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Ashton nodded. "It hasn't been raining for very long. You can try to continue tracking the footprints."

The policeman shook his head and sighed. "That's what we thought at first. However, after we found the footprints, we noticed a lot of stray dogs around the area, and it also started to rain. The tracks have basically been washed off. There are mostly farms around here, so it's not that easy to check thoroughly."

When we entered the factory, the policeman turned to Louis and said, "Look, it's here. Take a look and see if it's something that was with the child when she got lost."

Naturally, Louis did not recognize Snowfluff. He looked at me and said, "Letty, come over and see."

I was feeling a little weak in the legs and had been trembling ever since I entered.

Looking at Snowfluff lying lifelessly on the ground, I instantly lost strength in my legs and started to fall to the ground.

Luckily, Ashton acted fast enough and caught me in time, hugging me tightly to himself. He stared at Snowfluff and frowned. "It's Summer's dog."

When he was done speaking, he placed me on a chair and patted me on the arm. He said comfortingly, "Don't worry. No news is good news. They have found Snowfluff, so they'll be able to find Summer soon."

I pressed my lips together as tears constantly flowed down my face. With a choked voice, I asked, "Will they harm Summer?"

He shook his head and looked at me with determination in his eyes. "Trust me, I won't let anyone hurt Summer."

He then walked over to look at Snowfluff's corpse.

The forensic pathologist beside him said, "The dog was poisoned. The time of death was less than twelve hours."

John glanced at the surroundings, then turned to the policeman who led us in. "Is there any surveillance footage around here?"

"This place has been abandoned for a very long time. It's impossible that there's any."

I looked at Snowfluff and could not help but shut my eyes. Then, I turned to look at Jared.

There was a strange, cold feeling in my heart.

After listening to them discuss the situation for a while, I got up, glanced at Ashton who had been silent the whole time, and left the building.

I sat in the car for a while before John and Louis returned to find me in a daze.

John thought that I was worried about Summer and tried to comfort me. “Don’t worry too much. If the police can find Snowfluff, they’ll find Summer soon enough.”

I pressed my lips together and lifted my head to look at him, then asked, “What if we’re looking in the wrong direction?”

He froze for a while before looking me in the eye. His voice was full of suspicion as he asked, “What do you mean?”

“Snowfluff’s been through training. Although it wasn’t aggressive, it’s very vigilant. When I found out that Summer had gotten lost while in Crest Residence, I initially thought that Snowfluff could have been poisoned while in their house. But now it looks like someone had brought them both out of Crest Residence. There’re so many cameras around the house. How is it possible that nothing was captured at all?”

John raised his eyebrows as if he had realized something. He hesitated for a moment before he asked, “Are you saying that someone from the Crest family, did it?”

I nodded. “Also, that person should have quite a good relationship with Summer. Otherwise, she would never have followed them out of Crest Residence so easily.”

He paused for a while, then frowned. “Do you suspect Jared?”

“Don’t you think that’s possible?” I turned to him and continued, “Back then, Macy didn’t want Summer to stay with the Crest family and didn’t want Jared to know of Summer’s existence. At first, I thought that since he had blood relations with Summer, it was a good thing for her to have one more person who loves her.

But now, it seems like Jared just wants to keep Summer in the Crest family. He doesn't want her to stay with me!"

John looked at me with a hint of disagreement, "Jared's been doing business for many years. He won't do such a thing. He might be able to keep Summer for himself temporarily, but she's bound to grow up. As a granddaughter of the Crest family, she would have to attend many banquets in the future. There're only so many people in this circle. Sooner or later, Ashton and you are going to find out about this."

I lowered my eyes and picked at my fingers. Slightly annoyed, I replied, "What if he and Ashton are in on it together?"

Louis looked at me with a slight frown on his face. "Scarlett, let's go back first."

They clearly disagreed with my statement. I was getting even more irritated.

I did not speak throughout the ride back.

Back at the hotel, John and Louis were busy with something else, leaving me to stay in the room alone feeling uneasy and irritated.

Ever since we found Snowfluff, I was even more certain that Summer had been taken away by the Crest family.

Once the signs pointed me in a certain direction, it was hard to stop thinking that way.

In the end, I had made up my mind that Jared was the one who was hiding Summer.

I then immediately left the hotel and took a taxi to where Jared was staying.

