

Chapter 1021

It's written in a book that we must be serious when we part ways with someone. That's because we won't know if we'll ever get to reunite with that person again. So, does this mean that without separation, there'll be no purpose to wait anymore?

Summer's surgery was very successful. In merely six hours, his surgery was done. As for Amy, she was brought back to us together with her sister, Ann.

Staring at the two sisters, I smiled, "Since you've already made your choice, I guess it's time for us to say our goodbyes!" It was totally understandable for Ann to take her away. Since Amy is still a child, it probably was best to not let her undergo surgery at such a young age. Anyhow, everything still turned out well in the end.

Ann grabbed Amy's hand and gave me a bow to express their gratitude before uttering, "Ms. Stovall, I know that you've helped us a lot, and we are very grateful for that. Although we can't ask for your forgiveness, maybe we can pay you back in different ways. If possible, you guys should go to the basement of the Imperial Hotel. There might be something of your interest there. Besides that, you need to know that Brandon's boss is the real mastermind behind all of this. That person must be eradicated before more kids become his victims and end up like us."

After finishing her sentence, she took Amy and left. I didn't bother asking where they were headed as I knew that a smart girl like Ann would be able to take care of both Amy and herself.

After putting Summer in Cameron's care, I headed over to the Imperial Hotel together with Zachary. The nightclub here belongs to Armond. If anything goes awry here, I'll be in trouble.

The Imperial Hotel looked like a desolated building during the day. There were only a few employees, who were on the day shift, standing at the front desk. Upon seeing the two of us, two girls walked up to us and asked about our purpose here.

At this moment, I signaled Zachary to make a distraction. He then proceeded to feign illness in front of the girls. Out of concern, two of them went up to help him.

"Miss, if I'm not mistaken, there's a hotel upstairs right? My father and I are here on a business trip and we can't seem to find a suitable hotel for us to stay in. And because of the long trip, my father is exhausted. Can you get us two rooms to rest for the time being?"

The two of them pondered for a while before answering, “Okay. However, since we also have a nightclub here, it’ll be quite noisy at night. Are you two okay with that?”

I nodded and replied, “Yes, it’s no big deal. Now, can you help my father up to the toom first while I check in?”

One of the girls helped Zachary up the stairs while the other one helped me with check in.

Bang!

Suddenly, there was a loud noise outside. I went with the girl to check out the noise. Glancing out the window, our jaws dropped. The girl turned to me and apologized, “Sorry, please wait here for a moment.”

She then rushed outside to deal with the person who had just broken one of the glass windows. In the meantime, I scrutinized the lobby with my eyes, trying to find the entrance to the basement.

If what Ann said was true, then where did she find the entrance?

Having thought about it for a while, my guess was that it was hidden in Brandon’s office. At this time of the day, there shouldn’t be any people in the office area. Then, I went on to notify the receptionist just now that I was heading upstairs first.

As she was still busy dealing with the commotion outside, she only gave me a terse response. I took a glance at the person who broke the glass window before heading toward the elevator.

According to Ann, Brandon's office was situated on the top floor. I was rather perplexed when I first heard it from her. Under normal circumstances, shouldn't the big boss of the nightclub be the one who gets the office on the top floor? Why did a manager like him gets to have the office instead?

Without thinking too much about it, I took the elevator to the top floor. To my surprise, there wasn't any office on the top floor. Instead, there was another floor above the supposedly top floor.

"Mrs. Fuller!"

Joseph, who suddenly appeared out of nowhere, almost gave me a heart attack. Seeing him standing at the elevator entrance on the floor above, I was a bit baffled. "What's the matter?" I queried.

He frowned and replied, "This elevator here might be our way into the basement. However, this elevator needs a specific fingerprint in order to access it. We can't seem to find a way to open it."

I paused for a second. "Then, how did Ann find the way to get in?"

After pondering for a while, I came to an answer. The kid named Jody who was always wandering around at the Imperial Hotel must've told Ann about the secret entrance. Since Jody has been here for so many years, he would've known about it unequivocally!

Chapter 1022

“We should head outside first!”

Joseph looked confused. “We’re leaving already?”

I nodded. “Armond is currently in Moranta while Brandon is still occupied with the death of his wife. At a time like this, our main priority should be to locate Jody as soon as possible. Contact Dillan. He should have some information for us by now.”

Joseph nodded and left without any questions.

I then met up with Zachary in his hotel room. Using the noisy environment as an excuse, we checked out of the hotel and quickly left.

When we returned back to the hospital, Summer's surgery was done. Cameron was accompanying her during her recovery in the hospital. Fortunately, everything went smoothly.

Meanwhile, I went to find Ann and Amy. They settled down in an urban village in A City. The environment they lived in seemed a bit vile and dirty. When Ann saw my face, she didn't look surprised at all. She then continued on nonchalantly with her cooking using the induction cooker. Since there was no ventilation, the whole room was engulfed in smoke.

"The environment here isn't that good. Apologies!" She coughed a few times as she was saying that. After helping to set up the food on the small table, Amy sat on the bench beside the table and waited.

Although their living conditions wasn't that good, the two of them seemed happy together nonetheless. Cutting to the chase, I directly stated, "I've promised you that I'll help you find Jody. In return, I'd like you to convince him to go with us to the Imperial Hotel."

She lowered her head and continued washing the pots. "You guys want him to lead you to the basement right?"

"Yes," I answered truthfully.

She glared at me and uttered, "You do know that there's no need for you guys to confirm personally right? You can just call the police. Since they don't have time to move the goods now, they'll be forced to wait when the police do an investigation as the elevator is the only exit."

I smiled and responded, "I'll consider it. That being said, I still need you to convince Jody."

She went silent for a bit before replying, "I'm not sure if I could convince him. Have you guys found him?"

I shook my head. "Not yet!"

"I see." She walked to the table and sat down. "Do you want to have some?" she asked.

I shook my head. I then waited quietly on the side for her to finish her food before I added, "I used to think that what I did was right. But looking back at it now, I realized how daft and juvenile I really was. That's what I get for being so dumb."

