

Resent Reject Regret

Chapter 291 Cannot Ruin Charlene's Life Again

Brendan wiped Charlene's tears with his fingertips, and his heart softened. While suppressing the complicated look in his eyes, he said, "Don't think too much. I'm happier that you could wake up."

"Really?" Charlene bit her lower lip and asked, "Do you still like me?"

Brendan was stunned. He didn't know if it was because Deirdre's death had filled his mind, but he would have a heartache whenever he thought of her.

Frowning, he couldn't answer the question..

While restraining her hatred toward Deirdre, Charlene didn't force Brendan to answer but changed the subject. "About the promise you made to marry me back then, is it still valid? Ms. McKinnon has died, and your marriage has... Bren, it's time for you to give me an answer."

As he looked at Charlene's expectant expression, his heart seemed tightened by something, and he could not breathe.

However, he knew he should repay what was owed. He had ruined Deirdre's life and couldn't ruin Charlene's anymore.

After the truck was driven for an unknown number of days and nights while Deirdre was hugging her knees, she finally felt the car come to a halt. Following that, the door next to her was opened, and she heard the driver's voice. "We've arrived."

She staggered out of the truck. Her legs went weak as soon as she got out, and she fell to the ground. The driver didn't even think about helping her and just closed the door behind her.

"We've got to Village Alnwick. My mission to send you here has ended. From now onward, you'll have to go on your own."

Deirdre rose to her feet, brushed the dirt off her, and said, "Thank you."

Hearing it, the driver took another glance at Deirdre again and couldn't help but say gently, "Can you still remember the path back to your house? Even though you are blind, make sure you don't run into a ditch. and drown yourself."

"Yes, I can." Deirdre smiled. This village was, after all, where she had lived for more than two decades.

Only then did the driver let go of his worries. He threw a stick to Deirdre. "This is for you to use as a blind stick. There is an alley ahead of you. Just go straight along the alley. There are houses. Well, I'll have to excuse myself now. Bye."

The truck was driven away. Holding the blind stick, Deirdre paced into the alley. She counted the doors on her right and knocked on the fourth door.

After a while, the door opened, and a middle-aged woman came out. "Who's it?"

Deirdre wiped off the sweat from her face and greeted, "Madam Russel."

Madam Russel was stunned because the voice sounded familiar.

"D-Deirdre?"

Deirdre nodded. "Yes, it's me."

Deirdre was taken to sit in the yard. Madam Russel hurriedly went to pour Deirdre a glass of water in the living room. She handed it to Deirdre, who took it and finished off with a gulp.

Madam Russel was staring at Deirdre's face with sympathy as she asked, "W-What happened to your face?"

She couldn't help but feel pity for Deirdre, who used to be such a charming and beautiful girl.

Deirdre replied in a calm tone, "I can't recall it. I injured my face long ago, and it became like this."

"What about your eyes?"

"Also the same."

Madam Russel sighed. "How could such a good girl like you encounter such dangers? Your mother must be very distressed if she knew about it. By the way, where is your mother?"

Deirdre's hand holding the glass froze. "She's dead."

"My goodness!" Madam Russel hurriedly held Deirdre's hands. She didn't know what to say because she was uneducated. Even after some time, she was still at a loss for words. She eventually hugged Deirdre, patted her back, and promised, "In that case, just stay here. You can stay here as long as you want. I'm best at taking care of people, provided you don't mind."

Deirdre nodded while smiling, her tears overflowing.

After taking a shower, Deirdre wore the dress Madam Russel had bought for her from the street. While she was combing her hair, Madam Russel was staring at her back with sentiment.

Chapter 292 He Was Getting Engaged

Deirdre was once a well-known beauty in the region. Many young men had been paying her attention, waiting for the opportunity to ask her hand in marriage as soon as she became an adult. However, who would have thought that...

Tears welled up in her eyes as Madam Russel thought of it. She turned on the TV and said, "Deirdre, watch it a little while to relieve boredom while I take out dishes from the kitchen."

"Okay."

Deirdre fumbled and sat on the sofa. Watching TV series was a good way to spend time. While she listened to the drama, she combed her hair.

The entertainment news followed the TV series. The news presenter said, "Mr. Brendan Brighthall, the CEO of the Brighthall Group, has recently announced that he will be engaged to Miss Charlize McKinley, with whom he has been in love for many years, on the evening of the 28th. For this reason, he booked the largest resort in Neve, the Oceanside Resort. It seems that he has found the love of his life. Let us wait for the wonderful evening on the 28th with blessings."

Madam Russel also heard the news when she brought in the soup. She said with surprise, "The CEO of the Brighthall Group is getting married again? Hasn't his wife been in prison for two years?"

