

Chapter 656

Ashton approached us with narrowed eyes.

A bullet whistled narrowly passed his head.

“Ashton, stay where you are if you want her to live,” Abe shouted. “Her life is far more valuable than yours. I’m not going to exchange you for her. It would be in your best interests if you allow us to leave, or I would not be able to promise that she won’t bleed to death.”

Ashton froze, his eyes locked on my arm and the ghastly pool of blood that had gathered on the ground.

“Let them pass!” he commanded his men as though it was an easy decision for him.

Joseph stared at him in surprise; he was prepared to capture Abe once and for all. “Mr. Fuller, this is our only chance to...”

“Let them pass!” Ashton repeated with his pained gaze on me.

Abe kept his grip tightly on me and walked towards a junction that led towards another path.

At the sight of Ashton lowering his gun, Abe cackled with delight.

He tossed me in the car with Danny at the wheel. He sped off as soon as the doors slammed shut.

Abe grinned down at me. His eyes were reduced to slits in his malice. "Ms. Stovall, much obliged to you for getting me out of that."

I glared at him as fiercely as I could. The blood that I had lost was making me dizzy.

Abe laughed at my fury. "To Marshville!" he ordered Danny.

Danny opened his mouth to speak but caught sight of the bloodstains upon my arm. He frowned and nodded without a word.

"We are still being followed!" Danny said, with a glance at the rear-view mirror.

"Lose them!" Abe barked. He then glanced at me and his lip curled into a cruel sneer. "If Ashton enjoys my company so much, I'd say let him come. We can show him around the city if he likes. He should know that a life is at stake here."

It was obvious that he was referring to me as my arm was still bleeding steadily.

I felt dizzy due to the excess loss of blood. I leaned against the door and panted heavily.

Danny went several more rounds. He glanced back at me and said, "Sir, she might not make it."

Abe had been laying back with his eyes shut. At Danny's remark, he cast a lazy glance toward me. "Are they still on our tail?"

"No, sir. I think they're gone." Danny shook his head.

"Hmm! Bummer," Abe said with amusement. "No matter, to Marshville."

Danny switched routes. Instead of heading back to the villa, we headed toward a well-hidden building.

I had passed out before making sense of our destination.

When I next awoke, the white sheets that I lay on were unfamiliar.

The first thing that I had noticed was the pain in my arm which seemed to have spread. Even the slightest movement was too much for me.

After several painful attempts, I slumped back into bed, drenched in a cold sweat from exertion.

My throat felt dry as if I hadn't had anything to drink for ages.

My eye fell onto several glasses of water on the table next to me but I was unable to muster the strength to grab one.

Out of nowhere, a slender hand reached out and grabbed a glass. I glanced up at its owner instinctively.

A familiar face swam into view. “Armond!” I cried, stunned. My throat seared with pain from the mere utterance of his name.

Armond nodded, a thin smile across his lips. “Would you like a sip?”

“My throat’s parched,” I croaked.

He shifted his position and sat on my bed next to me. With his hands around my waist, he held me up and leaned me on his body against my will.

Armond must have sensed my reluctance. “You’re not well. Don’t even think about it,” he chastised.

Stunned, I had no choice but to go along with him. He held the glass of water near my lips.

I lapped several mouthfuls. “Thank you, I felt much better.” I sighed in relief.

Armond set down the glass and gently lay me back down.

“Would you like something to eat?” He stood gazing down at me.

“I’m not hungry.” I shook my head.

Armond frowned and slumped into a corner in silence.

I could no longer bear my curiosity. "Mr. Murphy, why are you here?" I blurted. "Do you know Abe?"

"This is a private hospital belonging to the Murphys," he said calmly.

"The Murphys?" I repeated, feeling bewildered. "The Murphys of K City?"

"The Murphys who saved your life," he said with a frown.

"Why did you save me?" I asked suspiciously.

"No particular reason," he replied with a cold glare. "I did not intend to save you. You just happened to come across one of my establishments."

"You came to Marsingfill for me. That counts as a rescue mission."

Armond laughed. He was a handsome man and looked much more attractive when he smiled. "Did you forget what you had promised me when we were in A City?"

I really forgot.

