

Chapter 731

Leedon nodded and reminded me, "The path is muddy. Ride carefully. You wouldn't want to get all dirty again."

"Noted."

The path leading from the base was indeed muddy, as Leedon had forewarned. Luckily, the weather was good in the morning and dried out the road a little, so I did not fall. I only got some mud stains on me.

The lunch was at the hotel at the visitor centre. I returned the bicycle and cleaned off the mud stain on my shoes and pants before heading to the hotel.

Just then, Nora called. "My dear, what are your plans for tonight?"

"I had a long day. I want to get a good night's sleep later," I replied.

"Tsk. What a waste of time!"

"What do you have in mind then?" I questioned her instead.

"Aren't you working on a project at Lavelian Village? We decided to pop over and spend Valentine's Day with you. There is a big field just behind Lavelian Village. We can camp there tonight, watch the sunrise in the morning, then spend the whole of tomorrow there. We already bought stuff for a barbeque tomorrow." She sounded pleased with her plan.

"We?" I was curious.

“Armond, Linda, Tabitha, Laurel, Tessa, and you. We know you are busy at work, that’s why we chose Lavelian Village for our outing. We can have a get-together without affecting your work schedule. Oh, by the way, Tabitha’s fiancé is joining us too. This going to be fun!” she chirped.

After a pause, she whispered, “Do you want to invite Ashton to join us?”

“It is not necessary,” I declined. “What time will you be here?”

“Soon. In about an hour. Shall we have lunch together?”

I would actually prefer to meet them for lunch. However, since Ashton had arranged for a lunch meeting with Mr. Oberick, I could not commit. “We shall see. You go ahead with your plans. I will join you once I am done on my side.”

“Okay!”

“Oh, I dirtied my clothes, so please bring an extra set of clothing for me,” I requested.

“No problem.”

After ending the call with Nora, I went into the hotel and was ushered to the private dining room Ashton reserved.

Almost everyone has arrived, and Channing was delighted to have such a lively group join him for lunch. He was chatting with Ashton and Rachel.

Their conversation soon turned to children. “Come to think of it, you were married for many years. Do you have kids?” Channing asked.

Rachel blushed, but Ashton was tongue-tied, and he turned to look at me.

I casually turned away to avoid his gaze. I could hear him diverting the subject. “Mr. Oberick, you should take some tomato basil soup later. It is appetizing.”

Channing may be old, but he is not senile and can see through Ashton’s little trick.

However, that was a subject close to the old man’s heart, so he refused to let go of it. “My boy, you are not young anymore. You have to start planning for your future. Both of you are over thirty and you had been married for so many years. It’s about time you consider having kids.”

Rachel tried to save Ashton from the grilling, so she smiled and chipped in, “Mr. Oberick, don’t be upset with Ashton. I was the one to blame. We definitely plan to have kids, just not now. We are in no hurry and can wait for a couple more years.”

“No hurry? How old are you now?” He then turned to others seated at the table and asked, “What do you think? Don’t you think it is about time?”

He locked in on Leedon and questioned him. “Leedon, tell me, when you were their age, how old was your child?”

“Mr. Oberick, you can’t compare me to them. I am not educated and left school early, so I got married early too. My focus was on our kids. Mr. and Mrs. Fuller are young and educated. I am sure they have their reasons for delaying having kids. Every generation has their different priorities, don’t you agree?” Leedon was a little awkward being dragged into this conversation.

Channing could not find fault with his reasoning. “Young people like you lack the wisdom we have. There is always an appropriate time for everything. At each stage of our life, we should do the things that are important at that stage. You will understand what I mean when you are older and wiser,” he sighed.

He seemed to be getting melancholic as he spoke, so Ashton told him, “Mr. Oberick, I have a daughter. She is five this year.”

The old man was confused. “You have a child? But your confessions are inconsistent with one another.”

Rachel was embarrassed and tried to explain, “Mr. Oberick, that child is not...”

“Let’s eat! It has been a tiring morning. Let’s get started so everyone can go back and get some rest after lunch.” Joseph was quick to propose. He obviously was trying to stop Rachel from yakking.

