

Chapter 711

Ashton and Armond's attentions were both naturally drawn to the sudden commotion. Armond snuck a glance at Ashton before asking me, "Are you okay?"

I nodded in response. "The water wasn't that hot. I'll go change my clothes and come back."

"The private restroom in my office has a spare change of clothes," he helpfully offered. "Feel free to use those."

I nodded in a daze and gestured for Linda to remain where she was. "I'm fine."

I exited the conference room and made a beeline for Armond's office. I had no other choice; I wouldn't be able to buy a new change of clothes in the shop now.

His private restroom was equipped with a bathroom, a bed, and other amenities. The minimalistic interior perfectly reflected his cold personality.

Inside the closet, there were several suits and ties as well as neatly folded-up shirts. Just as he had told me, there was one set of women's clothing placed in the corner of the closet. The clothes looked familiar to me, yet I couldn't recall exactly where I'd seen them before.

I decided to take a cold shower before changing into the clothes. The clothes fitted perfectly. However, the scalded skin stuck out like a sore thumb.

I paid no heed to it and rushed back to the conference room to resume the meeting.

When I got there, Linda was in the middle of presenting the project details and our concerns. After that, a representative of the Fuller Corporation described the level of cooperation needed from us during the implementation process.

As the person in charge, I was responsible for taking every detail and possible setback into consideration. That included smoothing over any troubles that might arise during our collaboration.

Having both companies' objectives aligned, we proceeded to finalize the collaboration. The person in charge from both companies would have to be on-site to supervise the progress once the project commenced.

After signing the contracts and exchanging handshakes and greetings with each other, Linda came to me to ask, "You didn't treat your burns?"

I shook my head. "I'll do it later. There's no ointment in here."

"You're a woman, Scarlett. You have to treat your skin better. It'll be hard to remove any scars the wounds might leave in the future."

"I'll keep that in mind," I laughed lightly, hugging the contract documents to my chest. "Does this skirt I'm wearing belong to you? It looked familiar to me."

She scanned my appearance from head to toe. "Isn't this the outfit you wore when you came back from Venria?"

I blinked owlishly, realizing that Ashton and Armond were both staring at me from afar. Furrowing my eyebrows, I glanced down at my clothes again.

Something was amiss. Armond had never bought clothes for a girl before. Hence, when he had to buy clothes for us in Western Europe, he chose four similar designs. Although they were similar, they were each different and individual pieces.

I distinctly remembered what he'd bought for me; these were not those clothes. Amongst the four of us, only Nora shared the same body shape and height as me.

Thus, these clothes had to be Nora's. I couldn't help but look over at Armond curiously. Why does he have Nora's clothes?

Feeling my gaze on him, he cleared his throat and declared loudly, "It's noontime. Let's have lunch together."

It seemed that things between him and Nora were progressing much more rapidly than we'd thought.

"Mr. Murphy has some interesting kinks," Rachel giggled.

She'd said that on purpose for Ashton to hear.

Ashton's face instantly darkened, turning his attention to me. I knew all too well just by his expression that he was suppressing his anger.

As we exited the conference room, Linda leaned in and whispered confusedly, "What's going on?"

"These are Nora's clothes," I sighed, exasperated.

She chuckled. "Those two are getting on a lot better than we'd expected. But I was actually asking about you and Ashton. What happened? Nora told me that you and he are married to each other. Who is that pretty young lady by his side?"

"It's a long story, but we won't be married anymore soon." I shrugged. "After this project is over and done with, I'll go to J City with him to sign the divorce papers."

Linda was rendered speechless by my sudden confession.

"Ah!" Rachel's voice cried out from in front of us.

It seemed that she had tripped over something and was limping.

Several people turned around at the sound of her cries. "What happened?"

Rachel leaned against a wall, eyes watering pitifully as she said, "Sorry. I twisted my ankle yesterday, so I can't really walk well. Now it just hurt even more..."

Rolled her eyes at the sight, Linda muttered under her breath, "Does she expect someone to carry her like a princess?"

"Didn't she say that she'd twisted her ankle?" I glanced at Linda, perplexed.

"She's trying to take advantage of the fact that she can't walk. Watch."