Confused, she raised her eyebrows. "Ms. Stovall, what are you..."

"It's nothing. I'm just blabbering. Okay then, I should probably go now. I'll contact you again once I've located Jody."

After that, I got up and left their small and narrow house.

As I got on to the car, Joseph reported, “Mrs. Fuller, I’ve received word from Dillan regarding Jody.”

I nodded and instructed, “Get some of your men to keep an eye on the Imperial Hotel. I want to know every vehicle that enters or leaves the place.”

He nodded in response.

However, there was still this uneasiness in me that I couldn’t seem to get rid of. Is Ann’s existence part of Armond’s plan all along? The timing of her appearance seemed rather contrived.

I decided to give Nora a call. Unlike her usual exuberant self, she seemed aloof when she answered the phone. “You have finally decided to call.”

“Let’s meet up at the café!” I suggested.

“Okay!” she nodded.

After that, Joseph and I headed over to the café.

When we arrived, Nora was already there. Something about her seemed different from when I last saw her. She was acting furtively.

Upon seeing me, she acted distant and let out a faint smile. "You're here. Take a sit!"

I sat down and stared at her quietly.

After a while, she broke the silence between us and asked, "When did you realize that he loves you?"

She was referring to Armond.

I pursed my lips and answered honestly, "When he was in Moranta, he wanted to get his hands on the management right there. In order to achieve his goal, he locked Ashton up in a refrigerating chamber. We barely escaped death."

She pursed her lips. "I won't pry too much into your personal matters. I'm truly sorry about what you've gone through. That being said, we can't be friends anymore."

I shrugged and replied apathetically, "I know. I respect your choice. We can put this whole thing about the Imperial Hotel behind us now. With that said, I'm not here for your apology. You know that, right?"

She asked instead, "What do you want then?"

I stayed silent for a while before answering, “Do not bring the Oberick family into this. Armond has done a lot of bad things. From trading human organs to smuggling kyanine, a lot of lives were lost because of him. He’ll be thrown behind bars once he gets caught. Nora, Mr. Oberick’s good name will be smeared by Armond when that happens. You can’t put the Oberick family at stake because of a crude man like him.”

Chapter 1023

She looked at me with reddened eyes as she clasped her hands tightly together. “Scarlett, I can’t turn back anymore. I won’t involve Grandpa’s men in this, but as long as he’s connected to it, I’ll do whatever I can to protect him.”

I frowned but understood her obsession and calmly replied, “Okay. As long as you think it’s worth it.”

This marked the end of our friendship.

There was no use talking about it anymore.

As soon as we left the café and got into the car, Joseph said, “There’re a few trucks below Imperial Hotel. Apparently, they’re cleaning out the hotel’s junk. They’re moving stuff right now.”

Taken aback, I hesitated for a while before I replied, "Let's go there now!"

He nodded and started up the car.

When we reached Imperial Hotel, four or five trucks were parked by the entrance, and there were several men moving things into the trucks. Thus, Joseph parked the car outside.

"Why are they suddenly moving all these? Where are they bringing them to?"

After watching them for a while, I noticed that they were bringing out tables, chairs, cardboard boxes, and white quilts. They seemed to be old items that the hotel did not want.

As I stared at the white quilts that had been loaded into the truck, I pondered for a moment before I asked, "Can you do something to make the truck with the quilts catch fire?"

Joseph was stunned for a moment, probably because he was thinking the same thing as I was. Then, he nodded. "I can!"

Subsequently, he called made a call and arranged for someone to tamper with the car.

Soon, a noise came from inside. We watched from our car as the truck started to catch fire, emitting smoke. "Make use of this messy situation and get someone to see if there's anything wrapped in the quilts."

Joseph nodded and spoke into his headset. Shortly after, he looked at me and replied, "There're weapons wrapped inside!"

"Call the police and the fire department. Also, get some men to surround the area. Don't let anyone get out." As long as this succeeded, Armond would be called to come back, therefore leaving him no time to deal with Ashton.

Shortly after that, I heard police sirens and the fire engines then arrived. As I watched the horde of men rush into the hotel, I was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

I turned to Joseph and said, "Come on, let's go and meet Dillan!"

However, Joseph did not drive and simply looked toward the front of the car. Following his gaze, I was stunned when I saw that familiar face. "Abe? Didn't he die in Moranta?"

Joseph was also taken aback and frowned.

Seeing that man hurriedly enter Imperial Hotel, I was about to get off and follow him in before Joseph stopped me. “Mrs. Fuller, wait in the car while I go down to check on the situation. Don’t get out of the car no matter what!”

I furrowed my brows, but as soon as I thought of Ashton’s words, I simply nodded and waited in the car.

However, not long after Joseph went in, I heard gunshots from inside the building. I instantly tensed up. What’s going on? They’re actually acting so savagely in this country?

I dialed Joseph’s number, but it would not connect. Just as I wanted to get off the car, I hesitated. If I get down now, not only would I be unable to do anything, I’d also be putting myself in danger. But if I don’t get off now, I wouldn’t know anything about Joseph’s situation.

In the end, I could only sit in the car and wait. Feeling helpless, I gave Boris a call for help.

His background seemed to be very noisy. As soon as he picked up, he asked, “What’s wrong, Ms. Stovall?”

Listening to the flustered voice on the other end of the line, I suddenly had a bad feeling. “Boris, are you okay?”

He coughed for a while before he replied, "Mr. Moore and I were tricked by Dillan. We're trapped in his villa now, and the house is on fire. Mr. Moore has lung disease and the situation isn't looking too good right now!"

Panicked, I hurriedly replied, "I'll call for help right away. You should call the police!"

After I hung up, I got out of the car and hid beside it. I wanted to enter the hotel to search for Joseph, but there were constant sounds of fighting coming from inside. Since Abe was a fugitive, naturally, human life would not mean anything to him.