Rachel was slightly taken aback and displeased with Joseph’s interruption. Ashton jumped in to change the topic to prevent Channing from probing on.

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Joseph’s quick thinking saved the day. The lunch session went by smoothly without more awkward episodes. Everyone ate their fill and dispersed to continue with their respective chores.

Nora arrived as we were about to send Channing home.

“Grandpa!” We could hear her shouting as she ran in from a distance away.

Channing looked up and was elated to see his granddaughter. “What is my little girl doing here?”

“I am here to meet my friends.” Nora held on to Channing’s arms and teased, “Are you here to meet your old friends?”

Channing looked at Ashton and smiled, “My old friend is no longer around. This is the grandson of the old Mr. Fuller. Let me introduce them to you. This is Ashton, and next to him is his wife, Rachel.”

Nora was baffled. She looked at me and mouthed, “Wife?”

I just smiled and did not elaborate.

She scowled at Ashton and spoke sarcastically. “Hi Ashton, when did you get a new wife?”

“You little imp! Mind your manners and stop spouting nonsense.” Channing knocked her on her head and chided.

Nora flinched but did not pursue the matter as she wasn't sure what transpired. She chatted with Mr. Oberick for a while then arranged for a driver to send him home.

After Mr. Oberick left, she turned back to Ashton and Rachel. “I did not know it is okay for a married boss to have an affair with his subordinate, let alone doing it openly right in the face of the wife! Well done, you two!”

She then turned to chastise me. “Knowing my grandpa is not aware of the situation, why did you not explain to him?”

“It doesn't matter. Let it go.” I gave her a reassuring smile as I reminded her of the group of friends waiting in the car. “Have all of you eaten?”

She shook her head. “We just arrived and are about to have our late lunch here.”

I nodded and urged them to go for their meal. In the meantime, I headed back to finish off my work. We were all happily looking forward to camping.

It was almost eight at night when we finally set off to the field where we planned to camp. We were a little worried as it was getting late and it would be difficult to set up the tents in darkness. Luckily, the field was not far away.

When we reached the field, someone had already set up a tentage. Nora glanced at me and queried, “Did you invite any guests?”

“Nope. Why did you ask?” I was puzzled.

She pointed at the grey tent. There was a light inside the tent and, in the flickering light, we could see a lanky figure standing outside.

Nora observed I did not figure out who that was, so she forewarned, "That's Ashton!"

I finally had a better look when we drove nearby. Indeed, it was Ashton. It looked like there was someone else in the tent. Nora let out a curse, "Disgusting! Why can't they be more discreet?"

She frowned at me and accused, "Don't you have anything to say? Why are you so emotionless?"

"What should I be saying?" I shook my head and declined to engage her further in her quibble.

I was the one who pushed Ashton away. If he found a better half, I should give him my blessings. I have no right to be jealous nor angry.

Nora was probably exasperated and gave up on me. She jumped off the car and went up to Ashton. "What a coincidence, Mr. Fuller."

Ashton was poised and composed as usual. "I had heard about this beautiful place. Took the opportunity to visit since we are around the area," he nonchalantly replied.

"Ohhhh..., looks like we are meant to meet again," Nora sneered.

Rachel came out from the tent. We could see she was startled and had not expected to see us. She hid her surprise and greeted us with a smile.

The rest got off the car. Tabitha and her fiancé were attracted by the beauty of the place. They immediately went for a nice, romantic tour around the field.

The stars were shining brightly and the field glowed warmly under the moonlight. Laurel and Tessa were also captivated by the beautiful sight. The gentle cool breeze welcomed us to a perfect star-gazing night.

Tessa's heart skipped a beat when she saw Ashton there, but when she noticed Rachel was next to him, her face fell.

After the earlier incident, Tessa and I kept our distance. We would merely greet each other politely when we meet.

Armond was a quiet and reserved guy, quite the opposite of mischievous Nora. He unloaded the tents from the car and started working on them.

Laurel and Tessa also started putting up their tent. No one knew if they deliberately chose the site next to Ashton's tent.

Nora was loafing about. She ran to me to gossip. "Do you think Tessa still has an eye for Ashton? And that Ashton, is he really going to share a tent with Rachel tonight?"

