

Chapter 681

I'd barely reached the hallway when Ashton lifted me from behind and dumped me onto the bed

I landed in a clumsy heap on the bed. Glaring at him, I shouted, "Ashton! Are you sick or something?"

"Yes," he replied seriously as he tossed his towel aside. He rasped seductively, "I'm lovesick."

I...

I tried to be modest and look away from his body. "Ashton, there are dressing gowns in the hotel. You should put one on!"

He seemed to ignore my words as he crawled onto the bed toward me. He asked huskily, "What are you hiding from? Are you scared of something?"

I was tongue-tied as the scent of his shower gel hit me. I started inching backward slowly. "Ashton, what are you trying to do?"

He began closing in on me, and I felt unsettled by his stare. "You should know what I'm planning to do."

He'd said this lightly, though I couldn't miss the emphasis he'd placed on the last word in his answer.

I'd run out of space to back into. I looked at him and swallowed my saliva involuntarily. "Don't come so near to me. It's late, and I should really get going."

This position was far too sensual for my liking. I was finding it hard to breathe.

He seemed to enjoy the atmosphere immensely. He didn't make a move and gave me a piercing stare. "Going back? Where to?"

He moved his lips closer to me as he spoke.

I was so taut that I almost forgot to breathe. Acting on instinct, I closed my eyes.

I tried to wiggle around and escape as I sensed his movements. He ordered in a deep tone, "Don't refuse me!"

I was taken aback and didn't know what to do. So I froze and let him have his way.

He deliberately took his time, placing featherlight kisses along my cheek.

I can't focus when he's doing stuff like this.

"Scarlett," he rasped, and I luxuriated in his rich baritone.

I mumbled incoherently, beginning to fall under his spell. He suddenly stopped just as I was anticipating his next move.

I opened my eyes and was met by his knowing smirk. He teased, "Do you want it?"

I knew my face was as red as a tomato at that point. I accused weakly, "Ashton, you jerk!"

His laughter rang out through the room.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't expect what happened later that night.

I woke up to the piercing rays of the August sunshine through the window. I was shocked when I saw the man lying next to me.

"Why are you still here?"

Ashton was lying on the bed. When he saw that I was awake, he pulled me into his arms.

He chuckled, "Why wouldn't I be here?"

I was still getting over my surprise and stuttered at him. "I-I..."

"Are you hungry?"

I chewed my lips and pulled away from him. "I should leave!" I still need to go to work this morning.

He pressed me down on the bed. "Where are you going?"

I kept mum for a bit before saying, "Ashton, let's just treat last night as a drunken one-night stand. Next time..."

"We go our separate ways?" His warm tone had disappeared as he interrupted my words. "Scarlett, did you really think I was going to let you get away?"

I shook my head. "No!" I paused again, thinking of what to say. "I'm not running away. I just want to make a life of my own. Ashton, you're really good to me, but I will always be living in your shadow."

He retorted, "That's rubbish! What do you mean that? Is my existence somehow disturbing your life?"

I nodded woodenly. "Yes, it is disturbing my life. I want to live alone and not become entangled with you like this. Why can't you understand?"

He stared at me coldly, not gratifying me with a reply.

He's angry all right.

I got up and picked up my clothes. I got dressed quickly and looked at him coolly, "I'm sorry for bothering you last night."

Then I rushed out of the hotel without waiting for his reply.

I hailed a cab to Murphy Corporation. The alcohol from last night was still messing with my system, and I felt light-headed.

I was greeted by the sight of Armond in a sharp black suit as I walked into the office. His stare was burning a hole through my head.

I was surprised when I saw him. I remembered Nora telling me how much he'd drunk last night and wondered if he was okay.

I put on a small smile and greeted him, "Good morning, Mr. Murphy!"

Linda ambled over with a pile of documents which she then dropped on my desk. "Ms. Stovall, there's quite a bit of work for you today. Good luck."

I nodded and greeted her as well. I noticed that Armond was still staring at me after Linda had left.

Flustered by his staring, I said, "Mr. Murphy, you..."

He interrupted, "Where did you go last night? You didn't come home."

Slightly stunned by his question, I tried to hide my embarrassment with a laugh. "I bumped into an old friend. We had a few drinks together and ended up pulling an all-nighter."

I knew my excuse was a bit far-fetched, but this was the only thing I could come up with.

He looked at me wordlessly. His incessant staring unnerved me.

