

## Chapter 716

I wasn't planning to subject myself to further awkwardness that night. I stood up and prepared to clear the table. Ashton, however, was looking at me strangely. Bemused, I asked, "Do you want to head over to the living room and rest?"

Ashton didn't speak. He wordlessly got up and brought the dishes into the kitchen.

I took a step forward to stop him. He was a guest, after all. However, Ashton's dark gaze halted me in my tracks. I gaped at him, unable to muster a single coherent thought.

I lowered my head and turned to the sink. Before I could turn on the tap, however, Ashton had hauled me aside. "Get over there. I'll do it," he said roughly.

I could only look on apprehensively as his long, elegant fingers set to work cleaning up the kitchen.

I made another move to assist him but was arrested by his menacing gaze. All I could manage was to stand by, hovering over his shoulder and fretting inwardly.

After a moment's thought, I asked tentatively, "Why did you suddenly move all the way here? Aren't you returning to K City already?"

Ashton tilted his head and looked at me icily. "Are you saying that you don't want me here?"

Good Heavens! This man is impossible. I thought exasperatedly.

To Ashton, however, I shook my head vigorously. "There's so much for you to do in K City. Haven't you more or less settled your matters here?"

"What about that?" Ashton replied curtly. He turned back to the dishes in hand, scrubbing and rinsing them off expertly.

He seemed reluctant to talk. I made up my mind not to put myself out on Ashton's account.

I thus kept to myself as I waited in the corner, ready with a hand towel for him to dry off when he was done. Ashton took it, then turned his attention to the fridge.

Baffled, I broke my silence. "What are you looking for?"

"Eggs," Ashton replied, pushing aside cartons and several food items.

"What do you want eggs for?" I asked incredulously.

Ashton took out a jar of brown sugar. He turned to me serenely and asked, "Don't you feel a slight discomfort in your stomach?"

Stunned, I nodded uncomprehendingly. "A little. What does that have anything to do with eggs?"

Ashton bit his lip, considering. Then he ordered, "Go to the room and get changed. Do you have any spare...?"

He trailed off, but any fool would have understood immediately what Ashton meant. My face immediately turned crimson with embarrassment.

Aghast, I quickly turned. There was a large stain on my pants that I had, up until that moment, been blissfully unaware of.

I'd dismissed the brief twinge of pain in my stomach earlier, never expecting my period to have arrived so suddenly without warning. It had been two months since I last had it and had long since lost track of my cycle.

Observing my flushed face and my hapless state, Ashton sighed. "Go and change. I'll buy some tampons later."

Without further ado, I turned and dashed for the stairs.

Before I could exit the kitchen, however, Armond and Nora's voices drifted in, getting louder as their owners approached the living room. Armond and Nora had evidently concluded their talk.

I broke out in cold sweat and looked anxiously at Ashton for help.

Unfazed, Ashton immediately took off his jacket. Raising his voice, he commented, "It's cold. Put this on."

Nora and Armond appeared in front of us. At the sight of Ashton draping his jacket around my shoulders, Armond winked knowingly, teasing, "Did we come back at a bad time?"

I flashed him a smile, then quickly replied, "I'm going to the bedroom to change into something warmer."

Fortunately, Ashton's long frame meant that his jacket hung rather loosely on me. It provided a rather opportune cover.

I got changed as quickly as I could. In my hurry to escape from Armond and Nora, however, I realized that I'd forgotten to bring my phone with me.

I could only hover, frustrated, in the bathroom.

Suddenly, someone rapped sharply on the bedroom door. When I cracked it open, Nora pushed her way in.

She stuffed the tampon that she had been discreetly hiding into my hands. Nora batted her eyelashes at me slyly, saying, "You've got rather good chemistry with your husband, haven't you?"

I bit my lip, then retreated into the bathroom to change. When I emerged, Nora was sitting on the bed in deep thought. I took a seat beside her. "What were you discussing in the rear house with Armond?"

"We were talking about life. Can you believe it?" Nora scoffed. She sounded disappointed.

Seeing her upset face, I decided not to pursue the matter and merely commented, "I had plans to move in with you, but that's turned out to be rather unfeasible. I promised Armond that I'd be here for all three meals in the day."

Nora nodded. "Got it."

After a moment's pause, she turned to me and said triumphantly, "I think Ashton moved here on purpose to further his chances with you! I really appreciate his persistence and approach to courtship."

Speechless, I made no reply.