I shrugged, ignored her, and continued fixing my tent. I could hear her mumbling, "What the hell is going on!."

I turned around and teased her, "So, are you going to slip into Armond's tent tonight?"

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To my surprise, she blushed. "Don't phrase it that way. I was only going to spend the night chatting with him."

She felt a little embarrassed and tried to explain further. "I actually wanted to keep you company tonight. Alas, I am caught between love and friendship! What a difficult decision that is!" she exclaimed.

"I am used to sleeping alone, so you don't have to bother about me," I stated as I crawled into the tent and started laying out my sleeping bag.

"Really? You can't get mad at me if you get spooked in the middle of the night, and I don't come running back to you, okay?" she muttered shyly.

"Don't worry, my dear Nora. I won't"

She grinned sheepishly, every inch a besotted young girl. "Young lady, get a hold on that dirty little mind of yours and stop drooling. Have some dignity." I cupped my forehead and jested at her.

She gave me a sly smile and whispered, "I can't help it. That man is too seductive. I can't control myself anymore!"

I was left speechless.

Rachel came by with some snacks and invited, "We brought some snacks. Would you like to join us?"

Nora folded her arms defensively and rebuffed her. "No thanks. We brought snacks as well. We don't need yours."

Oh, my! How childish can she get?

Ashton walked over and took a glance around. When he saw all the tents were up, he proposed, "Let's have supper together. If we are lucky, we may get to see shooting stars tonight."

"Oh yes! We have a good view of the starry sky here," Laurel concurred. "We can stargaze while we eat. We brought our grills, so let's enjoy a barbeque under the stars! That would be so wonderful!"

"Set! Let's get moving." Nora was all for it.

In the end, the barbeque planned for the next day was brought forward and everyone started chipping in with the preparation. The guys began to set up the grills while the ladies started preparing the food.

Nora brought over a bag of vegetables and potatoes. We started cutting and skewering them.

Suddenly, Nora leaned closed and asked, "Scarlett, what do you think is the difference between a vixen and a siren?" She had a shifty look in her eyes.

I shook my head, clueless. "I am not sure. Seems to be the same to me."

She sniggered and explained, “Not the same. They are all bitches in disguise, but a vixen is seductive, feisty, and out to get you.”

“What would a siren be then?”

She deliberated for a moment, then declared, “A siren is alluring. Before you can suspect anything, you have already fallen into her trap.”

“So, is there a difference between the two? Sound like they are both flirts, right?” Her attempt to explain confused me further.

She paused to reorganize her thoughts and then pointed in Rachel’s direction. “Try analyzing based on my earlier definition. What do you think Rachel is, a vixen or a siren?”

I was lost. All I saw was Rachel squatting next to Ashton, and they were helping to start the fire. Nothing seemed to be out of place.

“If I really have to match her to one, then vixen?” I hesitantly made a wild guess.

“Tsk. Now look over to Tessa and observe. What is she?”

Tessa was sorting out the ingredients, a short distance from Ashton. Her sight was fixed on Ashton and Rachel.

Watching Tessa made me realized she seemed to have been staying away from me the whole evening.

Usually, she would be hovering around me, directing sarcastic remarks at me. This evening, she was hanging around Ashton and Rachel. If Tessa's looks could kill, Rachel would have been dead many times over by now.

I reckoned she has redirected her anger to Rachel.

"Honestly, I can't differentiate. Based on your explanation, a siren and a vixen are the same." I gave up trying to figure out her little puzzle.

Nora wagged her finger and shook her head at the same time to emphasize her point. "You have to be more observant and discerning. Look at Rachel. She has not left Ashton's side since we arrived. No matter what Ashton does, she will be near him and pretending to help those around them. Next, watch her interaction with Tabitha and Laurel. They barely know one another, but Rachel is already acting pally with them, even feeding them fruit."

"Now look, she is walking over to Tabitha's fiancé with a plate of fruit," Nora proudly pointed out.

"Are you reading too much into it? Everyone's busy, so she brought them the fruit out of goodwill. Looks normal to me." I honestly could not figure out what Rachel had done wrong.

