving some instructions, the doctor left the room. Rosario, cautious not to disturb Madelyn unnecessarily, simply held her hand, gently brushing away a

tear from her cheek.

"Madelyn, don't be scared. I'm here with you.'

Madelyn's eyelashes were damp, her eyes welling up once again. This familiar pain took her back to her previous life, when she had been tortured by suffering and loneliness,

even unto death. Having Rosario by her side now made her feel that she was no longer alone in this world. She felt a glimmer of warmth only when she was with Rosario.

“Your dad knows about your accident, and he’s rushing back. He’ll be here by tomorrow. Mr. Jardin hasn’t finished his shift yet, but as soon as he’s done, he’ll be here as soon as he can. While you were unconscious, Mr. Jardin stayed with you till late every night.”

Battling the throbbing pain in her chest, Madelyn managed to say, her voice steady, “Please tell my brother not to bother. It’s late, and I don’t want to disturb his work.”

“Okay, I’ll let Mr. Jardin know.”

“And if he insists on coming, tell him I’m asleep.”

‘Why doesn’t Madelyn want to see Mr. Jardin? Odd. She used to be quite attached to him. Whenever she had a minor cold or fell ill, she’d insist on being fed by him. Lately, it seems like

Madelyn has been pushing Mr. Jardin away.

At half-past ten in the evening, Zach had just finished a meeting. His eyes reflected his exhaustion. He took the elevator down to the underground parking lot where a slender figure was dozing off in his car, her face hidden behind a veil of hair. Just as Zach was about to open the car door, his phone rang. Seeing the caller ID, he moved aside to take the call.

“Rosario, how’s Madelyn?”

“The doctor says she’s recovering quite well. She woke up for a bit but just fell asleep again. It’s late now, Mr. Jardin. It’s better if you don’t come over and disturb Madelyn. I’ll keep an eye on things here.”

Zach's deep-set eyes furrowed, his voice resonating low and deep. "Alright, I understand."

Chapter 20

Having swallowed two painkillers, Madelyn finally succumbed to sleep. But at the dreaded hour of three in the morning, her forehead was slick with a fine sheen of cold sweat, and her breaths were becoming increasingly labored.

The girl in the bed made a low sound of discomfort. Zach, setting aside his notebook, reached out to touch her forehead and cheek.

"Her temperature has dropped considerably. Seems like the fever's broken."

Rosario, just entering with a tray of water, walked in on this scene.

"Mr. Jardin, let me take care of her. You've got work tomorrow. Don't tire yourself out."

"So Mr. Jardin did come after all."

She knew that Zach, though he harbored no romantic feelings for Madelyn, deeply cared for

her **as if** she were his sister.

"He's always good to her."

"It's okay. Has she taken the painkillers?"

Rosario responded. "Yes, at ten."

"We can't overdo the medication."

Zach wrung out the towel from the washbasin, wiping the cold sweat from her face.

"Rosario, you should rest. I've taken a half-day leave for today."

Rosario looked at the girl in bed, then back at Zach. "Then...okay..."

“No...” The voice from the bed was weak, raspy. “I want Rosario... Rosario, don’t Madelyn had been awake for a while, but hearing Zach’s voice, she did not want to stir, much

less face him.

go...”

Rosario quickly stepped forward, her heart aching as she gripped Madelyn’s hand. “Okay... I won’t go. I’m not going anywhere. Mr. Jardin, Madelyn needs me. It’s probably best if I stay.”

“Fine, I’ll be next door. Call me if you need anything.”

“Alright, Mr. Jardin.”

As Zach turned to leave, his face resumed its customary cold indifference, the door to **the** sickroom gently closing behind him.

Madelyn slowly opened her eyes, watching his silhouette disappear through the doorway. It was then that she spoke up softly. “Rosario, you should go rest as well. I’m fine.”

“Were you woken up by the pain again?” Rosario wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye, her gaze filled with concern.

“No, I’m much better.”

“Madelyn, have you truly stopped caring for Mr. Jardin?”

Madelyn’s gaze moved to the white ceiling above.

“Yes. One heartbreak is more than enough. And Zach’s heart isn’t with me, forcing him will only make him resentful.”

All through their years of marriage, whether it was his drunken banter at social gatherings or his sleep–talking, they all centered around Jadie. In their eight years of marriage, other than utilizing her as a tool, Zach had never truly had a place for her in his heart.

“So... I think being a sister isn’t so bad. Besides, Dad didn’t approve of Zach and me together. If that’s the case, it’s better to let go and let him be with Jadie. Now, all I want is

to finish my studies and get into a good university. I'm not young anymore; I can't rely on my family **for** everything."

Madelyn's words took Rosario by surprise, but they also stirred a sense of admiration. It seemed Madelyn really had grown up.

"What do you mean, rely on or not? You're still young, there's no rush to grow up. In my eyes, you'll always be a child."

Hearing Rosario's words, Madelyn, exhausted, closed her eyes. Once she fully extricated herself from the Jent family, she would take Rosario with her.

Outside the hospital room, the hand resting on the door handle was slowly released. Zach had left his notebook inside the room. When he went back to get it, he inadvertently overheard their conversation. Beneath his dark gaze, a piercing light flashed. He withdrew his hand, turning away from the hospital room door.

The shadow at the doorway had already departed. Madelyn softly averted her gaze.

'Zach... did you hear all that? I truly, truly... have decided to give up on you. I don't love you anymore, Zach.'

Having endured the pain, Madelyn only fell asleep just before dawn. That night she dreamed nothing and slept soundly.

When Hayson returned to Ventropolis, his plane touched down at noon, trailed by a cadre of stern-faced security personnel dressed in sharp black suits. An air of grim intensity hung heavy in the study of the Jent family's Southern Haven Villa. A middle-aged man, lost in quiet reflection, lit three candles, pressing their warm glow to his forehead in a moment of solemn ritual. He bowed three times in a silent prayer before carefully placing them in their holders. "I apologize, Father. It's my fault for not taking better care of Madelyn, for neglecting her situation at school."