We sat at length in companionable silence. At last, when night had decisively descended on us, Nora got ready to leave. I followed her downstairs. Ashton and Armond were engaged in a vigorous discussion that broke off when Nora and I appeared.

Armond stood courteously. "Let me send you home, Nora," he urged.

"It's fine. I drove," Nora replied briskly. Traces of unhappiness were still apparent on her face.

What on earth did they talk about?

Armond, however, paid no heed to Nora's disagreement. He tailed her out of the living room.

I prepared to follow. Ashton, however, clutched me and smoothly stepped in my way. "What are you doing?"

Startled, I retorted, "I'm going to send Nora off, of course!"

“Armond’s already doing that,” Ashton said. He towered above me, barricading my way out.

Suddenly, a thought seemed to spring to Ashton’s mind. “Does your stomach still hurt?”

I shook my head. “I feel a lot better now, all thanks to you,” I replied meekly.

I opened my mouth, about to ask Ashton to take his leave. However, he interrupted, “It’s almost autumn. Dress warmer when you go out.”

I nodded obediently. “OK.”

Ashton maintained his tight grip on my arm. I tried to subtly wriggle out of it, but he held fast. “Where’s the ointment?”

## **Chapter 717**

Ashton was looking rather intently at the scalded area. I mumbled in reply, “It’s much better! I’m fine!”

Ashton furrowed his brow. Without even asking, he took my bag and fumbled through it for the ointment. He then proceeded to apply it.

Ashton looked at me throughout the entire process. His gaze was unfathomable. "Is Armond better at this than I am?" he questioned.

Uncomfortable, I shifted my weight from foot to foot, then stammered, "It's late, you..."

"Are you chasing me away?" Ashton demanded, his face growing murderous.

I took a deep breath, then nodded defiantly. "Yep. Or would you rather stay here?" I asked sarcastically.

"Can't I?" Ashton challenged. His dark eyes bore into my soul.

Dumbfounded, I shrugged. "It's up to you."

Ashton thus remained in the villa. I did my best to ignore him and headed up to my own bedroom.

When Armond was back from sending Nora home, he'd naturally deal with Ashton.

After my shower, I'd completely put aside all thoughts of Ashton. It was almost ten at night, so I blow-dried my hair, read a little, and eventually drifted off to sleep.

The rain came without warning. It was a chilly autumn night, and droplets pattered rhythmically onto the ground. A frosty wind blew into the bedroom, and I woke up with a shiver.

I made my way over to the window to shut it.

Suddenly, a burst of lightning, followed by the deafening clap of thunder, filled the room. Petrified, I bolted towards the window.

In my alarm, however, I ran right into the arms of the chaise lounge beside the bed.

A sharp pain shot through my knee and I crumpled to the floor.

The pain was immense. I exhaled sharply as I cradled it for a long while. The open window was still waiting, and I tried to get up to no avail. I finally sat on the floor, defeated.

The only thing within reach was the small lamp beside my bed. I turned it on, but the dim light only succeeded in casting ghoulish shadows against the wall. The wind continued howling through the open window. A chill ran down my spine.

The curtains were flying, spraying droplets of water across the room. At that moment, in the middle of the storm, the villa seemed to be a most forlorn, desolate place.

Ever since that traumatic incident with my baby, I'd always felt a sense of dread in the presence of rain and thunder. I was utterly vulnerable at the moment, incapacitated as I was with the elements blowing right at me.



I started to panic. My imagination was running wild and I began to tremble from terror. Valiantly, I tried multiple times to stand up with the support of surrounding furniture but only succeeded in knocking into others.

With a loud crash, the lamp fell to the floor and shattered. Its wan light instantly went out, leaving the room smothered in darkness.

I felt a wave of horror wash over me. Shrinking into a corner, I thought I could hear the sound of an infant wailing above the noise of the storm.

I recoiled in fear. Amidst the mounting dread, the sadness I'd suppressed for so long noticed that I let my guard down and saw its chance. Physically and emotionally debilitated, I nearly went mad with despair.

As I looked once more, dazed, at the window, the faint light streaming into the room took on the appearance of blood seeping steadily across the floor.

I screamed with every last bit of strength left within me.

"Scarlett!" someone cried from beyond the window.

"Go away! All of you, go away!" I shrieked in fright.

Stupefied with fear, I'd curled up into a ball, my head stuck resolutely between my knees. I was shaking uncontrollably.