"Are you dumb? There is nothing wrong with offering fruit. The problem lies with the timing! Why did she choose to bring the fruit to Tabitha's fiancé at this exact moment? She could have brought it to them earlier," she scoffed.

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I was dumbstruck. “Are there such unspoken rules?”

She pouted before going on, “Tabitha and her fiancé were chatting and having a sweet couple time moments earlier. Tell me, what is her fiancé doing now?”

I turned to look. “He is cleaning the fishes.” I could not figure out what she was getting at.

She squinted her eyes and asked, “Would that be dirty and smelly?”

I nodded, and she gave me a despised look before elaborating, “She did not bring the fruit when he and Tabitha were free. She chose to go over at this particular moment when Tabitha had gone away to wash the vegetables and when his hands are dirty and smelly. Don’t you think it is intentional?”

“It could be just a coincidence.” My eyes could not help following Rachel’s move, waiting to see what unfolds next.

Rachel walked over with a plate of cut fruit and smilingly placed it in front of Tabitha’s fiancé. “You have worked hard. Why don’t you take some fruit first?”

No one can be mean to a pretty lady smiling sweetly at you. He may not be interested in her, but it would have been rude for him to reject her offer outright. Thus, he politely declined by saying, “Thank you, but I am afraid it is not a convenient time for me to eat now.”

“No problem. Here you go.” Rachel casually picked up a piece of fruit with the toothpick and placed it next to his mouth. He had no choice but to open his mouth and ate the fruit. He was blushing when he mumbled a thank you with his mouth full.

Rachel smiled sweetly and cooed, “Loosen up. Tabitha and I are friends, so we are friends as well. This is just a small gesture, so you don’t have to thank me.”

She turned around and fed Tabitha a piece of fruit as well, then head back to Ashton.

Nora nudged me with her elbow and said, “Did you see that? She teased the man right in front of his girlfriend, and she made it look so innocent. That is a siren. Whatever she does, no one will associate it with bad intentions. Now, watch Tabitha’s fiancé.”

I followed her gaze. He was blushing and started stealing glances at Rachel.

I pursed my lips and frowned, “Why did she do that?”

“For fun. She is trying to project an image of being kind and innocent. The people around her would feel she deserves to be pampered and will subconsciously indulge her. Look at how she is always sticking to Ashton. People who don’t know any better would think they are a couple and sing praises about them.”

Nora gave a wry look and continued her analysis. “When you were at the hotel earlier today, I am sure grandpa thought Ashton and she are husband and wife. She is an expert in using small gestures to mislead people. The undiscerning would easily fall for her tricks.”

I had to agree with Nora’s analysis. Indeed, I had thought Ashton was to be blamed for Mr. Oberick mistaking Rachel as his wife. In actual fact, Rachel was the one who

projected that image by fussing over the old man as if she was Ashton's better half. Since Ashton kept mum about it, everyone just assumed she is Mrs. Fuller.

"So she is the siren?" Suddenly, I saw Nora's point.

Nora snapped her fingers and praised, "Bingo, smart lass. It is very easy to identify a siren. All you need to do is watch more soap operas and you'll be an expert in no time."

I was not interested in soap operas so I was clueless. I paused, then questioned, "What about the vixen?"

She raised an eyebrow and commented, "Look at Tessa. Since we got acquainted with her, what left the deepest impression on you about her?"

"The tales she told Ashton!" I blurted out without hesitation. I couldn't forget how she cooked up a totally alien version of what happened to us in Venria!

If we did not overhear their conversation, Ashton would have likely been misled by her.

Nora signaled in Ashton's direction and exhorted, "Look, she is throwing herself at your man. Aren't you going to check it out?"

I shook my head and said, "I had made my stand clear with Ashton. What goes on between the two of them has nothing to do with me. How can I, as the one who pushed him away, stop him from seeing other women. If I do that, I am no better than a siren or a vixen."

Nora rolled her eyes at me and condemned, "Now I realize Rachel is the siren, Tessa is the vixen and you are the moron. Make that a hopeless moron."

I knew she was anxious for me, so I kept my peace. Noticing she was keeping her eyes on Rachel, I reminded her, “Focus on cutting the vegetable, lest you cut your fingers.”