Only then did Deirdre resume combing her hair. She replied, "I don't know."

Madam Russel continued muttering, "Charlize McKinley? Why does the name sound so familiar? Oh yes, it's quite similar to Mr. Brighthall's former wife, who's been jailed."

It was normal that Madam Russel had such a question because Charlize McKinley was Charlene McKinney's pseudonym.

And they were getting engaged in such a short period because they thought Deirdre had 'died,' right? As such, her marriage with Brendan was no longer valid.

Deirdre inexplicably recalled a man she had met the night she left the police station.

He had told her that he was willing to help Deirdre escape, and she would never be found by Brendan as long as she listened to him.

Deirdre refused at the beginning because it was difficult for her to trust a stranger. After all, she might be in danger if the man plotted against her.

It was until the man made a call, and Madame Brighthall answered.

Only then did she realize that it was Madame Brighthall who couldn't tolerate her presence. Madame Brighthall had instructed Deirdre to vanish from Brendan's world through a faked death.

Madame Brighthall's demand didn't seem to disadvantage her. Hence, she had agreed.

She had first acted out a scene of a car falling into the sea. In fact, Deirdre and the driver had jumped out of the car at the point where the surveillance couldn't reach. Afterward, she had waited in the hotel for a few days before boarding a compartment of a large truck to get to Alnwick.

It seemed that the acting was very successful, as Brendan and Charlene would soon get engaged. During the interview, the reporter peppered Brendan with questions but was ignored as usual. It was only Charlene who answered with her voice full of happiness.

“Deirdre? Deirdre?”

Deirdre recovered to her senses and turned her face away. “What are you thinking to the point you fell

into a trance?” teased Madam Russel.

“Nothing. It’s just the TV which is too noisy.”

“Alright, I’ll switch it off then.” Madam Russel turned off the TV, stuffed a spoon and fork in Deirdre’s hand, sat back in her seat, and asked, “About your home’s yard, tell me what do you want to do with it?”

“I want to renovate the yard, plant the lavender that my mom likes, and erect a tombstone for her.” “But you didn’t even take Ophelia’s ashes?” Madam Russel suggested, “What about you tell me the location where her ashes are located? I will get Toby to take it back before he comes back here.”

Because they were with Brendan, Deirdre wouldn’t dare to let Tobey get them. If Brendan were to become suspicious, she wouldn’t be able to stay in the village any longer.

“No worries, I’ve buried them. Anyway, I believe that my mom will be with me wherever I go.”

Chapter 293 Why Can’t I Let It Go?

"You're right!" Madam Russel said, nodding as hard as a bobblehead on a bumpy road. She scooped a portion of mashed potatoes and set it on Deirdre's plate. "Either way, you should eat more! Your body needs it, dear. Give me some time. I'm gonna get a locksmith to break the lock to your courtyard in a few days."

"Sure."

Everyone in Brendan Brighthall's proximity knew a new demon had possessed the man. He had been dedicating himself, headfirst, to his work, almost welcoming the deluge, and had been found spending the nights in his office.

His assistant could not take it anymore. "Mr. Brighthall? You've finished reading your paperwork, right? Last I checked, there isn't anything important or urgent pending your attention, so maybe... Maybe you should go home. Rest up for the day, okay?"

She stopped shy of telling him why she thought it was necessary-the terrible blue-black eyebags and his almost gaunt visage.

Brendan propped his forehead with his palm. As soon as he stopped, fatigue washed over him like a shroud of black fog threatening to blind him. He gave a small nod. "Alright."

Still, he didn't nurse a single desire to go home. How could he, when home smelled like... her? When his home was covered in traces of her, shadows of her, trails of her? He would become anxious whenever he started to close his eyes because he was scared he would dream of Deirdre.

Nonetheless, the rational part of his mind knew that if he kept up his workaholic streak, he would fall sick soon enough.

Brendan picked up his suit and appointed a driver for himself.

He reached home. He saw people moving boxes out of the house across the court. Then, when he got out of the car, his eyes caught Deirdre's clothes sticking out of one of them.

His blood boiled. He stormed forward, snatched the box away, and shot daggers at the poor young man." Who the hell gave you the authority to touch my things!?"

The man jerked. Charlene walked out of the living room just in time. "Bren! What's wrong?"

She espied the box in his hands and understood immediately. "Oh, Bren," she explained, feigning a few chuckles. "We're about to be engaged, and I'll be moving in really soon, aren't I? So, I thought of tidying the place up for the incoming good news, you know? Ms. McKinnon has passed on, after all. We, the living, should let go too, especially since having the dead's stuff around can feel so..."