"Scarlett, it's me, Ashton," a voice said gently beside me. It pierced through the tumult of the nightmare. My heart clung wildly to that voice. At that moment, the rest of the world seemed to quieten down and fade away.

I lifted my head slowly. The light in the room had been switched on and the curtains neatly fastened. The window was now tightly shut.

“It’s me. Don’t be afraid,” Ashton said again, softly.

I took a deep breath. Squinting slightly, I peered at the person before me. It was indeed Ashton.

Without thinking, I collapsed into his arms, sobbing. “It was my baby! He’s here! He... he hates me! He hates me because I didn’t protect him!”

Ashton wrapped his arms around me tightly. He inhaled, then said hoarsely, “He doesn’t. He knows that you love him. How can he bear to hurt you, knowing that you loved him so much? Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

He gently patted me on the back, soothing me. My tears flowed freely as I lay in his arms, my heart heavy. “I’m sorry! I really did my best, but that rope was just too thick. I couldn’t get free!”

Ashton nodded. He gave me another squeeze and said tenderly, “He knows, he knows. He doesn’t blame you for it.”

We lay on the ground for a while as I recovered my wits. With Ashton’s help, I tried to stand, but the pain was still unbearable.

With a single swift motion, Ashton picked me up and carried me back to my bed. He then tucked me in and sat beside me.

I realized then that the pool of blood I'd seen spreading across the floor had been accumulated rainwater that had poured in from the window that I hadn't managed to close.

As I gazed absently at the puddle on the floor, Ashton looked at me worriedly. "Are you sleepy?"

Another thought occurred to me. "How did you get in?" I asked curiously, ignoring his question.

Ashton looked rather shamefaced. He then admitted, "The two balconies are connected. If you want, you can cross over easily from one to the next."

I gave him a hard look. "Ashton, you trespassed on private property!" I accused.

His gaze traveled up and down my body, then fixed on my arm. "How did you get hurt?" he demanded.

I then realized that there was a giant bruise on my arm that I'd overlooked in my distress.

## Chapter 718

Ashton had already flung the blanket aside, a rapid motion that lifted up my skirt along with it. Horrified, I snatched it back and cringed beneath it. "Ashton, you brute..."

He turned to me with a smouldering look. Without another word, he got up and strode out of the room.

I gaped at him. Did he just walk out on me? I thought in disbelief.

Ashton returned a few minutes later with a first aid kit in his hand. He once again took up his seat beside my bed and deftly began to apply ointment to my arm.

Ashton's regular, handsome features, framed by the soft glow of the light in the room, made a familiar but irresistible picture. I realized with a start that I'd known him for close to ten years now. He remained, however, just as gorgeous as when I'd first met him.

When he had finished, Ashton suddenly raised his head. Deep in thought, I hadn't time to react and was confronted with his intense stare.

Our eyes met. For a moment, I felt as if I'd plunged deep into his obsidian eyes. My face burned and I could feel my heart racing in my chest.

"Ahem," I coughed. My throat suddenly felt incredibly parched. "I'm very grateful to you for what happened tonight. I'm willing to overlook your trespassing incident and so won't be calling the police. Goodbye!"

"Ha!" Ashton gave a high, dry laugh. He narrowed his eyes at me, then remarked, "Scarlett, I never realized how cunning you are with your words!"

He reached out and grabbed my chin. Ashton was just inches away from me, and we were close enough to feel each other's breaths on our faces. I flinched. "I wasn't quibbling," I argued breathlessly, my heart pounding. "I was speaking the truth. Ashton, I told you that there was nothing between us anymore. Once I've finished this project, we'll go back to J City and get our divorce papers. Things will be officially over between us then."

I refused to look at Ashton and lay back down on the bed, facing away from him.

Ashton remained sitting as still as a statue. After a while, when he hadn't moved, I began to feel uneasy.

I thus turned back to look at him. To my shock, Ashton was staring straight at me. "Is it because of the baby? Or is it because of your parents?" he asked thickly.

The melancholic look in his eyes gripped me. I bit my lip, then said slowly, "Isn't it obvious? You didn't experience first-hand any of the events that I went through. They're all a list of incidents in your mind. We lost a baby, and I still bear grudge against my parents. You don't know how it feels! You think that these things can be overcome easily. You think I should move on and continue being with you as if nothing happened. That's selfish, Ashton!"