Before I even entered the hotel, I noticed two dead bodies beside the truck that was on fire. They appeared to be the drivers of the truck, which was still burning and could accidentally explode.

Luckily, not many people were around this area. When I still did not see Joseph, I started to get anxious. I wanted to give him a call, but again, the call did not get through. Soon, special forces soldiers had surrounded Imperial Hotel, which only made me more anxious. If they arrested Joseph, things would become troublesome.

However, if I entered then, I would be shot right away. I tried to call him again, and it finally got through this time. Joseph said anxiously, "Mrs. Fuller, are you okay?"

“I’m fine. Hurry and come back out. There’re special forces outside Imperial Hotel now. My dad and Boris were tricked by Dillan and are trapped there right now, so we have to hurry over.”

“Okay, but I can’t get out right now. Imperial Hotel has a back door, so you should drive away first, and I’ll come out to meet you.” As soon as he was done, he hung up.

As I studied my surroundings, I noticed that the special forces were closing in on Imperial Hotel and quickly ran back to the car and started the engine. Suddenly, a man appeared and blocked the car. I barely stepped on the brakes in time before I hit him.

Chapter 1024

When I raised my head to look at the person, I was stunned for a moment. “Danny, why are you...”

He hurriedly got into the car while bleeding and said, “Go now!”

Without thinking too much, I quickly drove out of the area and left the scene. Then, I looked at him and asked, “Why are you here? Are you still working with Abe?”

Due to the injury on his arm, he frowned as he looked at me. I continued, "I'll send you to the hospital!"

"You can't!" he shouted. He was already pale because of the pain.

A while later, I realized that if he went to the hospital then, the police would question him very soon. Since there was a shooting case in Imperial Hotel that day, even if Danny said he was not at the scene, his gunshot wound would still arouse suspicion.

Thus, my only option was to take him to meet Joseph first.

As soon as he saw Danny, Joseph's expression instantly darkened. The only thing he did not do was to take a knife straight to Danny's neck and ask him what exactly was going on.

Without too much delay, I gave Joseph a brief explanation then drove straight to Dillan's villa. The firefighters were already there when we reached, and Zachary had just been carried into the ambulance.

I looked at Boris and asked, "What exactly happened? Dillan actually set fire to such a huge villa?"

Despite it being in the suburbs, the villa was still worth tens of millions. What was he planning when he set it on fire?

Boris sighed and replied, "You head to the hospital to check on your father first. I'll take care of the rest."

We were indeed surrounded by many people, making it inconvenient for me to continue asking him questions. Thus, we headed to the hospital together as Boris suggested. The doctor concluded that Zachary had inhaled too much smoke but would be okay after resting for a while.

Joseph had to settle the matter with Imperial Hotel, and Boris was handling the issue with Dillan.

Meanwhile, Danny and I sat on the seats along the corridor for ages. After a long while, I said, "I know you are with Abe, so I won't ask too many questions. But considering that I have helped you today, can you tell me why Abe isn't dead?"

Danny's injury had already been treated by a doctor, and he was sitting beside me silently the whole time.

After a long while, he replied, "The man who died in Moranta wasn't Abe. Imperial Hotel is jointly operated by Abe and Armond, and the operating room in that factory you went to is also theirs. However, Armond had transferred everything over to Abe these past few days."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

He looked at me as he said, “I know you’ve been trying to find evidence of Armond’s illegal activities. Armond knows it too, so when you went to the village to find that family, he made a deal with Abe. They’d been doing business for so long that many of their things were old and damaged. Armond was worried since there was no way to openly get rid of them, but you gave him an opportunity. The things you managed to find out are all true. Armond wanted you to make them public since Abe would be punished in the end, not him.”

I was taken aback for a moment, then asked, “Why does he think he can use Abe as he pleases?” They were both proud men, so things were definitely not as simple as just shifting blame.

“You probably don’t understand Abe as a person. It’s true that he’s cruel and only thinks about profiting, but he actually treats his men very sincerely. After the issue in Venria was revealed, we were at a dead-end. We came over because Abe wanted to work with Armond so that his men could settle down. He would then help Armond clean up his mess.”

I froze. “So right from the beginning, Armond purposely led me on to investigate this matter just so that when I finally exposed everything, it would put an end to all these dirty businesses.”

He nodded in reply.

There was an unexplainable feeling of shock in me. From the beginning, everything that Armond did was to lead me to this point. He had taken the initiative to call me, revealed that there was an organ trade going on in A

City, and even gave me his name card. His ultimate motive was to let me discover those dirty secrets and expose them.

I hesitated for a long while before I replied, "Was he also the one who planned everything that had happened to me at Imperial Hotel?"

Danny nodded. "He purposely used the child to provoke you so that you would become determined to take action on Imperial Hotel."

Does it mean he has planned the whole thing step by step, just waiting to lead me into his trap and eventually making me the person who would help him succeed in his plan?

At that moment, I did not know if I should laugh or cry. After all this time, I was just someone's puppet?

Noticing my grim expression, Danny pursed his lips slightly as he apologized. "Sorry!"

I shook my head, feeling a little tired. After dealing with the matter for so long, everything just turned out to be a well-planned conspiracy.

Just then, I thought of Ashton and widened my eyes as I said, "Danny, have you left Abe?"

He frowned slightly but did not answer me.

Without knowing his answer, I continued, "Can you head to Moranta and help me protect Ashton in secret? Since Armond had planned such a huge trap, there must be something else waiting for Ashton. Can you do that for me?"

Chapter 1025

Danny looked at me with a slight frown on his face and replied helplessly, "Sorry, I can't leave A City right now. Now that Mr. Abe's been arrested, Dante and I will be too. The police should be looking for me everywhere, so I can only hide around the city now and can't head to Moranta."

I laughed bitterly.

Everything was destined. I could not change anything as it was all already arranged for.

Ten days later, Abe had been sentenced to death as Imperial Hotel was found to have hidden weapons and had participated in the organ trade.

Brandon was also charged for being Abe's accomplice.