He did not stay at Crest Residence. Instead, he stayed in a commercial-residential building in the city centre.

The people there said that I required an appointment to enter the building. Thus, I gave Jared a call at the door.

Although he was surprised, he soon got the security guards to let me in.

His door was left unlocked, so I pushed it open to reveal his very tidy house. Jared had heard me enter.

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He stood up from the sofa and poured me a glass of water, then said, "Have a seat.

I looked at him, then glanced around the house. Surprisingly, this place was turned into a three-story high unit and was very luxurious.

After admiring his house for some time, I immediately started to search his rooms.

Jared frowned at my behavior. "Scarlett, what are you trying to do?"

There was no trace of Summer in any of his rooms. Unable to hold back my anger, I took the glass in his hand.

Then, without hesitation, I splashed the water on him. I could not contain my emotions any longer, and said, “Jared, you’d better return Summer to me. Don’t have any weird ideas. I won’t let her live with you.”

He frowned as the water dripped off his face and onto his shirt. Narrowing his eyes, he replied, “What are you trying to say?”

I had no intention to drag this on any further, so I replied straightforwardly, “You took so much effort to do all this just to keep Summer with you, didn’t you? Let me just tell you. It’s impossible for I’ll never let you have my daughter.”

Jared was becoming furious. “Scarlett, what’s your problem? Do you think that I’d really do such a thing to my own child?”

I sneered, not in the mood to show him any mercy. “Why not? There’s nothing that you wouldn’t do. You’re just an unscrupulous businessman. Do you actually think you’re that noble?”

He was dumbfounded and spoke in a cold, low voice. “Scarlett, Ashton may accept you like this, but I won’t. I’m more anxious than you are over Summer missing. But this is no excuse for your unreasonable actions.”

“I’m being unreasonable?” I looked around his house and noticed one of Summer’s favorite toys on his sofa. My blood started to boil. I did not think before I said with a sneer, “Sure. I’ll show you what it means to be unreasonable.”

Before he could react, I had pushed his expensive red wine bottles to the ground.

After that, there were only sounds of glass breaking as red wine spilled on the ground.

“Are you crazy?” he roared.

I don’t give a shit. Whatever I could get my hands on, I just smashed onto the ground. All the while, I shouted, “Give my daughter back to me...”

Sometimes, it was difficult to control one’s emotions. When a person became overly agitated, they were no different from a madman.

By the time I realized that I had almost completely wrecked Jared’s home, Ashton had arrived.

Jared had on a dark expression as he said in anger, “You should send her to the hospital. It’s more serious than you thought.”

Ashton then pulled me into his arms. He frowned and replied in a cold voice, “Just go figure out how to find Summer as soon as possible.”

Then, he basically carried me out of Jared’s place.

I had calmed down by the time we got in the car. I was covered in red wine and my hair was a mess.

I knew I looked terrible. I did not even know what I was thinking when I wrecked Jared's house.

Both Ashton and I kept quiet throughout the ride back. When we were back in our room, I showered and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling for a long time.

Ashton stood by the bedside, looking at me with a troubled gaze. "Scarlett, let's go to the hospital, okay?"

I turned to look at him. At this moment, I was not overwhelmed by thoughts and didn't feel panic now. In fact, I felt rather relaxed.

I laughed. "What for?"

He looked at me with a pained expression. It hurt me to see the look on his face, so I looked away from his eyes.

I sat up and faced him, my mood unstable. "Ashton, do you not want me to raise Summer too? Are you helping him lie to me? Are you helping him to hide Summer from me?"

He frowned as he studied my face. The light was reflecting off of his eyes. With a saddened expression, he said hesitantly, "Scarlett, I..."

"It's the two of you, right?" I interrupted, then continued with more force, "You don't want Summer, nor do you want me. The truth is none of you wants me. Everyone just wants me to go away."

I lowered my head and started to cry. The sadness in my heart had been held in for a long time. He opened his mouth to speak but was heartbroken and could not make a sound.

Things were getting out of hand.

Noticing the pain in Ashton's eyes, I was suddenly stunned. Why are my thoughts all becoming so extreme and negative? Is something wrong with me?

However, I could not suppress my extreme thoughts. I was sure that Summer was being hidden away by the two of them.

That night, I fell asleep in Ashton's arms unknowingly.