Ashton continued gazing at me. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally spoke. "They're not just a list of incidents to me. If you want freedom or a new start, I'm willing to give everything up. Until then, Scarlett, you need someone by your side to take care of you. When you've found that person, I'll agree to the divorce readily and leave. I'll let you live the life you want then."

I was taken aback by his matter-of-fact tone. I hadn't foreseen that Ashton, who was usually so domineering, would suddenly soften once pressed. It discomfited me.

“All right, you’d better keep your word then!” I replied hotly. As those words left my lips, however, there was a vague aching in my heart.

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After the dark, stormy night, the next morning arrived bathed in a soft, sunny radiance. The air was filled with the scent of freshly turned soil.

When I woke up, Ashton was no longer in the bedroom. He’d evidently snuck away sometime in the night, probably after I had fallen asleep.

Without giving it much thought, I headed to the bathroom to wash up, then went to downstairs to prepare breakfast. There was no sign of Armond for a long while, however.

Puzzled, I knocked on the door of his room, then opened it. The bed was still neatly made. It had clearly remained undisturbed the whole night.

I then remembered that aside from the ruckus I’d raised in my bedroom, the rest of the house had remained singularly hushed. Armond must not have come home last night then.

Had he been with Nora? I pondered.

The relationship between Nora and Armond seems to have made rather rapid progress! I was delighted for them but was rather anguished over the amount of food I’d made. It was all about to go to waste now.

I decided to pack it all up and bring it along with me. As I exited, I noticed a black Maybach parked right outside the neighboring unit. It was probably Ashton’s.

I got into the passenger's seat, then looked at Joseph. "Morning, Mr. Campbell. Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

Joseph looked at me in bewilderment. Then he quickly stammered, "Morning, Mrs. Fuller!"

I grinned at him. Ashton was nowhere to be seen. Handing the breakfast over to Joseph, I said, "You haven't had breakfast yet, have you? Eat this while it's hot."

Joseph was about to reply when Ashton slid into the backseat. Tersely, he commanded, "Let's go to Gold Scale Estate first."

"All right!" Joseph said, transferring the breakfast in hand to Ashton. "Mr. Fuller, you haven't eaten breakfast yet, have you? Mrs. Fuller made this for you. Eat it while it's hot!"

I shot a glance towards Joseph. My words sounded strange in his mouth when spoken in his usual formal manner.

Ashton then looked up and noticed me sitting in the passenger seat. He acknowledged me with a nod, then began eating.

I had originally intended to hitch a ride. From the curt exchange between Ashton and Joseph, however, it didn't sound as if the car would be heading in the direction of Lavelian village. I announced hastily, "You won't be passing by Lavelian Village, will you? I'll be off then. See you some other time!"

## Chapter 719

I had opened the door and was ready to alight when Ashton cleared his throat rather aggressively.

Joseph immediately jumped in. "Mrs. Fuller, we'll definitely be going to Lavelian Village. We're only planning to make a short detour to Gold Scale Estate. Why don't you come along with us? There aren't many cars headed in that direction, and with the one-hour-long drive, it'll be inconvenient for you to get a taxi."

I looked at him uncertainly. "Really?"

Joseph nodded, then said earnestly, "I wouldn't lie to you, Mrs. Fuller. The Lavelian project just started, so we definitely plan on heading over there to take a look. Isn't that right, Mr. Fuller?"

Ashton made a brief grunt of acknowledgment. I turned to look at him to size up the situation, but he seemed thoroughly focused on tucking in the breakfast delicately. I guessed that Ashton hadn't heard a word we'd said.

Seeing Ashton's unconcerned demeanor, I decided not to put myself out unnecessarily. I slumped back into the seat and beamed at Joseph. "Thanks for the ride, then!"

Joseph smiled politely, then drove off.

The Gold Scale Estate was rather close by, and we arrived within ten minutes. We were greeted by the sight of Rachel in a white linen dress, her permed hair rippling over her shoulders. On one hand, she toted the most fashionable luxury handbag that was available this season. She looked every bit a wealthy heiress.



The car rolled to a stop just beside Rachel. She leaned over to open the door of the passenger seat. After a couple of tugs, however, the door remained stuck fast. I looked over at Joseph with concern. "Mr. Campbell, I think you didn't unlock the door," I reminded him.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Fuller. It must have slipped my mind." Joseph returned. He sprang into action, suddenly getting out of the car. Before I could react, Ashton had replaced Joseph in the driver's seat and was already calmly fastening his seatbelt.