Chapter 657

“I don’t have many hobbies of my own,” Armond said when I did not answer. “I just enjoy watching people fulfill their promises to me. Since you had already promised me, it was only natural for me to come and claim it.”

That seemed like a far-fetched reason to me.

“What about my arm?” I asked, determined to change the subject.

A bullet went through it. You’re d*mned lucky to be alive after all of it.

“It’s nothing,” Armond said. “Just rest up well. You’ll be fine, just not able to lift heavy objects is all.”

I pursed my lips at that but nodded.

A scuffle of footsteps outside made me panic, thinking it was Abe, but it was only the nurse here to change my medication.

I had a lot more questions for Armond, but he seemed to be reluctant to discuss them with me. With several more reticent answers, he took his leave.

Armond’s relationship with Abe is more complex than I had first imagined.

After some hot soup, I fell back asleep.

It was rainy in the tropics. Thunderstorms had a tendency to start at night and keep me awake with their fearsome and savage roars.

The hospital was sparsely populated, which made it even spookier during the late-night storms.

I had no way of falling asleep, so I thought to sit up for a bit. I attempted to pull myself into an upright position.

I must have swung overly hard and had knocked the bottle of saline solution to the floor with a loud crash.

The doors swung open at the sound of the disturbance, and Danny entered the ward.

He frowned at the mess on the floor and turned to leave.

Soon after, he returned with a nurse who promptly cleaned it up. She relayed some instructions in broken English and departed.

Danny glanced at me and turned to leave.

“Mr. Danny!” I called out suddenly.

“Yes, Ms. Stovall?” he spun around and answered politely.

“I’d like to know what is going on between Ashton and Abe.”

Danny frowned with reluctance. “Ms. Stovall, you need to rest,” he said after a moment’s pause.

He turned again to leave. In a moment of panic, I flung the glass of water onto the floor to get his attention. “If you are going to threaten Ashton with my life, you should at least do me the courtesy of telling me why. I just want to understand what my death is for.”

Danny was unhappy. “Ms. Stovall, you should treasure life!” he said, with his eye on the broken shards of glass on the floor.

“Mr. Danny, I know you are not a native Venrian,” I said after a deep breath. “For whatever reason that landed you to be Abe’s associate, you must understand that after all the illegal things that you’ve done, you have your punishment awaiting you.”

He looked at me with amusement like I was a simpleton. Meanwhile, the nurse returned and cleaned up the shards.

Danny took a seat under the lamp. His dark skin glinted maliciously under the bright fluorescent as he looked at me. I suppressed my shudder at the sight of him.

“I’m not a religious man,” he said after a pause. “I don’t believe in retribution or punishment; you can take your piousness someplace else away from us. Mr. Abe and Mr. Fuller share a grudge that is personal in nature. Your appearance was part of the plan. When you were in the car with Dante, the plan was already formalized by Mr. Abe.”

“We thought you were a Murphy, when the Murphys came looking for you. But when you said that the Fullers, the Stovalls, and the Moores from K City will protect you, it was a clue that sparked our interest for further investigation. There

wasn't much news of you back in Chanaea, but the fact that we were all able to pull this off with no casualties demonstrated that luck was on our side."

"What conflict did Abe and Ashton have in the past?" I asked, trembling. I did not expect to be used as a pawn that early on.

Danny leaned back on his chair. "'Conflict' is an understatement," he drawled. "Old Mr. Fuller and Mr. Abe's father were comrades during the war. One of whom returned to Chanaea to retire, the other remained in Venria to defend its borders. The Fullers capitalized on their wartime glory to flourish and prosper, but Mr. Abe's father didn't fare too well out at the border. For the sake of his wife, he was forced to make an honest but meager living. He did not expect that George Fuller and his grandson would one day come back and visit him, much less bring up his old indiscretions."

I frowned. I did hear of Grandpa Fuller visiting his old comrade along with Ashton at the border. On the way back they were assaulted and have met the Larsons.

Parker Larson had entrusted his sister to Ashton's care before he died. They remained married for many years. It was because of Rebecca that things happened between Ashton and me.

Little did I realize that I was dragged into the middle of this again.

"Did something happen to Mr. Abe's father?" I asked.