H

She faltered. Brendan's barely suppressed lividity made it impossible for her to continue. It took almost all of his strength not to let his fury spill out of him. "Her room doesn't even concern you. More importantly, you're not even the mistress of the house yet! Shouldn't you notify me if you're planning to dabble in any of the house's affairs?"

His anger was palpable. Charlene's mien turned pale. She was too familiar with his temperament-it was why it was imperative to remove everything about Deirdre from their lives. Out of sight, out of mind.

She did not expect him to return in the late afternoon, though.

"I... I didn't want you to break down in grief from seeing her things, Bren. So I took matters into my own hands. I worry that you might never be able to move on from Ms. McKinnon's passing if I don't do

something-"

“And it’s precisely why I don’t appreciate you taking matters into your own hands.” Brendan snapped. He closed the lid of the box, his head splitting from a migraine. “I remember telling you this already, and you better not do this again.”

He went past her and climbed the stairs to Deirdre’s old room. He took her clothes out of the box and hung them in her closet once more.

Everything that belonged to her was still here, untouched and locked out of the loop. It almost felt like she was still alive, just away on some affairs before she could pack her things properly.

The windows to her room had never been opened, so the place still smelled like Deirdre’s. Brendan moved his hand to his forehead, and his mind began to replay moments between them in this very room. From how guarded she was, to her gradual compliance, to, finally... the crumbling of the last sign of wariness and the blossoming of a genuine smile on her face.

He had foolishly believed that this was it. This would continue.

His fingers trembled, and his hand made its way to his chest as he felt suffocated. His shortness of breath had robbed him of his thoughts. It hurt to stay in the room.

He walked out and finally felt as though he could breathe again. He confounded himself. Why couldn’t he seem to let go of her already?

Chapter 294 You Knew, Didn’t You?!

Sawyer had arrived. It was just the thing for Brendan to seize and regain his mental footing.

He descended the stairs. Seeing him, Sawyer passed him a booklet. “Mr. Brighthall! This here catalogs all of the designs for Miss McKinney’s engagement dress. The shop would like you to finalize your selections as soon as possible.”

Brendan hummed and took it. "Where is Sam these days?"

Sawyer scratched the back of his head. "He, uh, is still looking for her body. He said he wanted to find her so she could have a resting place."

Brendan had not made it explicit, but even he had given up on the possibility of seeing Deirdre's body ever again. Sam's persistence surprised him into silence. After some time, he remarked, "These are bitterly cold days, Sawyer. Tell him not to stay by the sea for that long in a day. I don't want him to compromise his health at such a young age."

"I know, I know. I advised him against it so many times, but I don't think he listened. Still, he will probably take care of himself a little more if you're the one ordering him to."

Sawyer left. Brendan took the booklet and glanced at the door to Charlene's room. A while later, her voice finally escaped. "Bren! I'm in the middle of my shower. What's up?"

Brendan turned the doorknob and entered her room, his eyes on the booklet. "Sawyer came to pass you the catalog for the dresses. You need to start choosing as soon as possible."

"Alright! Just place it on my bed. I'm gonna be done soon!"

She sounded coy, almost flirtatious. She wanted Brendan to wait in her room, but the man had no plans to do that at all. He placed the booklet on her coffee table and decided to leave.

Her phone suddenly buzzed on the table. Brendan's eyes floated to the lit-up screen-and his visage. turned frigid.

Charlene came out of her shower as quickly as she could. Her rosy cheeks were framed by her matted hair, which coursed down to her naked body clothed in an untied sleep robe. She looked at the man

waiting by her couch and felt her heart skipping in excitement.

Finally! The chance she had been waiting for!

She always believed that Deirdre meant so much to Brendan because she was the first woman he had ever been intimate with. It was only normal for her to occupy a special spot in his mind! But once Brendan had a taste of her-once she brought the man to greater heights-Deirdre would become a nobody in no time. Charlene was sure of it!

She hooked her finger with a strand of her matted hair, curling and uncurling it. Her eyes almost felt. vulpine. "Bren..." she purred.

Brendan set a phone down on the table with a clank and glared at her.

That expression was nippingly hostile. It might as well as serve as a loud "no!". It immediately took the sail out of Charlene's seduction, leaving the young woman to freeze in her tracks and look at the phone.

It was hers.

She became nervous. "W-What?"

Brendan's black eyes zeroed in on her every expression. His gaze was so burning Charlene was starting to

sweat.

“Why are you talking to Steven?” he asked.

Charlene’s face turned pale, and cold beads of sweat oozed out of her palms. How did he know? She had covered her tracks pretty well-calls, messages, the whole shebang-had been removed from any possible archive. Unless...

Unless Steven sent her a message or something?

Just the thought alone suffocated her. She could not make any reckless move that could possibly expose her involvement before Brendan figured it out for sure.