Ashton's eyebrows knitted together slightly, ordering Joseph, "Go help Ms. Zimmer up."

Joseph nodded, holding Rachel up by one arm and assisting her in getting to the elevator, which was already full.

“Mr. Campbell, you and Ms. Zimmer should use the VIP elevator instead,” Armond suggested.

Taken aback, Joseph glanced over at Ashton, who offered no response. So, Joseph rejected Armond’s suggestion with a polite smile.

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“Ms. Zimmer injured herself in my company building, so I have to take some responsibility. Occasionally letting other people benefit from the privileges offered to me wouldn’t hurt, either” Armond stated.

Ashton’s voice was low as he cut in, “It’ll make things easier for Ms. Zimmer. Go.”

Joseph nodded, helping Rachel enter the VIP elevator. However, Ashton showed no signs of getting in with them.

“Mr. Fuller?” Armond spoke up, puzzled.

“I’ll take this one,” Ashton replied simply, following Linda and me into the employees’ elevator.

It was lunchtime, and there were more people than usual in the elevator. His tall height and handsome looks made him stand out from the crowd, drawing many curious looks from the rest of the employees in the elevator.

“What is Mr. Fuller doing?” Linda was stunned.

He could have definitely fitted in that large VIP elevator with much more room to spare.

I had no idea why he was acting that way either and decided to keep my mouth shut.

The elevator stopped many times on the way down, and people kept getting off or getting on their respective floors. Somehow, in the midst of all the chaos, Ashton ended up standing in front of me, and I was being squished into a corner.

He was facing me, shielding me from the push and pull of the rest of the passengers in the elevator.

I felt awkward after having said so many cruel things to him yesterday. Fixing my gaze on the floor, I placed a hand on his chest in an attempt to widen the distance between us. He didn't budge an inch, seemingly unbothered by my actions.

His eyes fell to my burnt wrist and furrowed his eyebrows.

The elevator stopped at yet another floor, opening up to let more passengers in.

Suddenly pushed by someone else, Ashton's body jerked forward, and he took a step closer to me as he readjusted his balance. There was barely a hair's breadth of space between us.

I pursed my lips and stayed silent, but the sound of my racing heartbeat was thumping in my ears. He glanced down at me, quietly murmuring, "We should be reaching soon."

The simple sentence instantly calmed me down, and we eventually arrived at our floor, just like he said.

Armond, Rachel, and Joseph were already waiting for us outside the elevator when we exited.

Ashton walked out in front of me, and Linda hung back to nudge me with her elbow. "The two of you were getting pretty intimate there, huh?"

My cheeks flushed red. "Nonsense!" I sputtered out, speeding up my pace to get away from her.

She followed behind me closely, giggling all the way.

Our group headed towards the restaurant. At the main entrance of the restaurant, Ashton said something to Joseph, and his assistant quickly left.

The two staffers accompanying Rachel noticed that her ankle didn't seem to have improved much. "Ms. Zimmer, should we get some ointment for you to relieve the pain?"

"No, it's fine. I'm sure it'll go away soon." She gave them a gentle smile, which only motivated the two employees to help her even more.

They jumped to their feet, valiantly announcing, "Mr. Fuller, we'll be going out for a minute..."

"There's no need," Ashton interrupted. "Joseph has already gone to buy ointment for her ankle."

The two men shrank back awkwardly, giving each other a knowing stare. They were both adults; they knew what was going on.

Armond glanced at me. "Mr. Fuller is very protective towards Ms. Zimmer, I see. I should have thought of that beforehand and let Linda go to buy pain relievers for Ms. Zimmer as well as burn ointment, instead of having Mr. Campbell go out. It's unsightly for a girl to have any scars."

Linda jumped to her feet. "Right, I almost forgot about that! I'll go buy some straightaway!"

And with that, she took off.

I gave Armond a smile. "Thank you."

"No problem."

Joseph soon returned, handing the plastic bag in his hands to Rachel. "Ms. Zimmer, should I help you to the infirmary to treat your injury?"

“No thank you, Mr. Campbell,” she answered, shaking her head. “I’ll handle it myself after I finish my meal.”