Danny nodded. "He was a hero on the battlefield. Forced to live a life of increasingly conflicting choices, his punishment was more severe than other men. To spare his wife and child the burden which he bore, he killed himself."

I was shocked with pity. My mind turned to the night I saw Ashton. He had spent a lot of money on that necklace. “What is up with that necklace?”

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“By the time old Mr. Fuller and Ashton returned to their country, they’d offended many illegal businessmen in the region, and the plot to assassinate the Fullers came into being. While they were being hunted, they were forced to pawn everything they owned just to make it back. That necklace belonged to Ashton’s grandmother. George Fuller kept it with him all these years. Mr. Abe learned of this and used the high sentimental value of the necklace to lure Ashton to Venria.”

I was able to venture a pretty good guess as to how the rest of the story went.

Abe used the necklace as bait to get Ashton to his territory.

The appearance of me and my value to Ashton was a stroke of dumb luck.

Ashton would never have guessed that I was here, and Abe would never have guessed the relationship between Ashton and me.

Danny rose to his feet when I did not speak. "What else would you like to know?" he asked lightly.

"What is the relationship between Armond and Mr. Abe?"

"They're business partners."

"Kyanine?" I asked, suddenly frightened.

"Our product is mostly exported to Western Europe," Danny smiled coldly. "Not much to Chanaea."

"What are they partners on, then?"

"Jades."

I nearly forgot. Venria exported an astounding variety of gemstones.

We relapsed back into silence. At his readiness to leave, I didn't feel like asking any more questions. As he was about to exit the room, I said, "I would like to see Mr. Abe."

Danny nodded and left the room.

True to his word, Abe appeared the following morning.

His tall frame cast a long shadow over my bed. "You wanted to see me?" he asked, looking at me in an odd manner. It was calculating but cold at the same time.

I nodded and sat up. "You promised me once, that if I did as you said, you would let my friends go."

Abe raised his eyebrows in derision. "Your friends?" he repeated with a laugh. "You still think your life is worth four of theirs?"

"Yes, because Ashton cares about me!" I answered, my eyes fixed upon his.

Abe grunted and absentmindedly tore up a leaf from the potted plant. "Are you his wife?" Abe asked, squinting at me. "Under these circumstances, shouldn't you be more concerned for his life over the lives of others?"

He paused. "Unless you're so confident in his abilities that you think he will get out of this alive."

"No matter which it is, you can't go back on your word," I said fiercely.

Abe laughed madly for an instant. "You have yourself a deal."

"Take care of the ladies," Abe instructed Dante. "When she's healed, send them back unharmed."

"Yes, Sir!" Dante answered.

I was away from K City for several months without being in touch with Ashton. I had wanted to leave, but I knew deep down that I was unable to bear a child with him.

I chose to leave and held on to the hope that with time, he would meet a girl worthy of him to bear his children.

But I have never expected to have run into him amidst my soul-searching trips.

It was an accident, but a coincidental one.

I sighed in despair. How am I supposed to keep traveling down this path without making mistakes?

Thankfully, my bones and arteries were unharmed and I began to feel like myself again only after a few days, though it hurt when I occasionally touched it. It was a gunshot wound, after all. It will leave a mark.

But it wasn't unbearable.

Abe kept his word as well. On the day of my discharge, Danny was there to pick me up to return to the villa.

Before I could say anything, Dante initiated. "Ms. Stovall, aren't you planning on visiting your friends?"

I did, of course. "It's time that they went home," I said with a nod.

As we made our way through the long operating theatre, I saw Nora through the glass room. After days of being locked away from sunlight, she looked haggardly and frail. Her mass of hair was shockingly white as well.

Nora and the rest seemed indifferent to see me. Being used to the life in the theatre, they barely glanced up at me before closing their eyes again, as if they'd never known me.

My heart ached when I saw that. "What happened to them?" I asked Dante.

Dante cast an eye over them. "All the women who come here will become this way; this isn't unusual."

I was unable to breathe. "Didn't you say that you would take good care of them?" I asked in a low voice.

"Hah!" Dante laughed coldly. "We are taking care of them by letting them live. If you hadn't bargained for their lives, you would be looking at a pile of corpses now."

I was at a loss for words, despite the rage in my heart.

"Release them!" I ordered.