Chapter 682

I tried to clear up the awkward tension in the air by making some small talk. “Mr. Murphy, have you had your breakfast yet?”

I almost forgot that my current job entailed looking after his meals.

He left my question hanging as he turned and headed into his office.

I wondered what I should do. In the end, I went downstairs to get some pastries for him. When I returned to the office, Armond was gone.

I didn't see Linda either. That was when I realized that there was a meeting this morning. I hurried to the conference room.

The person who was presenting his slides stopped talking when I entered the room. My embarrassment grew when I noticed that everyone in the room had turned to look at me.

Erm, awkward much!

I addressed my apology to everyone in the conference room. “Sorry for the interruption! And sorry I'm late for the meeting.”

Armond was seated at the front of the conference room. He shot me an intense gaze before motioning for the presenter to continue.

The meeting seemed to last for ages, and my hangover didn't make things any better. When the meeting finally ended, I got up to leave and was stopped by Armond.

"Scarlett!"

I slowed down and turned my head. I smiled awkwardly and addressed him. "Mr. Murphy!"

"Did you forget about the meeting today?" he asked sternly.

I nodded sheepishly before shaking my head in an attempt to clear myself of the funk I'd been in since this morning. "Mr. Murphy, I'm really sorry. That was an oversight on my part, and I promise it won't happen again."

He pursed his lips before continuing, "I don't doubt your capabilities since you've been employed at both Fuller Corporation and White Corporation before. That's why I hired you without going through an interview with HR. But this doesn't mean that you can gloss over the regulations in Murphy Corporation. Scarlett, you have to treat every job you take on seriously since it's now your responsibility."

I nodded several times and answered sincerely, "Yes, I know!"

He frowned, apparently in a bad mood. He walked around me and left the conference room.

I sighed, still feeling uneasy about the whole situation.

Linda was waiting for me at the door. Sensing my dejected mood, she tried to comfort me, "Mr. Murphy is always this serious when it comes to working. You'll get used to it after a few more days."

I tilted my head to look at her, surprised and touched by her kind words. "Thank you!"

She smiled at me. "Everyone went through this phase as well. For us women, if we refuse to become housewives that are crippled without their husbands, we can only fight harder to establish our careers."

I was stunned at her words. She started to walk away but stopped after a few steps. She turned back to me and said, "Oh right, I have a tip for you. Mr. Murphy likes sweets, though he doesn't eat them very often. You can carry some sweets with you. Who knows, it might cut down the number of times he tells you off!"

That was unexpected. Armond has a sweet tooth?

"By the way, Mr. Murphy has gastric problems, so he can't skip his breakfast in the morning. It would be good if you have some gastric medication with you at all times."

Linda left after bestowing me with her advice. It took me a moment to get over my surprise at the new things I'd learned about Armond today. I then headed back to the office and collected a stack of documents meant for Armond.

He looked pale, and I thought he was still angry at me. Cautiously, I said, "Mr. Murphy, I've already reviewed these documents. They're all good to go; they just need your signature."

He mumbled his acknowledgment without looking at me. He continued reading the documents in his hand as I placed my stack on his desk. That was when I noticed that one of his hands was clutching his stomach.

Linda's words came to mind as I realized he might be in pain from his gastric problems instead of being angry.

Seeing his intense concentration on the documents in front of him, I pulled out a few sweets from my pocket and placed them on the desk. I said apologetically, "Mr. Murphy, I'm really sorry about what happened this morning. Please have a few sweets first to stave off the pain, and I'll head out to get you some medicine and food in a bit."

He stopped whatever he was doing and met my gaze. His brows were raised as he asked with some humor, "Did Linda tell you about this?"

I looked at the sweets on the table and nodded. "Linda told me that you like to eat sweets. She also mentioned that you have gastric problems, so you can't skip breakfast. I'll remember these details in the future. I slipped up today, but I won't repeat my mistakes."

I grew nervous as I stared at him, and I took in a small breath to calm myself down. I tried to give him my most serious expression as I waited for his orders.

Suddenly, he smiled at me. He replied, "Just don't repeat it again. I'm fine, and you should get back to work. Let's have lunch together later."

I nodded eagerly.

I was still worried at his pallor and asked, "Are you able to bear the pain?"

He smiled placidly. "I've lived with this for a while now, so I'm used to it. Plus, it's almost noon, so I don't want to trouble you to go out now."

I nodded and said, "Then please have some sweets first and drink some water."

I left his office. Unable to shake off my concern, I went to the pantry and prepared a glass of warm milk.