The next day, Ashton was gone. I stared at the drizzle through the window and remained in a daze.

My memories from yesterday were clear, so I knew that I had made a mistake.

My head then started to hurt, so I hid under the covers. However, the more I tried not to think about yesterday, the more I thought about it.

I stared at the ceiling for a long time before eventually coming back to my senses.

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Maybe I had truly gone crazy. Or maybe, just maybe, that extremely selfish person was exactly who I used to be.

Ashton was no longer at the hotel. After I had washed up and was getting ready to leave, John knocked on my door.

Furrowing his eyebrows as he looked over my pale, sallow complexion, he asked, "You didn't sleep well last night?"

"No." I massaged my temples, shaking my head. "Is there any news about Summer?"

He made an affirmative sound, gesturing towards the room in a silent request to continue this conversation inside.

Stepping aside, I let him in and closed the door behind him, walking over to sit on the sofa.

He poured out a glass of water for himself, glancing at me. "Are you happy with Ashton?"

"John, I thought you were here to talk about Summer." I narrowed my eyes, a little upset at the new topic.

Coughing awkwardly, he reached up to rub his nose. "It's true that I came here to talk about Summer. But you are the most important thing to me right now. Summer has Ashton, the Crest family, and the Stovall family. So, let's talk about you first, okay?"

I squirmed uneasily under his intense stare, licking my dry lips. “What do you mean?”

“Just answer me.”

“Ashton and I have always been fine.”

“I was asking if you were happy, not if your relationship with him is fine or not.”

Now he was just being nit-picky. Irritated, I rolled my eyes. “Tell me, John: what is happiness?”

Life was all a huge, long-winded story. Every story had to have its ups and downs.

What was the meaning of happiness? If happiness could only be defined by how cheerful you felt in your daily life, wasn't that definition too narrow-minded?

John sat up straight, sighing. “Letty, I'm not sure that you understand happiness more than I do. You don't want to answer my question because your relationship with Ashton is starting to make you feel burdened and depressed. Deep in your heart, you still hold a grudge against him and resent him, don't you?”

I stared blankly at the glass of water in front of me. “What are you trying to say?”

“Either you cut off all contact with him, or you go to the hospital and receive psychotherapy before restarting your relationship with him. This ambiguous situation between you two is not healthy.”

Ambiguous?

I didn't even know what was wrong with myself anymore. All I knew was there was something wrong with me.

I was often unable to control my temper and apathy.

Years' worth of hurt and pain had never been once been healed properly. I'd only ever hidden my scars away and threw my nightmares to the back of my mind, leaving them for the future me to deal with. On the surface, I appeared fine, but one small poke at my wounds and you'd be able to see how rotten they'd become.

After a long pause, I spoke up, “I'll go to the hospital. Just... Not now.”

John nodded, not pressing the topic any further.

I looked up at him. “By the way, John, this isn't the time to be having a heart-to-heart right now.”

“I know. You're worried about Summer, and we should go look for her.”

“So?”

“Hear me out first, Letty. Alright?” He placed the glass down, taking a deep breath before turning to me. “Can you promise me to stay calm?”

That sounds so weird...

Testing the waters, I asked, “So did you guys find Summer? Did you?”

He nodded, but his expression was grim.

The idea that something might have happened to my daughter abruptly dawned upon me.

Forcing my tone to remain flat, I asked again, “Did something happen to her?”

“Letty, I told you to stay calm.” He kept his gaze fixed on me, concerned.

“Stay calm?” I snapped. “She’s my daughter! How could you tell me to ‘stay calm’? Just tell me what happened to her! Do you think you’re being funny by leaving me on a cliff-hanger?”

He inhaled deeply through his nose, recomposing himself. “You’ll scare Summer if you go to see her like this.”

“Then why won’t you tell me what happened to her?”

I jumped to my feet, pacing restlessly around the room.

Pursing his lips, he was quiet for a while before finally saying, “Summer was taken by Kristina. Right now, the Crest family are all looking for Kristina, as are we.”

I looked at him, my mouth falling open. “So, technically, you haven’t found Summer yet?”

“We have some leads. It’s better than blindly looking for a needle in a haystack, right?”

“Right,” I scoffed. I didn’t want to talk with him anymore, fishing my phone out to call Emery.