Dante didn't speak but raised his hand in a gesture toward the man guarding their door.

He opened the door and helped the lifeless women to their feet

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I rushed forwards to grab Nora as she collapsed against me. “Leave us behind, Scarlett,” she said hoarsely. “It’s no use. This is our fate!”

I shook my head and held back tears. The strain of her weight against my delicate arm was immense.

Dante had arranged for four bedrooms to be prepared in the villa. As the women occupied the bedrooms, he ordered for them to be cared for.

That’s them settling in.

When they were finally asleep, I went down to the living room where Dante and Danny were having some tea.

They looked up when I emerged. “Is there anything wrong?” Dante frowned.

“I will keep my promise. I’m going in!”

They stared at me for a moment before Dante laughed. “Ms. Stovall,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Do you know what will happen to you when you enter the operating theatre?”

“I do.”

“I’ve never met anyone who’s as desperate for death as you,” he chuckled.

I said nothing and waited for him to elaborate.

After a slight pause, he said, “You needn’t go in anymore. It’s a waste of your talents for you to be delivering goods. Mr. Abe has plans for you. Have a good rest!”

I was stunned to hear that. The men had returned their attention to their tea, and I didn’t bother asking them further.

Now that Abe knew about me and Ashton, it wouldn’t pay off to use me to transport their product.

Business is all about profit maximization, after all. I was destined for more lucrative operations.

I went back to my bedroom and stood on the balcony. The villa was heavily guarded; escape is nigh impossible.

Besides, it was located in the middle of a dense banana plantation. Without an experienced guide, this villa was as unlocatable as it was impenetrable.

On second thought, Ashton would be searching for me around the city for a couple of days. He wouldn’t be departing Venria just yet.

I saw Armond again the following morning. He came with Abe.

Nora and the rest were very frail and spent most of their time in bed. I went to them a couple of times, but they did not want to see me.

Soon, I gave up the endeavor.

Armond was in the living room having tea with Abe when I emerged from my bedroom.

“How’s your arm?” Armond asked when he saw me.

“Much better,” I replied after a brief pause.

Armond laughed humorlessly. “Can I have a few words with her in private?” he asked Abe.

Abe scowled but nodded.

Everybody left, leaving me and Armond at the table.

He appeared calm and cold, but he poured me a glass of tea politely.

“Would you like to go home?” Armond asked.

I was caught off guard and spilled some tea on myself as my hands trembled.

“Yes,” I said after a pause and a sip.

Armond nodded and laughed in his easy-going manner. He refilled my glass and said. “I’m flying to Epea tomorrow. You can come with me if you like.”

“It’s not so easy to leave now,” I said without thinking.

“Don’t worry,” Armond said. “Abe owes me a favor. He won’t do you any harm.”

Things weren’t that simple. My value to Abe in his grudge against Ashton was large. Abe won’t relinquish me that easily.

Armond would have to ask for a whole lot more to compensate for the loss that he had caused Abe.

“Scarlett, you just need to tell me if you’re willing to get away from here. If you are, I will think of something with Abe.”

“I want freedom for my friends as well,” I said with some hesitation.

Armond looked conflicted at that.

I was aware that he had a way of taking me away, but to take five women with him was another story altogether. It wasn’t just an inconvenience for him, it was dangerous too.

I did not wish to make things difficult for him. “Mr. Murphy, thank you very much for your kind gesture.”

“Alright, you’re all coming with me!” Armond suddenly said, his eyes gleaming determinedly.

I froze in confusion.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Armond set his glass down noisily. “I’ll bring your friends along. Tomorrow, some of my men will be here to pick you up.”

I was taken aback. It seemed like an overly breezy promise to make. I stared at him disbelievingly.

Armond laughed at my suspicion. “Us Murphys are known for accomplishing something when we set our minds to it. When I’ve made up my mind to take you away, I mean it. So please, humor me and accept my gesture.”

I became even more confused. Though I did not know the extent of his relationship with Abe, I was sure that it was a lot to ask from Abe. If he was determined to get his way, surely it would only end in a conflict between the two of them.

In the worst-case scenario, if they were just casual acquaintances, Abe might even hold a grudge against Armond.

No matter which way I looked at it, it was disadvantageous to Armond from every possible angle.