My phone began ringing with a call from Nora. I picked up the phone. "Morning, have you eaten?"

"Not yet. Babe, I need your help!" Pots and pans clanged in the background, and I guessed that she was in the kitchen.

Chapter 683

"Sure. What's up?"

"Can you send me the address of the company? I'm bringing lunch for Armond today. By the way, I can't enter the office without an appointment, right? So you'll need to come downstairs and get the food from me when I arrive!"

Sure!" I was just thinking about what to get for lunch. "Armond has gastric problems, and they're flaring up now. If you could bring along some gastric medication, that'd be great!"

I heard her cackling laughter through the receiver. "Leave it to me. I'll be there in half an hour."

I hung up and finished preparing the milk. Linda showed up at the pantry to get some coffee, looking exhausted.

I couldn't help but ask, "Linda, did you have a rough night?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "School's starting in a couple of days. My daughter hasn't completed any of her assigned work, so I've been up the past few nights making sure she finished them properly! Really, women shouldn't have kids at all. They're adorable when they're still young but become absolute nightmares when they're older! Here, look at my wrinkles. There are so many extra ones now!"

She moved her eyes closer to me and pulled on them dramatically.

I burst into laughter. "How old is your daughter?"

"She's entering third grade soon. I'm telling you, you can never run out of things to worry about them!"

"My daughter's entering first grade soon!" I replied on instinct as I thought of Summer. Though judging by Summer's nature, I probably won't be the only one worrying about her.

My reply startled her. "You have a daughter? Wait, are you married?"

I nodded as her astonishment grew. "I've been married for almost ten years."

She clicked her tongue and immediately launched into gossip mode. "Then what's going on between you and Mr. Murphy?"

I was flabbergasted at her question. She must be mistaken. I laughed as I explained, "He's just my boss. We seem familiar with each other because we've met on a few occasions before this. It's not what you think it is!"

She rubbed her temples and sighed, "I should've known. Men like him are hardly approachable by women. He's almost forty and still single; old Mr. Murphy must be going bald with anxiety."

I couldn't think of a suitable response and left with the glass of milk.

I knocked on the door to Armond's office before entering. He was still reviewing documents as I walked in. I called out to him, "Mr. Murphy, I brought a glass of milk for you."

The sweets on the table were gone, and I saw sweet wrappers in the trash can. So he ate the sweets after all. Who knew a frosty, reserved president like him would be a fan of sweet things?

He lifted his head when he heard me. His gaze fell on the glass of milk on the desk. Frowning, he said dismissively, "I don't drink milk."

"Well, you should at least drink a little bit of milk. It'll help to soothe some of the pain."

He shook his head adamantly. "I'm not drinking this!"

He paused for a moment and stared at me. "Linda didn't tell you that I don't drink milk?"

I shook my head.

He smirked and gestured for me to bring the milk away. I pursed my lips and retorted, "Even if you don't normally drink milk, a little bit right now will definitely help with your gastric pain. Plus, milk doesn't taste that bad."

I didn't wait for his reply and left his office. Nora had arrived.

She sounded excited through the phone. "I'm downstairs. You should come here ASAP. I spy a hottie here. He looks like an absolute bad boy. He's even more enigmatic than Armond."

Speechless, I hung up and hurried downstairs. She ran towards me when she saw me and pushed the lunchboxes into my hands.

She said in a rush, "Scarlett, I prepared lunch for both you and Armond. Don't tell him I made it, or he might not eat it. I'm off to ogle the hottie now, bye!"

I... Didn't she say she wanted to drop off lunch for Armond? She's literally just dropping it off?

I watched her running towards another floor and couldn't help but laugh at her antics. A woman's infatuation with handsome men is probably similar to how men are obsessed with the idea of college girls; they all boil down to human nature.

I got back to the office just in time for lunch. She didn't forget about the gastric medication, and she'd prepared dishes that were gentle on the stomach.

"Hmm? Did your friend bring this over?" Linda poked her head into the office as she walked past.

I smiled happily and replied, "Yup, she is free today, so she prepared some lunch for me. Would you like to have some too?"

She shook her head as she raised her own lunchbox. "I packed lunch here too."

I guess she is on the way to the pantry to reheat her food.

I walked into Armond's office. He was still knee-deep in work, though he seemed to sense my presence. Thinking I was here to drop off some documents, he didn't lift his head as he said, "Just leave it over there."