Joseph, meanwhile, had settled into the passenger's seat.

Rachel's rosy smile faltered, her face darkening. She said rather haughtily, "Is Ms. Stovall here too? Didn't Mr. Murphy arrange a car for her?"

"The rain was rather heavy last night. I'm not a very skilled driver, and the roads leading to Lavelian Village aren't smooth. That's why I didn't drive today," I informed Rachel, darting a look at Ashton.

Joseph fidgeted in the backseat in trepidation. He looked visibly distressed at being chauffeured by his employer.

Ignoring him, Rachel exclaimed sappily, "Mr. Fuller, have you had breakfast yet? I made pancakes this morning. Why don't you let Mr. Campbell drive while you try them?"

"I've already eaten," Ashton replied dryly.

"Scarlett also made breakfast this morning! Mr. Fuller just finished it," Joseph added helpfully.

The corners of my mouth twitched. I turned to look at Rachel and said goodhumoredly, "Ms. Zimmer, I think Mr. Campbell hasn't eaten breakfast yet."

Rachel reluctantly shoved the lunchbox in her hand to Joseph. "Try it, Mr. Campbell," she muttered.

Joseph would have refused if the lunchbox hadn't already been unceremoniously dumped into his lap.

He gave a faint smile and began digging in.

The car was silent save for the sound of Joseph chewing. Determinedly, Rachel turned once more to Ashton. "Mr. Fuller, the Magpie Festival's today. Do you have any plans for tonight?"

Is this woman planning on asking Ashton out? I thought in amusement.

I glanced at Ashton. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the road like a model driver. "I'm busy with work tonight," he answered shortly.

Does he mean that he has no time to waste? I wondered.

Rachel tittered daintily. Undeterred, she continued, "You should be done with work rather quickly tonight. Why don't we get dinner together afterward?"

Glancing sideways, I noticed Ashton observing me from the corner of his eyes. Then he inquired with sudden interest, "What are you doing tonight?"

I stoned for a moment before blurting out, "I'll just be at home."

Ashton snorted. He then addressed Rachel, saying, "I'll be going home for dinner."

It was too frank a rejection. Rachel's eyes widened but she remained silent. She looked tremendously displeased.

The car sped towards Lavelian Village. Murphy Corporation had erected a temporary office here for the ease of project supervision.

I proceeded to the office to put my things down. After a short catch-up with my colleagues, I headed to the Fuller Corporation's site to check things out.

Lavelian Village occupied a sizeable area. Besides the areas required for tourist boarding and eating facilities, the rest of the land was covered in fields of flowers and fruit trees.

It was the time of the year when the fruits had all mostly ripened. The journey to Fuller Corporation's AI base was a rather long one. It was, on the other hand, too bumpy to be driven on. I grabbed a nearby bicycle and happily cycled over.

Fruit trees and flowers lined the road. With the cool autumn breeze blowing in my face as I pedaled, I felt as if I was in some kind of paradise.

When I reached the AI base, however, I groaned inwardly to see Rachel. Donning a hat and a long dress, she looked entirely out of place on a worksite. It was as if she had been sightseeing around the area and accidentally stumbled upon the base instead.

Rachel was clutching a set of documents and looked annoyed to see me. She immediately turned away from the direction from which I was approaching.

I refused to take offense and marched in straight away to look for the site supervisor, Leedon.

“Ms. Stovall, we begin work today at the base. We’ve already informed Mr. Murphy. Will you be here for the next few days?” Leedon asked. He handed me a deck of documents containing the necessary information and data for their project.

I flipped through it, then nodded. “Yes, this project has always been under my charge. When you start work, be sure to observe safety. The holidays are approaching, and the number of tourists in this area will definitely increase. You must keep an eye out for both their safety and your crew’s!”

## **Chapter 720**

We were doing construction work, after all. Safety was paramount for the project to proceed unhindered.

Leedon nodded in understanding. Then he asked, “Do you need to take a look at Emerald Base as well?”

I shook my head. “Not for now. Fuller Corporation will hand it over when it’s ready.”

The Emerald Base was more or less complete. All Fuller Corporation needed was to do was to input their AI technology into the system.

The afternoon passed in a flurry at the base. Occupied with work, I neglected Nora's call until lunchtime.

I quickly dialed her number back. She answered within a few rings.

"Scarlett, are you busy with work? Why didn't you pick up my call?" Nora's voice rang concernedly over the phone.