“Oh, you mean between Mr. Young and me? Well, yes. We talk sometimes. He’s always been very kind and nice to me when he was your personal assistant, so I thought I should at least wish him good luck after learning he’s going to leave the city.”

“Really?”

Charlene steeled her nerves against Brendan’s accusatory tone and forced a smile. “What’s wrong, Bren? I don’t know what you’re getting at here-”

Brendan suddenly swept the booklet off the table, sending it flying to the floor. His scowl was as

dangerous as a cavern full of icicles. “Steven forced Deirdre into becoming your legal scapegoat back then! You knew all about that, didn’t you!?”

Chapter 295 He’s the Executioner

Brendan did not wait for Charlene to form an excuse. He leaped to his feet in sheer rage. "And you swept this under the carpet without telling me a single word of it! Through your silence, you agreed to have Deirdre sent to prison in your stead! Why? Because the one who would be protected with this act was you, wasn't it? F*cking hell! Charlene McKinney... How do you even sleep at night!?"

His veins were popping out of his skin, but worst of all, he called her by her full name, as though she was a stranger.

Charlene panicked, reached out to him, and pleaded, "No, I can explain!"

Brendan swung her hand off him. He suddenly realized he did not know her

Who was he looking at?

anymore.

How could she be so calculating and cruel? How could she even think the means justified the end? She was no longer that kind, innocent young woman who would throw her life away to save others anymore. Charlene's eyes were red. She was both terrified and panicking as she tugged on Brendan's sleeve and sobbed. "P-Please don't hate me, Bren... I didn't mean for it to happen. I was just scared! I was so scared of losing you, okay!?"

"I had been unconscious for two years while Ms. McKinnon and you just... Your marriage was going so strong that she was bearing your child! If I went to prison... And Ms. McKinnon brought the kid to terms.... I'm no longer relevant to your life, don't you get it!?"

"I love you, Bren! I love you so much that I rushed into the fire, even when I could have died, to save you! You should know just how much you mean to me from that alone, Bren, so how could I possibly let anyone take you away from me?"

"Besides, the gravest of my sin was my knowledge of it. But I didn't act for or against it, did I? I didn't hurt Deirdre myself, did I? Call me self-serving if it helps you, but just... don't hate me! Bren!"

Charlene lunged, throwing her arms around his waist and squeezing it tight. Tears kept rolling down her cheeks.

Her antics were driving Brendan into a migraine. He clenched his fist and broke away from her unsolicited hug.

She looked up at him, still tear-stricken, and muttered, "Bren?"

"Our engagement is delayed."

"Bren!"

"I hate being kept in the shadows, so you should count your blessings that I've only decided to delay our engagement," Brendan snarled, opening his eyes. They were still and unfathomable, like the surface of a lake in an underground cavern. "Of course, I don't blame it on you either. I'm the one at fault."

He was the one who insisted on using Deirdre. This whole thing resulted from his idea.

In the end, he was the executioner.

"Bren..." Charlene shivered. Seeing the profound disappointment in his eyes, she suddenly felt more frightened than she had ever felt before. She knew she had disappointed him.

"I need time to myself. Don't follow me."

He moved toward the door.

Brendan returned to his room and opened the window. The year's first snow had fallen, and a breeze brought some of the flurries of white inside.

In a daze, Brendan seemed to have returned to the first snow in their marriage.

She was busy tending to the flowers in the yard even as the tip of her nose turned red due to the cold.

He was holding his umbrella over her head, startling her. She beamed at him and explained, "I was just checking if the flowers are alright in this weather, so I'll be inside in a bit. You should head in first. The cold always gives you a headache, right?"

"Please. You're even more prone to being ill than I ever am. I'll get an actual headache if you turn up sick," he replied, freeing his hand from the umbrella to her before covering her small frame with his coat.

Brendan was simply worried that if she caught a cold before their scheduled family get-together, she would spread it to his mother during their meal together. It was a simple, pragmatic calculation, yet it was enough to color her eyes red. She cried, laughed, and hugged him.

Her voice was thick with tears. Her voice was soft.

"Thank you, Bren! Thank you..."

He found her reaction comical. He threw her a little bone, which apparently was enough to move her to tears. She was so happy that she woke up early the next morning just to set some time into learning new recipes for him. The breakfast that morning was large enough to be called a feast.

For all her effort, he ate only a few bites noncommittally.

Brendan lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Fatigue and dizziness crashed onto him and finally took hold.

Chapter 296 There's No One Inside!

Brendan woke up with both a sore throat and a body as heavy as lead. Jolts of chill and heat cycled through his veins, cluing him in on the possibility that he had a fever. The last time he had been sick like this was about a year ago, and Brendan had a faint idea of where the medicine kit was.