The glass of milk I'd brought over was now empty. I stared agape at the glass and exclaimed, "I thought you wouldn't drink it!"

He finally tore himself away from his work and stared at me. He said jokingly, "It's not bad!"

Noticing the lunch bag in my hand, he raised his brows and asked, "What did you bring?"

"Lunch!" I sat down next to his desk and continued, "My friend made this herself, so it's going to taste great. She also made some for you. Want to try it?"

Chapter 684

He got up from his seat and walked closer to me. "Did Nora make this?"

I was surprised at his guess. "How did you guess?"

He laughed. "You don't have many friends here, let alone friends free enough to bring lunch for you. So naturally, I guess it's Nora."

That makes a lot of sense.

I began laying out the utensils and passed him the gastric medication. "Here you go. Remember to take this if you have gastric pain."

He looked at the medicine before turning his gaze toward me. "Did you ask Nora to pick this up?"

I nodded. "Something like that."

He took the lunchbox from me and paused for a moment before asking, "Did you see Ashton last night?"

I was taken aback by his question. I'm going to get whiplash from the way his mind works.

Seeing as I'd suddenly become mute, he took a few bites of his food before launching into a monologue. "Fuller Corporation is planning a project in A City. Technically speaking, Ashton doesn't need to be in A City for it, but he's here and it seems like he's planning to stay for quite some time."

I nodded, not intending to reply.

He frowned at my continued silence. "Since Fuller Corporation isn't a local business, they're planning to hold a public tender for the project tonight at Oasis Hotel. Murphy Corporation is planning to bid on this project as well."

I stared at him in surprise before finally speaking, "You can just let me know directly what you need me to do."

He chuckled at my words as a bright smile began to form on his face. "I'm putting you in charge of this project!"

I frowned at him in confusion. "I've just joined the company not long ago, as your secretary. My job is to take care of your odd jobs and organize your documents. Following up with Fuller Corporation is a job more suited to a project director. Even if you insist on putting me in charge, you need to consider my capabilities. Do you have that much faith in me?"

He raised his brows and put down the fork in his hands. With a serious expression, he said, "You've worked at Fuller Corporation for years, making your way up to the Director position from the lowest rung of the corporate ladder. Isn't that proof enough of your capabilities? A position is an abstract thing, and it doesn't dictate whether a secretary can handle the tasks of a project director. You can ask Linda yourself. She's always been an executive assistant since she first joined the company, but she has a hand in most Murphy Corporation projects."

I knitted my brows. Is he trying to hard-sell me or something?

He continued, "Besides if we send you to bid for the project, our chances of success are a lot higher. I'm not above playing some dirty tricks."

As if I didn't know what he had in mind. He's definitely trying to gain some leverage by using my relationship with Ashton.

I didn't really want to go, though I didn't say a word.

He looked at me, and his gaze softened. "I'm not going to force you if you don't want to. You'll just lose your twenty percent commission on the project, that's all."

Stunned, I blurted, "Twenty percent?"

He arched his brows and said, "Supervisors in charge are entitled to a twenty percent commission for all successful bids. This policy has been around since Murphy Corporation was first established."

I wasn't unaware of commission distributions for successful bids, but supervisors typically got a five percent cut. Even ten percent was pushing it.

A twenty percent cut was a mouth-watering prospect. A project from a company as big as Fuller Corporation would at least come with a six-figure commission. If it was a project on a larger scale, it could go into the millions.

A commission like that could set me up comfortably for years.

Armond noticed that I was in a daze. He continued eating for a while before walking toward the other end of his desk. He passed some documents to me. "These are all the details regarding the project by Fuller Corporation. The local council is planning to work with Ashton as well. Right now, we only have one advantage going into the bidding, and that's you."

I replied helplessly, "Ashton's not going to favor me in the tender just because of our personal relationship. You said it yourself; profit is the only thing that matters in business."

He smiled cryptically at me. "How would you know if you never try? The tender begins tonight, so you need to get the bid proposal out this afternoon."

Pursing my lips, I replied in a somewhat harsh tone, "Mr. Murphy, aren't you just making my life difficult now?"

He smirked. "So you can't do it? Or you won't do it?"

The words froze in my throat. Neither scenario was accurate, though my heart still hesitated.

He broke the silence first. "Scarlett, you should start thinking about what you'll gain from this. Just ask Linda if you're unsure about anything."

He turned his attention back to his documents after leaving me with that piece of advice.

Chapter 685

My head was muddled as I stared at my lunch on the table.