Linda also came back, nearly on Joseph’s heels as she rushed into the restaurant. “I’ll go wash my hands and then help you put this on!” she told me, giving me a box of burn ointment before leaving.

Almost immediately, Armond took the burn ointment from me and pulled a chair to sit down beside me. “I’ll help you.”

What?

Without waiting for a response, he took out the ointment and the cotton swab that had come with it. He carefully tugged on my hand and placed it on his thigh, squeezing out a bit of the cream and spreading it all over my burn wound.

Linda came back from the washroom, her mouth falling open when she saw us. “Mr. Murphy, you...”

“Is there a problem?” Armond glanced up at her.

“Nope! Not at all!” She quickly turned away, wiping her hands dry with a napkin.

The atmosphere around the dining table was strange and uncomfortable. The food had been ordered, but nothing had been served yet. Armond kept himself occupied by focusing on treating my burn wounds, while Ashton had on a stony expression. Everyone else instinctively turned a blind eye.

I felt as if I was sitting on needles, being watched so intently by several people at once. Armond looked unperturbed by the whole situation as if he had nothing to do with it.

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After putting on the ointment, he took my hand in his and raised it to his lips, blowing on it softly. "I don't think it'll scar," he reassured in a gentle tone. "I'll put some more after we get back tonight. It should heal properly after a few days, but to be on the safe side, don't touch any water tonight and ask me if you need help with anything, okay?"

His words made it sound like we were much closer than we actually were. I felt Ashton's sharp gaze focus on us from afar.

"Mr. Murphy, are you living together with Ms. Stovall?" Rachel asked suggestively.

Armond simply murmured in acknowledgement.

For some reason, the two employees from the Fuller Corporation decided to add fuel to the fire, perking up and added, "You treat Ms. Stovall with such kindness, Mr. Murphy. Anyone would be able to tell that the two of you are very close. It's so admirable that you can work together and take care of each other."

I was at a loss for words for a good moment. I opened my mouth, wanting to defend myself, but was worried that it would seem as if I was taking the chance to explain and show off my relationship with Armond on purpose.

So, I kept silent. At that moment, a waiter arrived with our food and that was the end of the topic.

While eating, the two Fuller Corporation employees had somehow jumped to the conclusion that Ashton and Rachel were a couple.

After the meal was finally over, Ashton instructed Joseph to send Rachel home, but the man in question had some other things to tend to.

Without a beat of hesitation, Linda offered to let me take Rachel home.

I didn't even have a chance to retort with anything before Linda shoved me into the driver's seat of my car.

Rachel didn't speak for a long time during the drive. Naturally, I didn't attempt to make conversation with her either.

Suddenly, she spoke up. "Did you leave Mr. Fuller because of me?"

I paused, then shook my head. "No. It has nothing to do with anyone else."

She rubbed at her knee, possibly due to the low temperature of the car's air-conditioning. I reached down and turned the air-conditioner to a warmer setting.

"So you do have some self-awareness and left him because you know that you don't deserve him. In that case, you're not as despicable as I thought you were." She watched as I turned up the heating in the car. "Thanks."

I let out a light, casual laugh, deciding not to argue with her on the subject. "I'll send you to the hospital to get your injury checked out. You've hurt your leg two times already, and it might be much more severe than expected."

She nodded but didn't sound grateful at all as she said, "Sure. You have nothing else to do, anyway."

At the hospital, the doctor asserted that she'd pulled a ligament in her leg and needed to rest at home for a few days. He prescribed her some pills and an ointment for her injury.

"Send me home, too. It's hard to hail a taxi out here," she insisted as we exited the hospital.

It was true that taxis rarely came by the hospital area. Internally sighing, I nodded silently in agreement.

While on the way to Rachel's place, Linda called my phone. "Why are you still out? What happened?"

"Nothing, I just brought Rachel to the hospital. Tell Armond that I'll be back soon."

"Holy crap! Are you out of your mind, Scarlett? That woman is trying to steal your man! Why are you going to such lengths for her!"

The speaker on my phone wasn't particularly loud, but anyone sitting near me could still be able to hear Linda's raised voice.