Cameron and Zachary had brought Summer back to K City, and Dillan's family seemed to have disappeared without a trace. There was no way we could find them.

Although things seemed to be over, I was not as happy as expected and was still angry. After toying with me, Armond had hastily ended everything just like that. I had lost my child due to my own stupidity, yet he was able to gain something and even managed to walk away unscathed.

However, I was no angel and would not just leave it at that.

On Thursday, I headed to the mall.

As an apology for not attending Tabitha's wedding while I was busy in K City, I had asked her and Laurel out to go shopping together.

Having not seen her in such a long time, Tabitha seemed to have put on some weight. After some careful questioning, I found out that she was pregnant.

Laurel joked, "It's indeed different when you become a mother. Your gaze has become so gentle. By the way, the customers have been asking when you'll be back for work ever since you stopped going to work. Isn't it a bit too early to be taking time off when you're only two months pregnant?"

Tabitha smiled slightly. "It's mainly my husband who's feeling uneasy about it. If I go to work, he'll be worried the whole day and will want to find me at work. In the end, he'll be distracted from his own job. Seeing that, I quit my job and stay at home, his parents will be there to take care of me, and that's a load off him."

Laurel's gaze was full of envy as she looked at Tabitha. "You're so lucky. Your husband's gentle and caring, and your in-laws are willing to take care of you. Look at me. I've been married for six years now, but it feels like I'm a widow. I've been raising my son alone too. Although my mother-in-law helps to take care of him, she always picks a fight with me. You don't understand how annoying things are for me at home."

Tabitha replied comfortingly, "As you said previously, you just have to accept life as it is! Your husband's starting his business now, so it'll definitely be tough on him. Aren't you also taking care of your son while you work for the sake of your family? If you persevere, I'm sure you'll be able to enjoy life later on. My husband's the same. He has it tough, so we try to understand each other and compromise. You can't just focus on the unhappy parts of your marriage and ignore the good part."

Laurel sighed as she looked at me. "How about you, Scarlett? How have you been these few months? Your husband's both rich and handsome, so you should be the happiest among us. Nora called me to complain some time ago, saying that Armond seemed to be ignoring her. You guys are already so rich, so why do you still work so hard to make money? You're not short on it anyway."

I smiled slightly and replied, "A lot has happened recently but I asked you guys out as soon as I had some free time. By the way, have you guys seen

Tessa recently? I haven't seen her in a long time. I wonder how she's doing."

Laurel replied, "I met her some time ago. I heard she has adopted a five or six-year-old kid, so she's probably not intending to get married. Tessa's already thirty-six or seven, so it seems like she wants to live alone with the child in the future. But the last time I saw her, she was driving a Mercedes-Benz S-Class. Apparently, she also bought a house a few days ago. Didn't she say that she was poor? Why's she suddenly able to buy a car and a house. Do you guys know what kind of business she's doing recently?"

Tabitha shook her head. "No, I don't really contact her. I'm not that interested in her affairs, so I don't really bother checking on whatever she bought or did."

Laurel paused for a moment, then said, "Tabby, you don't seem to like Tessa very much?"

Tabitha was a straightforward person who wore her heart on her sleeve. Thus, she shrugged and replied indifferently, "I neither like nor dislike her since we're just acquaintances. Anyway, we don't belong in the same world as her. I'm sure you know that she's overly ambitious. She probably sees us as mere passers-by who aren't significant enough."

I laughed lightly as I listened to their conversation. "It's okay, we're just having a casual chat and sharing some gossip. If you guys don't like something, you don't need to talk about it. I was just a little curious about where Tessa's adopted child came from. Is it even legally possible for an unmarried woman to adopt a child now?"

Laurel nodded. "I think it's possible as long as you meet the requirements. Apparently, a woman between thirty and forty who's unmarried and is doing okay financially is qualified. I think Tessa also mentioned that the child isn't an orphan. The child's mother died in a car accident and his father was sentenced to death because of some severe offense. Therefore, the child was trusted upon her."

Chapter 1026

Death sentence?

I spent the rest of the afternoon chatting with Laurel and Tabitha, then returned to the villa.

I arrived to see Nora in the midst of moving out of the villa next door, much to my astonishment. She'd hired a bunch of professional movers who streamed in and out of the doorway toting boxes of various sizes.

Nora stood just outside the door supervising them, occasionally reminding them to be careful with her things.

I stood rooted to the spot in the yard, watching her. Nora saw me out of the corner of her eye and turned in my direction. Our eyes met, and I could see that hers were swollen and red with crying even at that distance.

What on earth has happened?

I hadn't much of a clue what had transpired and didn't suppose it was a suitable time to ask. I smiled at Nora embarrassedly, then stepped into the villa. Ashton was still stuck at Moranta fighting Armond. Cameron had originally extended an invitation to Summer and me to return to K City in the meantime. However, I was busy resenting Armond for having deceived me and in no mood for socializing.

I was vexed but was determined to try and accomplish something.

Back at the villa, I collapsed onto a chair in fatigue. At that moment, the doorbell rang.

I strolled over and peered out of the window. Nora was standing outside, patiently waiting for me beyond the gate of my yard.

I hastily walked out to the yard and beckoned her. "Do you want to come in?"

Nora shook her head. She replied glumly, "It's all right. I came over to return this to you." Having thus declared, Nora wriggled the bracelet that

she was wearing off her arm, then handed it to me. Channing had originally given me a matching set of bracelets. I'd given one to Nora and kept one for myself. They weren't worth much, but they were a significant token of my and Nora's friendship.

I looked down at the bracelet lying in Nora's outstretched palm, then looked back at Nora. "This bracelet belonged to your grandmother. If you're here to ask for it back, I'll return it to you. There's no need for you to return anything to me. I gave the bracelet to you in the first place because of the relationship between our families and because I believed that our friendship was genuine. I never thought that anything could ever come between us. I see now that perhaps I was wrong. Even if that's the case, I don't want your bracelet. I gave it wholeheartedly to you back then, and I don't intend to ask for it back even though things have turned sour between us. You can do whatever you like with it. Throw it away if you wish."