She picked up after a few rings. “What’s up, Scarlett?”

“We still haven’t found Summer. Can you help me investigate Kristina’s recent movements in W City?”

There was a surprised pause on the other end. “She kidnapped Summer?”

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“Yeah.”

“Got it. I’ll do it immediately, so don’t panic.”

After hanging up the phone, I picked up my bag. “You’re heading out?” asked John.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No, I mean— it would be better to wait for updates from them instead of going about and looking aimlessly for new leads.”

“Aimlessly?” I shot back.

Probably thinking that I was acting too hostile to provoke any further, he shut up and threw his hands up in surrender.

I left the hotel without another word, and Emery texted me several addresses in W City where she thought Kristina might be.

I wasn’t familiar with the city at all, so I had no choice but to hail a taxi and go to each address one by one.

After visiting each location, Jared called, telling me to visit the suburbs we’d went to yesterday.

It started raining again while on the drive there, the taxi slowing to a stop by the roadside with seemingly no one around for miles.

“Miss, are you sure that this is where your friend told you to go? It’s way too desolate out here! Maybe you should give them a call and double-check the address,” the driver suggested kindly.

My attention turned to what seemed like an abandoned factory a short distance away from where the car had stopped. Hesitating, I told the driver, “Could you wait for a moment while I make a phone call?”

I pulled out my phone and dialled Jared’s number.

“Where are you, Scarlett?”

“I’ve arrived. Why did you ask me to come here?”

“Come on in. I’ve found Summer...”

“If you did find her, then why didn’t you bring her home?”

Silence.

And then, “You could also choose to not come over, Scarlett.”

“What are you trying to do, Jared?” My eyebrows knitted together. “Summer is your biological daughter.”

A cold laugh rang out through the phone, and he reiterated, “If you choose to not come over, I can’t guarantee if you’ll ever get to see her again.”

A threat.

What kind of person is Jared, exactly? Even after so many years, I can't tell if he's a good or bad person.

Never mind, that's stupid. People's moralities weren't black and white.

Whatever.

I paid the fare and got out of the car, but the driver was still worried for my safety. "This doesn't seem safe, miss!"

Nodding in acknowledgment, I opened up my umbrella. "Help me lodge a police report on your way back." In response, the driver gave me a perplexed look before driving away.

I had no idea what Jared might have in store for me.

The muddy path that I followed to the factory was littered with footsteps of varying sizes and depths.

The building itself was quite large, but I didn't feel scared because I'd been here once before.

As soon as I stepped foot within the factory, I spotted Jared standing alone.

“I didn’t think you had the balls to come,” he mocked.

What goes on inside his head? What does he think of Ashton?

“Are you going to kill me?” I stared at him, less fearful than I thought I’d be. If anything, I was curious and morbidly confused.

He sat down in a rotting old chair, leaning back and crossing one leg over another in a casual manner. “You’re not scared?”

“Am I supposed to be?”

Jared raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you going to ask about Summer?”

“Okay. Where’s Summer?”

Perhaps bored by my simple question, he rolled his eyes. “Aren’t you going to ask me ‘why’?”

“Why?”

“God. What does Ashton see in you?” He clicked his tongue in annoyance.

I pursed my lips and didn’t answer.

If I die today, what are the chances that someone will stumble across my corpse here?

How long would it take for someone to find out that I had died in the first place?

He ignored me and played with his phone as I looked around the place. “Summer is safe; Kristina merely brought her to another location. Don’t worry,” he drawled.

“You’re good at acting,” I commented.

I’d been genuinely convinced that Summer had gone missing when I met him.

Jared raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “Thanks. If I wasn’t, then you wouldn’t have believed me, no?”

Summer was his biological child. There was no way he would let her be in mortal danger.

I decided that I might as well wait to see what he planned on doing.

After a long pause, he brought up, “Remember when she jumped from a tall building and scarred her face? Want to try and imitate that?”

Who is this “she” that he speaks of?

Seeing that I wasn’t budging an inch, he pointed to what looked like an infusion bottle on top of a broken table. “Go on.”

I looked at the bottle, and then back at him. “Is that sulfuric acid?”

He nodded calmly. "It might hurt a little, but you'll get over it."

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I just stared at him, unmoving.