"The Fuller Corporation's project starts today. I'm at Lavelian Village, busy settling several things. What's up?" I asked, watching Leedon walk over with two lunch boxes. He wordlessly handed me one of the boxes when he saw that I was occupied.

I nodded my thanks to him. In the meantime, Nora continued, "It's nothing. Tabitha called to ask if we were available anytime these few days, hoping to organize a reunion of sorts. Didn't we say that we would set up a business together or something? I think everyone's been rather free lately, so we're looking for something to do."

"Sure. Why don't you ask her to pick a date and place? You can let me know afterward. I'll head over there straight," I said, stuffing food into my mouth by the spoonful. In my haste, I choked, spluttering.

Leedon handed me a glass of water. I mouthed a "thank you" to him as I drank it gratefully.

On the other end of the line, Nora said, "That works too. I'll let them decide then."

Just then, I recalled the events of last night and probed, “Did you spend last night with Armond?”

“Um...” Nora stammered, then said meekly, “Um, I’m busy with something else right now, so I’ll be hanging up! I’ll text you once we’ve agreed on a date.”

Nora then immediately ended the call. She was clearly set on avoiding the question altogether.

I looked down at my phone chuckled to myself. I then turned to Leedon and properly thanked him once more. “Thank you!”

Leedon waved away my thanks. “All of Lavelian Village’s projects used to be managed by men. I don’t recall ever having seen a female manager here before. Prepare yourself, Ms. Stovall. You have a long ride ahead of you.”

I took another few bites of rice and grinned at him. “No problem. What’s life without a purpose to strive for?”

Leedon agreed, then exhaled. “You look so young! You’re probably as old as my daughter.”

I laughed. “I’m already over thirty years old! You aren’t too old yourself either, from the looks of it.”

Leedon hesitated. He looked me up and down, then commented ruefully, “Here I was thinking that you were still in your twenties! You have a youthful air about you.”

We broke out into guffaws. At that moment, Ashton appeared, accompanied by Joseph and Rachel.

Leedon reached forward and covered his half-eaten lunchbox. He then stepped forward and extended his hand in greeting, "You're here, Mr. Fuller!"

I, too, got to my feet and called out likewise, "Mr. Fuller."

Ashton had his jacket draped over an arm, perhaps compelled to remove it by the heat. He was wearing a wine-red shirt and looked more peaceable than he usually did.

His attention seemed to be on the lunch box in my hand. Ashton wrinkled his brow, then ordered, "We'll head out for lunch in a while. It'll be good for us to report on the respective developments in our work then. We're expecting some people in the afternoon, so everyone can take the chance to get to know each other."

Leedon agreed vigorously.

I reserved my comments. I'd eaten my fill, and was resolved to remain professional.

As I emptied the leftovers into the bin, Ashton drew near. I assumed that he had further matters to discuss with Leedon.

I turned and entered the base. Its area spanned approximately five thousand and three hundred square feet, and the laying of its foundation required human labor. We planned to continue the rest of its construction using solely AI technology.

No matter what other opinions I held of Rachel, I had to confess that her intellect was truly astounding.

An immense frame had already been erected inside the base and was already inlaid with reinforced concrete. It was break time, and most of the machines had temporarily wound down to rest.

I wasn't familiar with construction work. Over the course of handling a few other projects, however, I'd gained a superficial understanding of how things worked.

"I heard you managed projects such as these at Fuller Corporation previously. Now that a few years have passed, how does it feel to be back in the shoes of the Director once again?" A voice rang out from behind me. I turned my head only to see Rachel sauntering over.

Her flowing dress made an exceptionally bizarre contrast against the dusty landscape.

I poked at a steel bar beneath my feet, and it rolled off, harmless, to the side. I then turned to her with mock applause, saying, "Aren't you afraid of losing your balance? Your high heels must have cost a fortune!"

Scornfully, Rachel replied, "A fortune? It just cost me a few thousand. As for you..."

She looked at me disdainfully, her gaze sweeping over me from head to toe. "I guess Ashton doesn't really care about you much. You're the dowdiest president's wife that I've ever met. I suppose the total cost of everything that's on you, including your phone, isn't worth more than five thousand?"

I answered cheerfully, "Yes. They're just things."

Rachel sniffed contemptuously. "There's no need for you to carry on like this. Let me give you a piece of advice. Divorce Ashton, and I'll give you a hefty sum of money. You



can't compete with me anyway! By dragging things on, you're just making yourself look more pitiful."