Deirdre had placed it in the cabinet near the headboard.

He coughed and pulled the door to the cabinet open. Every medicine bottle had a post-it note with scribbles on the dosage and its expiration date. It was just who Deirdre was-she had always been very meticulous with whatever she undertook.

Brendan tore the note away and felt his chest somehow get torn open.

A few days had passed with no sign of his sickness availing. Still, he went to work, battling his coughing fits and general sickness as he thumbed through paperwork. More days passed, and he was beginning to think his memories were fading into white noise.

Then, suddenly, he received a call from Sam.

"Mr. Brighthall, we found the car!"

He cast everything aside and drove to the Southern Bridge. Sam was talking to a group of people as they undressed in the bitter cold. They were about to dive, apparently.

The wintry gale nipped at Brendan's temples, and his headache worsened. Panting, he approached them. and asked, "How's it going?"

"We've pinpointed the exact location of the vehicle, sir. This will be the second time these divers go down. They have their tools with them this time," Sam explained. "The goal is to break the windows and.... pull Miss McKinnon out of it."

Brendan felt the world blurring before his eyes for a second. "I... I see."

He thought his heart had grown numb, but it suddenly tightened. Every part of his chest was filled with little needlepoints of stinging pain because... he was scared. He was terrified of seeing Deirdre's corpse lying sprawled before him.

At the same time, part of him felt relieved. He was relieved to finally be able to bury Deirdre instead of leaving her spirit locked inside that sunken car at the bottom of the icy sea.

The team began to put on their diving gear. "The average body extraction agency has rejected our request, Mr. Brighthall," Sam explained further. "These divers were the only ones who would accept the job, though even assembling this team took a long while. No one wanted to take this on. It's cold this- month, and people don't want to get sick from the expedition. Also... Most people simply shun jobs that involve the dead, sir."

Brendan understood their reasoning, so he replied, "Once they are back on shore, tell them they are. getting \$71,500 for their effort."

Sam nodded, then frowned. He finally got to inspect Brendan's face a little more closely and found his coloring alarming. "Mr. Brighthall, are you sick?"

Brendan did not seem to mind. "Been under the weather for a few days, but it's fine."

“It’s cold out here. Maybe you should wait in the car. I’ll inform you the moment they get back.”

“No,” Brendan said snippily, his refusal as instinctive as a knee-jerk movement. He pursed his lips and stared at the sea, as he could not bear to miss any image or moment. The location of the drowning

vehicle was too far from the shoreline, though, and after so many weeks, it had sunk quite deeply to the seafloor.

Time crawled forward. The team did not return for hours. As the expedition went on, Brendan felt his heartbeat racing.

Anxiety and dread gnawed at those who waited by the shore. Then, finally, several silhouettes bobbed to the surface.

The team rose to the shore, and yet only their tools were with them. Sam stepped forward and asked, “What’s wrong?”

One of the divers wiped seawater away from his face. Even as he put his clothes on, he shivered. “With all due respect, sir, is this a prank? There’s no one inside!”

“What the hell-”

“What?!”

Brendan had lurched forward, his hands clutching the man’s collar. He narrowed his eyes and demanded indignantly, “What do you mean?!”

The diver stiffened. Sam had to step forward and assuaged him. "That's Mr. Brighthall. It's okay."

The man's shoulders relaxed. "Oh. Okay, so I broke the window with my tool and we got inside. The thing is... that Miss McKinnon lady wasn't the only one who wasn't in there. Even the driver was missing!" "That Miss McKinnon lady wasn't the only one who wasn't in there. Even the driver was missing-"

It was as though someone had let loose a swarm of hornets inside his skull. A thought formed amidst the chaos and triggered the flames in his chest, as if itching to break out. His eyes were beet-red. "Are you Sure?"

Chapter 297 Where Did You Hide Her?!

"100%, Mr. Brighthall. Going down there in this weather was no piece of cake, sir. We wouldn't resurface. without any results unless there was no result to begin with," the diver answered. "Honestly, this is my first time seeing something like this. Not a single body inside a car skidded into the sea-that's just creepy!"

"Maybe the body got moved elsewhere by the current?" someone else asked.

The man shook his head. "Hell no. The windows were shut, man. No one could have pushed the car open against water pressure after the entire vehicle plunged into the sea. The only plausible explanation is that

no one was in the car when it went down."

"No one was inside."

It felt like an explosion in Brendan's chest. He could not even tell if most of it was joy or sorrow-all he knew was that it soared straight into his skull and caused the world to spin before his eyes. He felt ready to black out altogether.

Deirdre was not dead.

He reeled in realization. Instinctively, he concluded that it had been a setup-Deirdre's fake-out to kill his attachment to her. He remembered her getting into this exact vehicle as soon as she had left the station and became convinced that none of this was a coincidence.