I turned to shut the gate without waiting for her reply.

Nora, however, stopped the gate with one swift motion. She paused, then said in a trembling voice, "Thank you, Scarlett."

I smiled faintly but said nothing. I had a rather accepting attitude towards friendships and whichever winding paths they ultimately took. I had never pursued anyone, accepting the eventual end of any relationship stoically. In the three years that I'd spent waiting for Ashton, I knew that despite how much I loved him, I would never fight for our relationship if he'd decided to give it up.

If I wasn't even ready to strive for the person I'd loved wholeheartedly, I won't be willing to chase after a friendship. Nora was presently entangled in her own difficulties, and I thought the best course of action would be to retreat and respect whatever decision she made.

Since Nora had evidently made her choice to part ways with me, there was no point dwelling any further. I thus chose to flash a bright smile at her and replied, "There's no need to thank me. I wish you all the best in your future endeavors."

It was an absolutely meaningless, patronizing phrase that I'd always loathed. I now uttered it with absolute sincerity, however. I did hope that Nora and I would each come to find our own happiness eventually.

It was truly goodbye. I would no longer continue journeying through life with Nora, but I hoped that my well-wishes would remain with her when I could not.

The metal gate closed with a steely clang. I exhaled, then walked slowly back into my villa. Just as I was about to head into the room to sleep, the doorbell rang a second time. I opened it to see Nora still standing outside.

Staring fixedly at me, she muttered, "Whether you believe me or not, I have to tell you that I was drunk that night at the Imperial Hotel. If I had known that he would have turned out to be so violent, I would never have dreamt of calling you. I never wanted to cause you any harm, not even once."

I looked at her and smiled as it was a relief. “I know. I never once thought of blaming you. Don’t worry. Go on back.”

I had indeed never blamed Nora for anything that had happened. I was merely wary that Armond had been using Nora as a pawn all along.

I was on the verge of swinging the gate back shut when Nora piped up. “Brandon’s woman was bought over by Tessa. You should be careful. It’s not safe for you to stay here alone.”

I looked at Nora, bewildered at her sudden revelation. “Got it, thank you,” I hesitated then added, “I’ll be sure to take care of myself.”

Nora hung her head, then turned and walked back to her villa.

I looked at her departing figure with a twinge of regret. Nora was never malicious. She’d simply made the mistake of falling in love with the wrong man.

...

It had never occurred to me to spy on Tessa. I’d initially planned on meeting her in person but was worried about alarming her. If I confronted Tessa directly, there was a possibility that she would reveal everything to Armond. He would then make a move against Brandon who was vulnerable and at his mercy now. The truth was Armond had no weaknesses so far. At the same time, he was cold-blooded and poisons filled his veins. Thus, he

would want to ensure complete secrecy by sending Brandon to his maker to seal his mouth forever.

Chapter 1027

Hence, I was resolved not to tell Tessa anything for fear that the information would simply be passed on to Armond. I was afraid that before I could even get around to persuading Brandon, he would already have died under suspicious circumstances in prison.

It wasn't difficult to uncover news about Tessa. We moved about in the same circles, after all. One could easily obtain any desired information with some effort. Nuthana Gardens was a newly-developed piece of property. Not long after it was completed, its prices skyrocketed, and it was now sold for at least ten thousand per square foot. An apartment of a thousand and five hundred square feet was worth around fifteen million. Tessa had neither a stable job nor a steady source of income and had no projects on hand. Her sudden wealth had naturally raised queries in both Tabitha and Laurel's minds. How could a village girl have acquired enough to buy both a posh apartment and a luxury car in just a few months?

Armond was clearly rewarding Tessa handsomely. What is Tessa doing for him that warrants such a hefty sum? I wondered. Armond wasn't a spendthrift character. I thought of what had happened in Moranta. A niggling thought arose within my mind. Has Tessa been part of Armond's numerous evil schemes?

I had no access to the residential area at Nuthana Gardens. It boasted tight security, and external visitors had no way of entering without permission from a resident. I could thus only observe discreetly from one of its exits.

It was the only method available but also the most labor-intensive. I waited an entire afternoon before Tessa's car pulled up at the entrance around four in the late afternoon. She drove a black Mercedes-Benz that was the latest model.

I watched as the car entered the basement carpark, then fished out my phone to call Laurel. I had intended on inviting her out along with Tessa. Before I could dial her number, however, my phone rang with a call from Ashton.

I picked up the phone. Ashton immediately demanded, "Why were you sitting out there for the entire day? Did anything happen?"

I was baffled for a moment. Then, I suddenly recalled that Ashton had arranged for a bodyguard to watch over me from afar. I giggled sheepishly. "It's nothing! I wanted to snoop on Tessa a little, so I waited outside her residence to see when she came back. The security here at Nuthana Gardens is way too tight, and I have no way of entering. So sitting out here was the best I could do."

Ashton was silent on the other end of the line for a while. When he next spoke, there was a note of resignation in his tone. "Scarlett, when will you finally remember that your husband isn't a poor man?"

Sensing my confusion, Ashton continued, “Nuthana Gardens’ developer gave me a few units within the residence when it had been completed. I’m sending the key over to you right now. What are you investigating Tessa for, though?”

“She has adopted Brandon’s child. I wanted to see if there was anything there I could use to win Brandon over,” I replied. I’d already reasoned that Brandon’s testimony would be the most damning weapon against Armond.

Ashton was silent for a while. Then, he said slowly, “Scarlett, don’t interfere anymore in this matter. I’ve already made plans to handle this. Go back to K City and take care of yourself. If you’re bored of that place, come over to Moranta.”

I could detect undercurrents of meaning rippling beneath Ashton’s casual manner. He seemed unwilling to tell me just what he’d planned. Exasperated, I fumed, “I’m going to stay in A City. Armond took all of us for a ride from the start. If I don’t get to witness his conviction and imprisonment, I won’t be able to rest.”