I gave Rachel an anxious sidelong glance. She was staring at the passing scenery outside, seemingly letting her mind wander.

“Whatever. I’m driving right now, so I’ll call you back later!” I hung up the phone and went back to keeping my eyes on the road.

“If it weren’t for Ashton, maybe we could have become good friends.”

The words that came out of Rachel’s mouth surprised me, and I glanced over at her in bewilderment.

“Two people fighting over someone else’s affections can never become friends, anyway.” The corners of her lips quirked up slightly.

There was a pause before she went on, “I’m curious as to why you left Ashton. From my point of view, he was really serious about you.”

“Everyone has their own troubles to deal with. You need a certain amount of fate and luck in a relationship, and when those run out, the relationship naturally falls apart.” I slowed the car to a stop at a red traffic light.

She pursed her lips, silent for a moment. “That is why I will be happier with him than you were, Scarlett. I will never leave him, no matter what.”

I merely smiled and didn’t reply.

I headed straight for the office after sending Rachel home. Linda gave me a glass of cold water as soon as she saw me, saying, “So? Did anything transpire from two love rivals sitting in a car together?”

“Not at all.” I gulped down the water, immediately feeling cooling relief spread throughout my body. It was already August, and yet the weather was still so hot and humid.

She clicked her tongue, sitting down opposite me. “Seriously, what happened?” She sounded uncharacteristically solemn as she stressed, “Are you really ending things with Ashton like this?”

I was already fed up with the topic and was in no mood to discuss it further. “Isn’t Magpie Festival two days from now?” I hummed. “Want to call up Nora and grab lunch together with her?”

She nodded, suddenly widening her eyes as if recalling something. “Sure. By the way, the burn ointment I gave you earlier was from Mr. Campbell!”

“Mr. Campbell?”

“I bumped into him on my way out. Apparently, Ashton had instructed him to buy it for you and also buy medicine for Rachel while he was at it. When he saw me, he figured I was going out to purchase ointment for you, so he just gave this one to me.”

The little knot bothering me in my chest tightened even further. I inhaled sharply but kept my mouth shut.

Seeing that I wasn’t offering any sort of response, Linda sighed. “Scarlett, you and Ashton still care for each other, don’t you? If so, then why put yourselves through so much torture? Did you see the look on Ashton’s face when you and Armond were acting all intimate with each other today?”

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I stared off into space and didn't answer her. As a result, she decided to end the conversation there and walk away to continue working.

The project at Lavelian Village was going to kickstart as soon as it was approved, so I had made plans to stay there for a while.

Nora called me right after I'd finished packing up my belongings in the office, inviting me to eat dinner with her tonight.

I had yet to answer her when I realized that Armond was standing at my door, gazing at me. Thinking that he was here for business matters, I quickly told Nora, "Give me a minute!" before turning around and asking him, "Have you gotten off work already, Mr. Murphy?"

He nodded. "What are we eating tonight?"

Right. I'd nearly forgotten that I was responsible for managing his daily meals. I hesitated, pondering over Nora's dinner invitation.

"I haven't decided yet. What would you like to eat?" I replied instinctively.

"Anything. Work hours are over. Let's go."

"You can head on down first. I'll come as soon as I get my things sorted out."

I waited for him to walk a good distance away before whispering into my phone. "Nora?"

"Are you going to reject my invitation?"

I massaged one of my temples, pitying her quick wits a little. "No, you idiot. Are you going to pass up such an amazing chance to hook up with this highly eligible bachelor?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll send you Mr. Murphy's address so you can come over and cook dinner for him tonight. I'll act as your assistant, and we can eat together at his place. How does that sound?"

She gasped in excitement. "Really? You are my superhero, Scarlett! I'm going over there right this second!"

Hanging up the call, I dashed out of the office and searched for Armond's car in the building parking lot.

He seemed to have smoked a cigarette while waiting for me, the heavy smell causing me to cough a few times. "Is there something on your mind?"

He started up the car, replying calmly, "No."

After that, he didn't speak a word to me at all. I could tell that he was in a bad mood, although I wasn't sure why.

Half an hour later, we reached his villa. Armond made a beeline for his study upstairs while I paced around aimlessly in his kitchen, waiting for Nora.