“I would like to know why,” I blurted after a moment’s hesitation. I could not quell the suspicious feeling within me.

Armond raised his brows. “Would you believe me if I told you that I feel a certain way about you?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” We were all adults here, there was no place for fanciful feelings anymore. Besides, we’ve only met a handful of times, and I wasn’t particularly beautiful that every man I met would just fall head over heels for me.

Chapter 660

There was no such thing as first love in the world of grownups. He smiled coldly. “Being too smart isn’t good for a woman. It’s better if you play dumb once in a while. You know how it feels to be loved. I’m sure you don’t want to lose it.”

I pursed my lips. Contrary to what he believed, all I felt was disgust. I kept quiet for a while before answering, “I want you to tell me the truth, Mr. Murphy.”

He nodded. “Remember where we first met?”

“J City’s cemetery.”

He nodded; his gaze still fixated on me. “To be precise, right in front of Mrs. Stovall’s tombstone.”

I knew my grandmother was a Stovall, so that wasn’t a shock. “So?” I looked at him. I saw Armond when I went to the cemetery on All Souls’ Day, but I didn’t think that much. I only thought he was being kind when he helped me out of the kidnapping, but after mulling it over, I thought things weren’t as simple as they seemed.

There are no coincidences in this world.

“I want the sandalwood box Mrs. Stovall left you.” His gaze was still cold as ever.

I stiffened up and frowned at him. “That’s a puzzle box. How do you know I have it?”

He smiled. “I found out about it.” And he said nothing more.

I shouldn’t give him the box, since my grandma left it for me. However, if it could exchange five people’s lives and Ashton’s consolation, that would be worth it. I nodded. “No problem.”

He smiled, looking satisfied, and he stood up. “Sleep tight and wake up early next morning.”

I nodded. I had something else to say, but Abe had come down. “What were you guys talking about, Mr. Murphy?” Abe squinted at me, then his eyes were locked on my face, and he criticized, “She has the curves, and her features are nice, but

she has a scar. She's not the best woman you can get, so what did you see in her?"

He was talking to Armond.

Armond smiled at me. "Never judge a book by its cover. Beauty is nothing without a gorgeous soul."

Abe snorted and plopped down on the chair, staring at me quietly. "I can never get your aesthetics."

I went upstairs, refusing to stay any longer, and I mulled over what Armond told me. It would be for the best if he could take us away.

Nora and the girls were looking better when I went to see them again. Nora, especially, had regained consciousness. She tugged at my arm, her eyes teary. "I want to go home."

That broke my heart, and I nodded. Everyone else was starting to regain some color, though they were still relatively pale. Well, anyone would be driven insane staying in that wretched place for such a long time.

Abe rarely stayed in the villa, probably fearing for his life. He was always cautious and appeared out of nowhere every time.

Same went for Danny and Dante. They'd appear whenever I thought they weren't around, but I could never find them whenever I tried.

It was a sleepless night that night, for Armond's promise lit up my desire to get my life back, and the prospect of bringing Nora and the girls back excited me.

I stayed up until late in the night, then I heard the roar of the engine coming from below. I froze in fear, thinking that Abe had come again. Then I went to the balcony to take a look, but someone knocked on the door before I could and startled me.

I went to take the door after a few more knocks, though surprisingly, it was Armond standing there. He was still cold as usual, though his black suit made him all the more distant. He frowned at me. "Let's go."

I was surprised. "Now?"

"Abe's at the vineyard having fun. It's your best chance to make a break for it. I've handled everything else. Now go."

I was flabbergasted, but I had to take the chance, or it might prove difficult to leave. I went with him and noticed Danny in the living room downstairs, only illuminated by the dim lamp. He was staring straight at us.

I stopped in my tracks. "Danny."

"Let's go." Armond threw him a look and dragged me away.

I thought Danny would stop us, but all he did was see us off. I hesitated for a moment, and I said, "Thank you."

He didn't answer me. Instead, he looked at Armond.

Three black cars were waiting for us when we came out, and the moment we got in, I heard gunshots coming from the rubber plantation. He shoved me into the car and told the chauffeur, "Take them and go!"

Abe's probably back. I stared at Armond, panicked. There was nothing I could say but, "Be careful."