Ashton sounded helpless. In a patient voice, he soothed, “It’s not time yet. Don’t rush into things. Just leave everything to me.”

I bit my lip in frustration. Ashton was once again treating me with the same patronizing manner as he would a child. It made my blood boil.

I hung up the phone. Someone arrived shortly thereafter with the keys. I was still harboring resentment towards Ashton for his condescension earlier. I was in no mood to continue with the investigation any further that day.

With that, I turned and headed back to the villa.

I headed into the bedroom and flopped onto the bed, ruminating over the events that had occurred. I felt as if everything I'd done had been rendered worthless and grew even more infuriated.

Just then, a phone call came from Hannah, reminding me that I had to go to K City to attend her wedding. Amidst my busyness, I'd totally forgotten about it. I hurriedly replied to Hannah that I would definitely be there.

The wedding had been scheduled for two days later.

After much deliberation, I decided to head back to K City first. After Hannah's wedding, I'd immediately return to continue scrutinizing Tessa. I thus booked my tickets for the flight to K City.

...

Hannah's wedding was to be held at Chandler's childhood home. The house was situated rather near K City's suburbs. It wasn't much of a drive away at all. Hannah had familiarized herself with the customs there. She

had no intention of being caught by surprise by any rituals she hadn't prepared herself for in advance.

As she sat in a cafe in the city center, Hannah's radiant smile nearly filled the room. When she caught sight of me entering, Hannah looked overwhelmed with elation. She greeted me enthusiastically, then fired, "Why did you stay in A City for so long? Chandler has been clinging to me so much lately. I haven't even been able to tear myself away to go shopping!"

I listened to Hannah's rapid prattle in amusement. "Wouldn't you want him to stay by your side every day? What's so annoying about that?"

Hannah pursed her lips. She grandly got to her feet and did a small pirouette. Noticing that all eyes in the cafe had immediately fastened themselves upon her, Hannah immediately sat down bashfully once again. "Did you see how fat I am now? I think Chandler's been stuffing me too much food!"

I guffawed, then stopped at the sight of Hannah's sober face. "Don't you think you look beautiful now? Even as another woman, I can't take my eyes off you!"

Chapter 1028

Hannah rolled her eyes dramatically, then wailed, “You’re not serious, are you? My wedding’s happening in a couple of days! What if I can’t fit into my dress? I can’t possibly ask his mother to alter it on the spot, can I? The dress was custom-made and embroidered by hand! It cost an absolute fortune! I’m on the verge of moving out. I have to lose weight, or there’ll definitely be a problem.”

Hannah’s noisy complaining could not hide the traces of a smile hovering over her lips. I grinned at that. If a little weight gain was all that Hannah had to worry about for the rest of her marriage, she’d have many blissful years ahead of her.

Hannah’s endless rambling was finally put to a stop by an incoming call from Chandler. She answered the phone only to redirect her flood of words into the mouthpiece. On the other end, Chandler just absorbed everything patiently.

I suddenly found myself very much an outsider in this romantic display of affection. I surveyed around the cafe casually. Abruptly, a familiar face popped up within the field of my vision. I froze.

I was slightly myopic, so I couldn’t be certain that the figure was indeed who I’d taken it to be. I squinted as hard as I could in that direction, but to no avail. I thus reached out and tugged on Hannah’s sleeve, gesturing subtly in that direction.

Hannah paused and looked over. She was similarly taken aback. Hannah quickly mumbled into the phone, “Chandler, I just saw someone I know. I’m hanging up!”

After she’d ended the call, Hannah hauled me out of the cafe. When we’d gotten outside, she immediately shrieked, “That woman was Rebecca, wasn’t she?”

I wavered, unable to say for sure.

We didn’t approach her, however, but merely continued observing from a distance.

K City was a bustling, modern city. Life here was fast-paced, and it was common to see people dashing from place to place. Nobody paid any heed to the sight of a woman pulling on a man and shamelessly begging him for money.

Hannah glanced at her watch, then looked at me with a horrified expression. “It’s only seven in the evening! It’s not even midnight yet. Is she doing what I think she’s doing?”

I bit my lip and continued gazing in Rebecca’s direction. She had on a thick layer of makeup and wore a revealing dress that exposed various areas of

her body with utter disregard for the winter cold. She looked as indecent as she was legally permitted to be.

Rebecca had a gorgeous face and a lovely figure. It was usually sufficient for attracting stares anywhere she went. If the scene unfolding before our eyes had played out anywhere else, I would never have given it a second thought.

Where we were presently standing was K City's most notorious red-light district. Vice oozed out of every pore of her. Rebecca's scantily-clad self, placed against this surrounding, made our suspicions perfectly reasonable.

Hannah dragged me closer to take a better look. We could hear the sound of Rebecca's cries now, clear as a bell. "Mr. Tuffin, you promised that as long as I agreed, you'd give me the money! Now that I've done it, how can you go back on your word? You can't do that!"

The man looked visibly irked by Rebecca's constant pleas. He fished out a couple of bills from his wallet and flung them roughly at Rebecca, vehemently cursing her all the while.

I was dumbfounded. Did we just witness Rebecca selling herself? How can this be?

Even if Ashton no longer cared for Rebecca, Joe clearly worshipped her. He would never have sanctioned this degradation of Rebecca's dignity.

Rebecca stooped to pick up the bills, utterly focused on counting them while shivering helplessly from the bitter cold. Clutching herself to preserve what little bit of warmth she had, Rebecca scampered off and disappeared into the nightclub behind her.

Hannah's stupefied expression mirrored mine exactly. We were stunned while we looked at each other as if to confirm what we'd just beheld. Haltingly, Hannah asked, "That was Ms. Larson, wasn't it?"

I craned my neck in the direction that Rebecca had slipped off to, then nodded reluctantly. "I think so."

"What happened to her? How did she end up that way? Wasn't she so glamorous previously? How did she suddenly end up like this? What in the world happened?" Hannah asked urgently. She was evidently still in shock. I could see the cogs in Hannah's mind turning as she struggled to process what she had just seen.