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She squinted and then frowned, “Wait! The bracelet on Rachel’s wrist looks familiar. I must have seen it somewhere before.”

I turned to look. The bracelet on her slim wrist was the gift from Mr. Oberick.

Before I could say anything, Nora dropped her chores on hand and started walking towards Rachel. Unexpectedly, she turned back and picked up the knife. “I can overlook anything else, but how could she shamelessly con him of my grandma’s bracelet?” she muttered under her breath.

I was shocked when I saw her with the knife. I quickly went up and pulled her aside. “Calm down! Your grandpa gifted this to Ashton’s wife. Since Ashton gave it to her, you should not fault her for it,” I explained.

She pushed me aside and fumed, “My grandpa may be senile, but I am not. First of all, Ashton will never be her man. It is okay for that bracelet to go to Ashton’s wife but not her. That would be an insult to my grandma. Secondly, my grandpa meant that as a gift for Ashton’s wife, meaning you. She is a fake and that means she misled my grandpa. I cannot forgive her for that.”

She angrily stormed up to Ashton and Rachel and taunted her. “Ms. Zimmer, that bracelet looks good, right?”

Rachel was alarmed when she saw the knife in Nora's hand. She stumbled backward and nearly dropped the plate of fruit in her hand.

"Ms. Oberick, what are you doing?" Her face regained some color as she stood close to Ashton, feeling more secured.

"Give it back to me!" she demanded, barely hiding her anger.

"What do you want?" Rachel was puzzled. She had no idea what Nora was referring to.

"The bracelet!" Nora hollered. "Do you think any Tom, Dick and Harry can take my grandma's bracelet? How shameless can you be? The old man was confused and you took the opportunity to con him of that bracelet? Ms. Zimmer, show some grace."

The commotion attracted the rest, and Tabitha came running over. "What's wrong?" she probed.

"Why are you holding a knife? That is dangerous. Chill and talk calmly!" Laurel tried to remove the knife from Nora, but she managed to jerk away.

Nora glared around and snapped, "Go back to what you were doing. This is between her and me. Stay out of it."

No one knew what was happening. They could only look on, worried.

Rachel regained her composure. She knew that with so many people around, Nora would not be able to hurt her.

“Ms. Nora Oberick, is there a reason for you to kick up such a big fuss? Indeed, this bracelet is a gift from your grandpa. Mr. Fuller and Ms. Stovall were both present and they witnessed your grandpa gave it to me. How did you get the idea I conned him? Does the Oberick family always give something then turn around, and demand it back? What would happen to the reputation of A City’s famous Oberick family if words got out about what happened today?” Rachel challenged, emboldened by the crowd that gathered.

“How disgusting! My grandpa gave this to Mrs. Fuller. Who are you to take my grandma’s bracelet?” Nora had always been straightforward and will shoot off her mouth when she is mad.

“It’s you, Scarlett Stovall, isn’t it?” Rachel turned her attention on me and jeered, “You are really beyond my comprehension. On one hand, you chased him away. On the other hand, you are still out to milk him. Are you jealous I got the bracelet and wanted it for yourself, so you instigate someone else to get it for you? Scarlett Stovall, if you want it, come get it yourself, and quit hiding cowardly behind others. One word from Ashton, and I will hand it to you. You don’t have to resort to such underhanded means.”

That was ludicrous. When I saw Rachel trying to remove her bracelet, I stopped her. I darted a quick look at Ashton. He stood there like a bystander, so I turned back to Rachel to clarify. “You are mistaken. I did not instigate Nora to get the bracelet from you. First and foremost, it is because Ashton and I are not related anymore, so what he does with the bracelet is none of my business. Secondly, the reason Nora objects to you having the bracelet is that you are a disgrace.”

“You...” She was aghast at what I said. “Mr. Fuller, I’ll give this bracelet back to you. I will never accept this ever again,” She woefully looked at Ashton and quavered, as she removed the bracelet and shove it into Ashton’s hand.

Ashton had not uttered a word. He just stared at me coldly. When Rachel turned to walk away, he grabbed her arm, surprising her.

His action stunned Nora too. She actually did not care who had the bracelet. She was just annoyed with Rachel's attitude, which was why she frowned when Ashton held Rachel back.