I shook myself out of my stupor a moment later and cleaned up before leaving his office.

It had been ages since I'd last written a bid proposal, and I didn't know where to begin.

When Linda came to my desk, I was staring blankly at my computer screen, my chin propped up in my hands. She laughed before imparting her wisdom to me. "Fuller Corporation is calling for bids in A City because they want to expand their market share. Since they're a listed company, you can more or less view Ashton as an investor. Since an investor's fundamental goal is to multiply their profits from an initial investment, any form of profit will be important to them."

She continued, "Public enterprises in A City are clamoring to work with Fuller Corporation because, like us, they believe that this project shows a lot of promise. No one wants to miss out on a cut of its potentially lucrative profits. Their advantage lies in their stability, though their bid may be lower owing to their limited funds. This also implies that they may end up cutting corners during the late stages of the project to save costs. So when you're drawing up the proposal, there's no point in bidding extreme prices. Price wars are meaningless, and you only need to come up with a price that guarantees quality and profitability. Then, you should consider and address any concerns that the Fuller Corporation may have when it comes to developing a project in A City. If there's a need for it, you can arrange for Mr. Murphy and Mr. Fuller to meet for a private discussion. It may be much more fruitful compared to whatever us employees can accomplish."

She leaned closer to me and smiled. "This is my advice to you regarding the proposal. You can gather more opinions from the others in the office. Everyone has different thoughts and strengths."

I nodded and got up to thank her.

Nora called as I was contemplating Linda's advice in silence.

She started chatting excitedly, "Scarlett, are you busy? I'm downstairs; let's go for tea."

Rolling my eyes, I replied, "Nora, I'm working now. Mr. Murphy just dumped a tricky project on me, and I'm panicking like mad. I'm definitely not in the mood for some posh afternoon tea!"

"You're joking, right? Aren't you just his secretary? How can he dump a project on you like that?"

I sighed, "It's hard to explain. Oh right, where did you go? You left in such a hurry."

"I was tailing that hottie until I lost him, but now I'm back! By the way, did you enjoy the lunch I made?"

"It tastes great!" I paused for a bit before saying, "Do you know about Tessa's work?"

She appeared befuddled by my question. There was a slight pause before she answered, "No, I don't. Why are you suddenly asking about her? Do you need her to help you with something?"

"No," I replied hurriedly. "Armond assigned a somewhat complicated project to me. I was thinking that Tessa might know some people involved in it; that's why I asked about her."

She tut-tutted before replying, “She used to be in the tea business. I believe she was selling premium tea. Some years back, it was quite trendy to gift overpriced teas, so she must have rubbed elbows with many rich people back then. I’m sure she’s at least acquainted with some of them, though I’m not sure she’s the most reliable person for you to approach.”

“We’re going up against public enterprises in this project. I need to ask around since I’m not familiar with the social landscape of A City. After all, it can’t hurt to know more about the competition!” The previous night, Tessa recognized Derek at first glance when he arrived with Ashton. She must know quite a lot of people in those circles.

Plus, going by the situation, it seemed pretty obvious that Derek was present to discuss collaboration opportunities with Ashton.

Nora spoke after a moment’s pause. “You might as well ask me or Tabitha instead of Tessa. My grandpa may be retired, but he’s still got some useful connections. He might be able to get some useful information for you. Tabitha’s husband is also in the premium tea business, and he might be able to find out some intel in his circle for you. He’s probably more reliable than Tessa too.”

I pondered her suggestion for a while before asking, “Are you still downstairs?”

“Yup. Come on, let’s go for high tea. I know I look like someone who’s got nothing better to do, but that doesn’t mean I’m totally useless!”

“Alright, give me a sec!” I packed my things and hurried downstairs.

She was playing a game on her phone when I reached the lobby. There were a bunch of shopping bags slung on her arm.

She shot me a radiant smile as I approached. "Yay, time for tea!"

The assortment of shopping bags on her arm seemed to be a myriad of luxury goods. I couldn't help but exclaim, "Does your family own gold mines or something?"

She spends so much, but she doesn't even work.

Laughing, she replied cryptically, "No gold mines here, but my grandpa has owned a legal coal mine since a couple of years ago. It's not going to make me a fortune, but I won't go starving."

Some people are destined to struggle since birth, while others carry their silver spoon with them their whole lives.

I didn't probe into her words and just followed her to the cafe for high tea.

As I buckled myself into her white Cadillac, I commented, "You have no idea how many women would kill for what you have right now."