I didn't have the answers to Hannah's questions and said so frankly. "I don't know what just happened either. I think Ashton gave her an apartment and a car that we never asked her to return. Joe has also given her lots of money. There's really no logical reason as to why Rebecca would be so desperate for money that she'd need to sell her body!"

Hannah bit her lip. Soberly, she said, "Come on, let's go over and take a look!"

The incident at the Imperial Hotel had left me with a lingering uneasiness. I hesitated, then shook my head. "I don't really want to. It's too chaotic over there and isn't safe."

Hannah was insistent, however. She pouted, then wheedled, "It's not. I'm going in with you. Don't worry. As long as we don't cause any trouble, nothing will happen to us. Don't worry!"

Without waiting for my consent, Hannah dragged me across. Upon entry, the dance floor rose to meet us, packed with teenagers wearing the barest slips of clothing. The DJ's hollers were deafening over the speakers, and the drunk partygoers gyrated to the pulsing music without a care in the world.

Hannah burst out, "What's wrong with all of these people? Have they gone insane?"

She tightened her grip on my arm as we move through the crowd, searching for Rebecca. But, she seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. Hannah puzzled, "Why isn't Rebecca on the dance floor?"

I pondered this, then realized, "She's in terrible need of money, isn't she? She should be hard at work right now."

Hannah smacked her forehead exaggeratedly. "That's right! Why didn't I think of it?"

Chapter 1029

We eventually located the front counter of the nightclub but were promptly ignored by the staff. While we were there, we heard a patron making enquiries if there were girls available to spend the night with. The staff member merely handed him a card. It was all rather cloak-and-dagger.

Rather naively, I whispered to Hannah, "What's that?"

Hannah explained, "It's a card with a number on it. It's the same in other bars or clubs. Due to the wide variety of characters that flow through sordid places like these, the nightclub caters to a similarly wide range of demands. That guy we just saw at the front counter should have been a new patron. He may have come from overseas, been here on business, or was simply here to try something new. There was a phone number on the card. I'm guessing that there's a woman waiting upstairs for the customer to call the number on her card. I suppose it's pretty much self-service from then on."

I didn't understand. "What do you mean? What will he do upstairs?"

Hannah said patiently, "The units above this nightclub are all apartments occupied by women. The staff at the nightclub connect these women with their clientele. Plainly put, it's a brothel."

I frowned. "Surely Rebecca can't be in such pressing need for money, can she?"

Hannah shrugged listlessly. "I wouldn't have thought so, but after what we just witnessed outside, it's hard to say for sure. One thing we can be certain about is that she's no longer in contact with Mr. Quinn. He's getting married to a K City socialite named Jordyn Bloom. I heard that she's a sophisticated woman who just returned from studying in Granatano. She's only in her early twenties and is a young and pretty lady. It's a pity that her parents pushed her to marry so quickly. Who knows how it'll turn out!"

"Joe?" I asked doubtfully. "Is he really engaged to a socialite?"

Perceiving my skepticism, Hannah replied, "It happened a few months ago. You were occupied with taking care of Summer, so I didn't want to bother you with this frivolous gossip. Apparently, after Jordyn found out about Joe's playboy ways, she made a fuss and wanted to terminate the engagement. Jordyn only went ahead with it begrudgingly because her parents pressured her into it."

All sorts of conflicting emotions stirred uneasily within me. I'd been jealous of Rebecca ever since I came to know Ashton. I could not deny that I'd been incredibly anxious about which one of us Ashton would choose, Rebecca or me. Even though I had defeated her, I could not find it in me to rejoice after seeing Rebecca's predicament. Perhaps I had also never really believed that Ashton would leave me for Rebecca. Besides, my identity as a member of the Moore family had already cemented my superiority to her.

It was peculiar how one's family background could make such a vital difference to one's bearing and attitude towards life. Anyone who

possessed any sort of self-confidence or boldness usually had the backing of a strong heritage and family status.

Hannah looked determined to continue hunting down Rebecca. Unwilling, I tugged at her, saying, "Let's go back! There's nothing much for us to look at here. No matter what caused such desperate straits to befall her, it's none of our business either. Let's leave this place quickly!"

Hannah frowned, then egged me on, "Aren't you curious at all to see how Rebecca's faring?"

I shook my head firmly. "Nope. There's no point in doing that anyway."

What was the point in witnessing Rebecca's debasement? What would I gain from gloating over it? No matter what Rebecca was doing now, wasn't my business with her already entirely relegated to the past?

Seeing my obstinate expression, Hannah decided not to pursue the matter. "Fine. It doesn't matter anyway. Let's go, then!"

There was a small alley just behind the nightclub. Hannah seemed to be in a particularly daring mood today. She was usually rather meek and timid, but today she was exhibiting a wildly uncharacteristic side of her. She was spontaneous and seemed to be especially seeking out a challenge.

I wondered if it had anything to do with Chandler. Now that Hannah knew there would always be someone supporting her unconditionally, she felt absolutely liberated to act without fear of the consequence.

I, however, hung back slightly and trod rather fearfully behind her a little way, Noticing that the last dregs of daylight were fast fading, I shimmied closer to Hannah, urging, “Hannah, shouldn’t we be turning back already?”

Hannah turned to me with a mischievous grin on her face. “Chandler’s still out of town, and Xavier’s staying with Uncle Louis. I’m so bored staying home all alone. Let’s just take a stroll together! I’m going to get married in a few days’ time and will be under Chandler’s thumb for the rest of my life. He won’t let me out to play, I’m sure! The thought of it is dull enough.”

Hannah’s pout belied the warmth in her tone. I smiled at her obvious happiness. Romance was a truly lovely thing. It could utterly rejuvenate and transform anyone.

Unable to resist Hannah’s cheerful enthusiasm, I thus continued down the gloomy alley with her. Nervously, I joked, “Why are we taking a stroll here? Wouldn’t a mall be more suitable?”