He was quiet for a brief moment. "When I first met her, she was only seventeen years old. Then, she passed away at the age when her vanity was at its peak. I don't want to force your hand, so please do it yourself."

"At least let me know who she is, and why you picked me," I inquired.

When he lifted his head to gaze at me, his eyes looked calm. If anything, they looked too calm, nearly to the point that they were devoid of emotion. "'She' was Ashton's cousin, Naomi Fuller. I never intended on hurting you specifically, Scarlett, but there is a hole where my heart used to be. The devil lives in there now, and I can't get him out."

"So, I've now become your sacrificial lamb?" I couldn't understand a word he was saying, gazing at him in disbelief.

"Not really. It's just that Ashton happens to be in love with you." He shrugged. "He and I are best friends. If I lose something, it's only fair for him to lose something as well. We need to share that sense of empathy; otherwise, he'll never know what it feels like to lose the love of his life."

Stacey had mentioned that Charlie used to have a daughter when he was younger. Unfortunately, she passed away due to an accident, and he never wanted any more children after that.

I was also aware that Ashton had a cousin that Jared used to date.

But I wasn't present during any of that, and I had no idea as to what had happened in the past.

I didn't know what he felt towards Ashton, but he must have gotten rid of his humanity a long time ago if he had come all this way and taken this many extreme measures.

His stare towards me was pitiful and compassionate, mixed with several other complicated emotions that I couldn't place. He lamented, "You really remind me of her sometimes. When you handed me those clothes at the villa at Oceanid Bay, I nearly mistook you for her. You're both just so, so kind. And afterward, I wanted to help you leave Ashton so that you would be free of him. Why didn't you leave him?"

I chewed on my lower lip, unsure how to respond.

Jared let out an emotionless bark of laughter. "Maybe if you'd left him back then, your life would be drastically different from what it is now. I would never have hurt you, I wouldn't have met Macy, and you wouldn't be feuding with your parents..."

He abruptly stopped himself, a cruel smile on his lips as his stare turned sharp. "Do you see now? Do you see why Ashton deserves to die? He hurts everyone he loves, everyone who's close to him. He bounds people to him and loudly proclaims that he's doing it out of 'love'. No matter how broken you feel, he will always comfort you with sweet nothings about how he'll always protect you, how he'll always treat you right. And then, it reaches a point where you can never bear to hurt him, even if you hate him to death.

“We’re actually the same, you and me. You’re his lover, and I’m his best friend. He hurt you, but he also loves you. Because of that, you’re not willing to hurt him, and you even force yourself to suppress all your feelings of upset and frustration in order to stay with him. I do that too; he indirectly caused me to lose the woman I loved most and caused me pain like nothing I’d ever felt before. But then, he proceeded to save me from the depths of hell. I absolutely loathe him, and yet I don’t want to hurt a single hair on his head. Such a conundrum, isn’t it?”

Humans are defined by our wide array of emotions. These emotions are never separate, but always intertwined and tangled and connected with each other.

I felt my heart clench inside my chest, but I had no clue if it was out of sympathy or pity. “You want to kill me so that he would be able to feel your pain?”

He nodded, smiling. “That’s right.”

“If I die, you and he will become mortal enemies.”

“I know. That is the best possible outcome. If we become enemies, then neither of us needs to hold back the pain we feel anymore. We will no longer need to hide away our wounds and scars.”

It sounded easy when spoken out loud, but surely it was much more complicated than just a simple declaration of love and hate.

“Do you promise that Summer will continue to grow up safely and healthily?” I asked.

Nodding, his expression softened somewhat. “Of course. She’s my daughter. I will take good care of her and give her all my love.”

I believed him.

So, I nodded.

I wonder if that taxi driver has called the police by now. Probably not. I was too reckless to come here without informing John. If I died right now, no one would ever be able to find out what happened to me.

I don’t want to be discovered as a rotting corpse!

Jared seemed amused as he watched me stare intently at the bottle of sulfuric acid. “I did give you the choice to die the same way Naomi did. You should be grateful.”

“You think giving me options on how to kill myself is a privilege?” I snapped.

“Yeah, it gives the whole thing a sense of ritualism. Now do it.”

I wasn’t afraid of dying. However, I loathed having to die this way, and my movements were slow and hesitant.

Unfortunately, Jared’s patience was already at its limit, the man exasperatedly getting to his feet and walking over to the table.