He hugged the fabric on his chest tightly to keep himself from fainting. Eyes red, he ordered Sam, "I want you to find out who else Deirdre had talked to other than you and me at the police station!"

Sam did as he was told while Brendan returned to the car. Being exposed to the elements had dealt a blow to his body, so he felt cold, then hot, then cold again. His fingertips were trembling uncontrollably. And yet, in an almost twisted way, Brendan felt as though he had just been resurrected from the edge of death and despair.

Because Deirdre was still alive. She had faked her death and fooled everyone.

God, the cruelty! Had she had no idea just how much pain and grief she would cause him? Or was that the exact reason she had done it? Because she had wanted him dead.

His body was boiling at fever point, and his head was ringing from pain.

He did not even know when he collapsed. All he knew was that, after battling his fever to a standstill for days, the fever finally garnered enough force to break out of him now.

The next time Brendan opened his eyes, he was already lying down on the living room couch. Dr. Ginger was by his side, and his phone kept ringing nearby.

He forced himself up, endured the discomfort, and picked up the call. Sam took a deep breath and said, Mr. Brighthall? I found him. A man came to see Miss McKinnon before she disappeared. That man.... had contacted Madame Brighthall before."

It was all it took for Brendan to barge into the old family residence.

Madame Brighthall hardly looked perturbed. Even as her near-hysterical son stood some distance away, eyes beet-red, she continued praying, her fingers laced around the rosary beads. The housekeeper, who had failed to stop Brendan from breaking in, stood awkwardly aside and glanced at Madame Brighthall helplessly,

The older woman frowned, looking unimpressed. “Where is the grace and composure one expects from the Brighthall scion and CEO of Brighthall Group? This is an embarrassment.”

Charlene was standing by Madame Brighthall’s side too. As soon as the older woman rose, she quickly helped her up, even as she trained a mortified glance in Brendan’s direction.

Brendan’s face was eerily pale. Despite the signs of his sickness on full display, he leveled a steady gaze at his mother’s face and stepped forward, demanding, “Where is Deirdre? Where did you hide her?!”

Madame Brighthall said nothing, but Charlene’s expression darkened. Was Deirdre not dead already? She turned, catching a glimpse of the older woman’s mien, and felt her heart sink.

Madame Brighthall patted her dress and smoothed it. “I’m afraid I don’t understand your question. What does Deirdre have to do with me? She’s dead, isn’t she? For your own sake, please control your

hysterics.”

Brendan seemed to have already expected his mother to handwave his accusation. He closed his eyes, willing his head to stop spinning, before opening them again. He stared at her frigidly. “Does the name ‘Jay Long’ ring any bells? ‘Course it does. You sent him to talk to Deirdre and fake her death. You’re. welcome to deny your involvement, Mom, but

there's literally nothing to stop me from abducting Jay to question him right now. I'm feeling very, very pissed too, so if he leaves with his arms broken or anything, that's not really on me."

Chapter 298 He Just Can't Let Her Go

"Goddamn it!" It was the first time Madame Brighthall had ever been so apoplectic. She shot daggers at Brendan and snarled, "Haven't you reached rock bottom yet?!"

Brendan took a deep breath. "Yes! Which is why I need Deirdre. I need to atone!"

"And what if she doesn't want your stupid atonement?" Madame Brighthall retorted.

Brendan felt a pang in his chest and clenched his fists. "I'll make her accept it."

Madame Brighthall turned to face a statue of Mother Mary. "No, I don't think it'll work at all. Do you really think she'd be eager to leave because of me? No. It's because she hates you to her very core. She wanted to escape you and never see you again in her entire life. If you're really seeking atonement, then put everything about her behind you and settle down with Lena already. Treat her as though she's already

dead!"

"Never!" Brendan snapped unthinkingly. Without flinching, he demanded again, "Where did you hide Deirdre?!"

Madame Brighthall ignored him.

A coughing fit seized Brendan, but he marched over to the stairs to get to the first floor. Just two steps in, he lost his footing and fell.

“Bren!” Charlene’s eyes reddened, and she tried to help him.

He slapped her hand away coldly.

He was clearly still seething from their previous conflict. Charlene bit her lip and cursed the fact that that. b*tch was still alive-and that Brendan had somehow found out about it too.

The young man’s sickness had tortured his features into a terrible grimace, but he still stormed up the stairs and began searching every room. Madame Brighthall was so appalled that she cried, “You’ve gone. insane! Lena is right here, right next to me! The two of you are going to be engaged on the 28th! The two of you are going to get married! But you... You are throwing a hysterical tantrum over another woman right in front of your bride-to-be! How could you do this to your future wife?!”