Hannah turned to me and pressed a finger to her lips. As if she were sharing a delightful secret, Hannah whispered, “I’ve been hearing about this place for the longest time. Apparently it’s a gathering place for all sorts of characters at night. I wanted to take a look to satisfy my curiosity.”

I gaped at Hannah, aghast. “What are you so curious about nothing for? All we’ll meet are probably hardened criminals! Shouldn’t we be fleeing instead of charging straight into their den?”

Hannah sniggered. Gleefully, she declared, “I wrote a book recently and was considering adding some scenes set in the city’s underworld. All the true crimes I’ve ever heard were paltry drug sellers earning a few quick bucks, though. I’ve never seen the real deal, you know? K City is rife with all sorts of shady characters. I really wanted to come here after all I’d heard about it and see for myself, hoping to gain some material for my writing.”

Chapter 1030

I groaned inwardly. This woman is crazy!

I reluctantly trailed after Hannah. We hadn’t proceeded much further, however, when we came to a halt.

K City’s underworld was equally as squalid as how vibrant the city was. Beneath streetlamps so dim, there was barely a glow in the oppressive dark sat a few men. Some were leaning against the wall while others perched on top of it. Some looked haggard, skeletal, and barely sustained by the occasional meals from good Samaritans.

Others were dressed in flashy outfits, clutching thick wads of cash in their hands. Revolted by the grimy, seedy appearance of the place, I grabbed Hannah and yanked at her frantically, indicating that we should leave right away.

Hannah was evidently terrified as well. She took one glance and turned on her heels, ready to leave with me. Before we could escape, we ironically crashed headlong into the one person we'd come here to meet. It was Rebecca! In the flickering light cast by the streetlamps, Rebecca's face looked absolutely ghastly.

Rebecca's eyes widened first in shock, then in recognition. She instinctively recoiled, her eyes darting nervously from side to side. Realizing that there was nowhere for her to hide or run, she faced me squarely, her eyes blazing in fury and despair. "Scarlett? Why are you here?" she asked.

My gaze shifted to the object that Rebecca wielded in her hand, then jumped in fright. "You..."

Rebecca glanced down at the sealed plastic sachet in her hand. The corners of her mouth curved up into a sinister smile. "What? Do you want to try some? It's good stuff. Once you've had some, you'll find yourself craving for more the rest of your life."

I staggered slightly in horror and gawped at Rebecca. "Did you use the money from all your dirty deeds to purchase this?"

Rebecca narrowed her eyes, then abruptly burst into peals of high, piercing laughter that sounded almost like a shriek. "So it was indeed the two of you I saw just now! I'd thought I was hallucinating," Rebecca admitted dizzily. She stuck a fingertip into the powder in her hand, then waved it in front of us. "Come on, I got lots of extras today. I can spare you a little. Why don't you try a bit to see what it feels like? How about that? Just a little."

“Get away from us!” Hannah struck out, shoving Rebecca aside. She bellowed, “Rebecca, no one cares if you become an addict. But you’d better keep your distance from us! We don’t want to end up like you.”

Hannah’s words seemed to trigger something in Rebecca. Scowling, Rebecca snarled, “Mrs. Fuller, you’re already married to Ashton, aren’t you? What are you doing all the way out here, then? Why are you suddenly so interested in addicts like us? Aren’t you afraid that someone will kidnap you and demand a ransom of millions from Mr. Fuller?”

“Enough of your nonsense!” Hannah snapped back in return. “You’ve already been reduced to such a state, yet you’re criticizing others? Let me tell you honestly then, we came here to look at you!”

Hannah pulled my arm again, but Rebecca stood adamantly in our way. Raising her voice, she addressed the group of men standing behind us. “Everyone, listen up! She’s the wife of the president of Fuller Corporation! If you manage to get her, you should be able to easily get a cool hundred thousand from Mr. Fuller at the very least.”

Does Rebecca intend to incite my kidnapping and threaten Ashton? I pondered.

Hannah was speechless. “Rebecca, have you gone crazy? How can you bring yourself to stoop so low?”

Busy reveling in her loathing of me, Rebecca seemed unfazed by either Hannah's derision or the cold wind. One could say that Rebecca was my nemesis, perhaps, but amongst all the possible endings to our rivalry, I'd never imagined this one. There was no light at all in Rebecca's dull eyes. She looked as if she had utterly given up on herself and life.

I had no intention of squabbling with Rebecca. This wasn't an ideal environment, and the sooner we got away from here, the better. Besides, I wasn't invested enough in her to care. We were merely two individuals whose paths had crossed at one point in time but had diverged thereafter. I thus saw no purpose in further engaging with her antics.

I briskly pushed Rebecca aside, dragging Hannah close behind me. But, Rebecca stopped us with one hand. "Scarlett, do you really think I'm going to let you get away so easily?" Rebecca sneered.

Having said that, she howled towards the men behind us with a vengeance. "Inject her with the stuff! I'll give my entire stash to anyone who succeeds. Quickly!"

I froze. Hannah lunged forward to restrain Rebecca but was pushed aside. Rebecca's eyes were blazing. "Move aside if you don't want me to kill you as well!"

I struggled, but Rebecca seemed possessed with an inhuman strength. I was totally incapacitated by her strong grip.

The audience behind us in the alley sprang into action. I highly doubted that they cared about the legality of their actions. Rebecca's proclamation seemed to unleash the demons within them. They scrambled and sprinted over in their eagerness to inject me.

At the sight of those needles pointing towards me, I stood rooted to the spot, petrified. My mind raced and I panicked. These needles are all probably infected with something or another! I'm dead if they touch me!

Rebecca laughed maniacally. "Scarlett, I never thought I'd live to see you like this!"

Just then, a miraculous burst of energy surged through me. I wrenched my arm out of Rebecca's strong grip and hurled her towards the incoming needles. Without a second thought, I grabbed Hannah. We sprinted for our lives towards the exit of the alley.

Fortunately for us, it wasn't a long way off. The addicts, probably lethargic, didn't have enough of an interest to hunt us down.