She eventually showed up at the house with several bags full of groceries. "I already told you not to buy anything. This is so much!"

"I needed specific ingredients for my recipe, and I wasn't sure if you had them!" She winked at me. "Oh, and besides that, I spotted someone next door who looked familiar."

"Who is it?" I took the groceries from her and set them down on the kitchen counter.

"I think it was the assistant who's always beside Ashton. He looked like he was moving in." The kitchen was entirely made up of smart appliances, but she looked at ease and in her own element as she instructed me to wash the vegetables.

"Joseph is moving here?" I wondered out loud to myself, dumbfounded.

She nodded, busying herself with creating a homemade sauce.

The housing prices in A City weren't as expensive as in K City, but they usually went for around several hundred thousand per unit. Joseph was already married with children, so why was he purchasing a villa worth hundreds of thousands here of all places?

It wasn't as if he regularly came to A City either, because he worked in K City. Was it possible that he was feeling pressured or stressed so he bought a house here as an investment?

I couldn't figure it out even after wracking my brain, so I decided to throw the idea to the back of my mind and distracted myself by following Nora's instructions in the kitchen.

“How are you planning to spend Magpie Festival?” I questioned.

Her movements froze for a brief second as she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. “What about you?”

“Linda and I made plans to meet up and have a meal together.”

“I can guarantee that she’s going to stand you up,” she chuckled.

“Why is that?”

“She’s at the time of life where she’s trying to start another relationship after the failure that was her first marriage. You should be spending such a lovely holiday with someone you’re interested in, not eating out with your besties! There’s always another time for that.”

I observed as she skillfully sliced up the fish into thin pieces, admiring her professionalism. “Basically, what you’re saying is that you don’t want to spend Magpie Festival with me.”

“Obviously.” She rolled her eyes at me humorously. “I can go out and eat with you anytime, just not on Magpie Festival of all days! I want to spend the day doing romantic things and such, you know?”

She has a point.

Come to think of it, there was no other choice for me but to spend the holiday alone. I pondered over whether I should make a trip back to K City.

After the completion of this project and the divorce was finalized, I had to consider my plans to settle down in A City.

As preparations were nearly done, Nora told me, "Go wash your hands and call the neighbor to come over as well. We're all acquaintances and I've cooked so much today, so this could be like a welcoming party for him."

The thought of Joseph had completely escaped my mind. Getting ready to go out, I washed my hands and called out over my shoulder, "Armond's in the room to your left on the second floor. Go up and tell him that dinner is ready."

She giggled, breaking out into a wide grin. "Can I take this as you create a chance for me?"

"That's up to your own interpretation." I waved her off.

Armond's villa wasn't that large. Every building was close to one another, and it had a front yard as well as a water feature in the backyard.

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A single wall separated the two rooms. Sound traveled easily across the balconies.

I rang the bell of the neighboring villa. Joseph answered the door. When he saw me, he started ever so slightly, then asked, "Mrs. Fuller, is something wrong?"

I paused, then smiled at him winningly. "Were you aware that we were neighbors?" It was peculiar that Joseph hadn't asked me what I was doing here. Instead, he had immediately seized on something going awry.

Joseph's eyes darted uneasily. He avoided the question altogether and exclaimed brightly, "Please come in!"

"No need for that," I assured him. "It's time for dinner, and you just moved in today. I suppose you haven't had the time to cook. Would you like to join me?"

Joseph smiled but insisted on showing me in.

I felt it rather peculiar of him to do so. It all made sense to me, however, after I'd stepped and caught sight of the man himself seated on the grey couch and reading a book.

The one who had pushed for this move must have been Ashton rather than Joseph.

"Mrs. Fuller, let me get you a glass of water!" Joseph chirped, already darting out of the room in haste.

I remained standing where I was in the living room, tension creeping up my spine. I searched my mind frantically for something to say. Linda's words flashed across my mind and I blurted, "Thank you for the ointment you sent me today afternoon!"

Ashton's eyes never left his book. He casually turned a page, then replied coolly, "OK."

Silence returned to the room.

I gulped, then continued, "Are you planning to stay here?"