Brendan suddenly fell to his knees, startling the older woman. His downcast eyes revealed no change in his resolve as he groaned. “I’ve never begged you for anything, Mom, but this time... I’m begging you... Tell me where Deirdre is! She’s suicidal and she’s acted on it multiple times already. Now that her mother’s. gone, she’s got nothing left in this world. She might..”

He scowled, remembering the day when Deirdre had thrown herself off the ledge. The despair in her eyes

The hopelessness on her face before she...

His heart ached. “The only way for her to live is to have her by my side! I have to find her-I need her back! I owe her too much and I can’t have peace until I’ve atoned for it all!”

“Why you-!”

Madame Brighthall pressed her hand against her temple. The world was spinning. She had never seen her son in this freakishly mulish state before. It took her minutes to finally find the voice to say, "I promised her I wouldn't say a word about her whereabouts, okay? You want to atone? Then think! Has it never occurred to you that the only time she truly feels free and happy is when she's freed from you?"

"I know," Brendan muttered under his breath. Of course he did.

His head was splitting. His sickness was acting up, and his limbs were growing weaker. His vision was

filled with black spots, and his attention waned. And yet, he still had enough clarity in him to answer his mother's question.

Yes. He knew. The problem was... He couldn't let her go.

Maybe he was selfish. Maybe he was an *sshole. But he knew that Deirdre's absence suffocated him, and every moment without her stung with regret, longing, and pain.

He knew one thing for sure: Without her, he was going mad.

Brendan looked up at his mother. His face was ashen and grave. "Are you really content to see your only son steadily going mad?"

Madame Brighthall shut her eyes in exasperation and staggered backward a little. Never in her life had she imagined her son would lose his marbles over a woman who had appeared out of freaking nowhere.

"If you do not tell me where she is, I'll find her myself. There will be clues, I know. I don't care if it takes me a week, a month, or a year."

Chapter 299 What's Hers Is Hers

Brendan's lips were pale, as was his entire appearance. And yet, every word sounded like a strike at an old bell. "I'll see her even if it kills me!"

He rose to his feet and began to cough his lungs out. His body was careening with every step, but he gritted his teeth and marched toward the front door-and right into the snow.

"Stop it!" Madame Brighthall bellowed breathlessly. "How dare you blackmail your mother with your own. life? What now? You're gonna stand outside in the snow until you die unless I reveal her whereabouts? This is how you're going to threaten your own mother?!"

A winter gale swooped through the landscape, kicking up a chaotic swirl of snow in front of Brendan as he stood by the door. Framed by the nipping white horizon and the unforgiving flurry, his back looked small and forlorn. "I'm not blackmailing you or anything, Mom. I just don't want you to regret this even harder than I do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If Deirdre dies, the young woman who's been your companion over the past two years will die too... And you'll be the one who killed her. Won't you regret that?"

Madame Brighthall's face turned pale. She stared at him wide-eyed, aghast.

Charlene was even more mortified. "B-Bren! What are you doing?!"

She panicked. Brendan was about to reveal the biggest secret between them for Deirdre's sake! How could he-how could he f*cking do that?!

Brendan turned toward her with an impassive glance. "What's hers is hers, Charlene. Time to give it back."

Charlene's face turned ashen.

Madame Brighthall scowled. She was puzzled, but more importantly, she felt anxious. "Brendan Brighthall, what are you saying?!" she asked frantically. "What do you mean? My companion over the past two years? Since when do I know Deirdre?"

"Did you really feel nothing the first time you saw her? Didn't you think she looked familiar?"

His words touched a nerve in Madame Brighthall. She thought of the first time she had met Deirdre- when the young woman had summoned a strange feeling in her chest. It had been a kind of familiarity, and yet she could not pinpoint why. Madame Brighthall had passed it off as a trick of the mind back then. but now, Brendan's rhetoric had brought that back.

For a moment, Madame Brighthall looked lost. Then, she shouted impatiently, "Who is she?"

"She's-

"Bren!" Charlene yelled, cutting off Brendan as she trembled under the weight of fear. He was going to ruin her... all because of Deirdre! It had taken her so much effort to finally get Madame Brighthall to like her, and now he was going to yank her blindfold away and tell her, in no uncertain terms, that Charlene had been the third wheel all along?!

Since when had Brendan been capable of... of... such cruelty?!

Brendan simply looked at her placidly.

She felt chills in her bones. All the privileges and favoritism the fire narrative had bestowed upon her would now be completely revoked just because Deirdre had staged that fake accident.

Madame Brighthall pulled her hand away from Charlene's arm and asked again, "Who is she?"

"She was your daughter-in-law." 1

It was the connotation-not the volume or the enunciation-of the word that struck Madame Brighthall right in the chest with the force of a sledgehammer. She stumbled backward and fell, sinking onto the couch as her mind went blank for a second.

Deirdre was the daughter-in-law? She was "Charlene"?

No wonder the young woman had felt familiar despite her disfigurement. Even when Madame Brighthall had thought she was seeing Deirdre for the first time, there had been a nagging feeling that she knew her from somewhere.

She had been her companion for two years.

And for all the kindness she had shown her, Madame Brighthall had repaid her with vitriol and character assassination. She had called her a sadistic witch and forced her out of their lives. And finally, she had orchestrated a plan to send her away by turning her into a living ghost. 1

Madame Brighthall felt as though her heart had been yanked out of her chest. Everything made sense now. Deirdre was not some woman who had appeared out of nowhere. She had been with them all along -as Brendan's real wife.

"T-Then... Then who is this?!"

Brendan clenched his fists. "The year when you objected to our marriage, Lena got into an accident and went into a coma. No one knew if she would ever wake up again, but I knew you would never let me marry an unconscious woman. The only means I had was to find someone else to pretend to be Charlene. And that impostor... was Deirdre McKinnon."

Madame Brighthall had not liked Charlene the first time Brendan had brought her home. The older

woman had prided herself on her acute judgment of character and had known based on the greed and ambition in her eyes that Charlene would only be the start of a nightmare.

Naturally, she had objected to her son's marriage.

But then, one day, Charlene had just... changed.

Madame Brighthall had been befuddled to see the same calculating woman carrying her on her back through the snow when the older woman had had a heart attack. She had been bewildered to hear about that schemer nursing her to health for days on end. She had been stupefied when she had seen the young woman's face break into a bashful, mirthful grin when Madame Brighthall had finally woken up.

That young woman had never asked for anything in return. She had come down with a fever for her effort, and all she had done was take some medicine and go about her day. When asked, the same young lady had said she simply felt it had been the right thing to do.

It was moments like these that had slowly moved Madame Brighthall into acceptance... and then some. Madame Brighthall had cared and protected her because she'd genuinely liked her.

And now, Brendan was telling her that the Charlene she had come to sincerely love had been Deirdre all along.

Madame Brighthall felt as though the world was going dark. She thought of the verbal abuse she had hurled at Deirdre. God, her heart ached. She fished out her medicine and swallowed it, her hands shaking.

“Why... Why didn't you just tell me?”

Brendan turned his eyes to the floor. Why? Because he had not cared about Deirdre at all back then. Her purpose had been to clear the road for Charlene's eventual ascension as his wife. Why would Brendan botch his own scheme?

Madame Brighthall pressed her hand against her chest. A long silence later, she wrote something on a piece of paper and folded it. “I don't know if she's still living here, but this is the place she specifically said she wanted to go to, Maybe... you've still got time...”

Brendan's eyes glinted with excitement. He took the paper from her hand, his chest undulating with a wave of emotions. He opened it, and the address leaped into his view.

A pang hit him. This was Deirdre's old address.

she

She had left this place with her mother back then so she could “work” as his impostor wife. And now, had returned to her real home, bruised and battered, coming back to her roots worse off than she had started.

How forlorn she had to be to end her journey like this! He could only imagine the desolation she must have felt...

Now was not the time to think. He muttered an apology and bolted out into the snow despite his illness. His cough had become sputters. His ears were ringing. His throat and entire body were protesting the

strain he put them under.

But he wanted to see Deirdre, and he wanted to see her fast.

He fell face-first into the snow. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Sawyer running toward him, his breaths visible as he cried out to Brendan. He grabbed hold of Sawyer's hands and breathed. "Find her..."

"Who, sir?"

"Her."

"Dee Dee? Time for lunch!"

Madame Russel pushed the door open, only to find Deirdre crouching over a patch of dirt, shoveling a spadeful of dirt patiently. The yard had been abandoned for a long time, and Madame Russel could not help but remark, "Ophelia was really into it back then, huh? Some flowers there. A tree over here... I could smell them every time I passed y'all by. But now, in the blink of an eye, they have all withered."

Tall grass had come to claim the garden as soon as it was bereft of its matron. Winter had been the only thing stopping it from growing about a meter tall.

Deirdre flashed a smile. "It wasn't the blink of an eye. It was four long years."

"Four long years..." Madame Russel parroted in a daze. She shook herself out of it and removed some of the grass. "Let's head back."

She led Deirdre to the living room and brought out a bucket of warm water. As Deirdre washed her hands. and face, she scurried inside the kitchen and brought out their meal.

A thought popped into her mind, and she smiled.

“You know, you came at just the right time. Toby’s coming home today!”