"Yes," Ashton intoned. He clearly didn't seem interested in having a conversation with me at the moment.

I bit my lip and pressed on. "I'm guessing that you haven't had anything to eat. I've already made dinner. Do you want to join me?"

Ashton suddenly slammed his book shut. He got his feet and replied evenly, "All right."

Without another word, he set his book down and left the room.

At that moment, Joseph re-entered the living room bearing a glass of water. He froze when he saw Ashton stalking out. Joseph hurriedly shoved the glass of water towards me, saying, "Mrs. Fuller, please have a drink!"

I shook my head and replied, "No need. Come over and have dinner with us!"

Joseph nodded, smiling sheepishly. "Thank you for having us!"

"There's no need to stand on courtesy," I replied cheerily.

By the time we'd traipsed back to my place, Nora had already arrayed the dishes on the table. When she saw us enter, Nora beamed, remarking, "What a crowd we have today! It's been a while since I've had such an eventful dinner."

As Nora set the table, I noticed that Armond wasn't present. Turning towards Nora, I asked, "Did you call Mr. Murphy to come as well?"

Nora nodded, her face coloring slightly. "He'll be down in a while."

Noting her rather unusual reaction, I probed, "Is something the matter?"

Nora smiled faintly. She said in a low voice, "Let's have dinner first."

Armond arrived minutes later after getting changed. He didn't seem surprised to see Ashton and merely greeted him rather matter-of-factly. We all sat down to dinner.

I suddenly had the peculiar feeling that everyone was privy to some information I was clueless about.

"Scarlett, how do you plan on spending Magpie Festival?" Nora abruptly asked. I raised my head and met her level gaze, nonplussed.

Nora continued smiling at me encouragingly. "Are you spending it with anyone? Why don't you ask Mr. Fuller out?"

I was flabbergasted. What is this woman trying to do?

Armond likewise had looked up from his plate. It was Joseph, however, who spoke. “I think tomorrow’s the actual date of the Festival, actually.”

“That’s right! It’s the weekend besides,” Nora exclaimed. She enthusiastically shifted her attention to Armond, pressing, “Mr. Murphy, will you be going out with anyone?”

Armond maintained his usual collected self. He eyed Nora, then answered brusquely, “Nope.”

Without thinking, Nora fired back, “I’m reserving you for tomorrow night, then.”

“Ahem!” Armond suddenly erupted into a fit of violent coughing. Flustered, he reached out for the napkins on the table.

Nora helpfully handed them to him. Rather helplessly, she chided, “How are you still choking on water? You’re not a child anymore!”

I couldn’t help but stifle a giggle. It was the first time we’d seen Armond flustered. It was quite a sight.

Feeling someone’s eyes on me, I looked around and saw Ashton’s penetrating gaze fixed squarely on me. Momentarily taken aback, I, too, nearly knocked over the glass of water near me.

“What’s going on with all of you? Why’s everyone so on edge?” Nora demanded.

No one responded. I cleared my throat and straightened my back a little nervously.

After a moment's hush, Nora sighed. "Scarlett, when are you going to move in with me? I'm all alone and bored out of my mind! Why don't you move in quickly?"

After a moment's delay, I answered hesitantly, "All right, perhaps in a few days' time. I'm scheduled to take over some projects these few days and I'll be a little busy with work."

Armond stared at me. "You're planning to move out?"

I nodded. Too late, I remembered that Linda had once told me Armond didn't like having caregivers at home. He'd thus always had personal assistants or secretaries handle his personal affairs instead.

I froze for a moment, uncertain of how to reply.

Just then, my stomach lurched, and I frowned subconsciously. Nora was already getting up and striding towards the fridge. She brought out a pitcher of watermelon juice with her, announcing, "Have some of this, everyone. It's freshly-squeezed watermelon juice."

The cold watermelon juice perfectly complimented the cool August evening. I took a swig and felt instantly rejuvenated.

The watermelon juice brought an air of refreshment to the table, and we broke off into idle chatter. Looking thoughtful, Armond asked Nora out to the rear house for a private conversation.

Joseph had similarly scurried off into a corner to deal with matters of his own. Ashton and I were left to ourselves.