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When I shifted my gaze towards him, his handsome features exuded an elegant and alluring aura. He had also changed into a pair of grey sweats. It seemed like he had just emerged from a shower, as his ebony hair was in damp tendrils. Originally, Ashton had much shorter hair. He must have neglected it due to his increasing workload. His hair was now long enough to fall across his forehead. Overall, it gave him a very youthful appearance.

He did not notice my presence when I entered the study. He must have been too immersed in his work. Seizing the chance, I tiptoed over to his figure.

While he was distracted, I sneaked my way behind him and pointed my fingertip to the back of his head.

“Don’t move! This is a robbery!” I uttered in a low and raspy tone.

Gently, he set down the documents along with the glasses perched on his nose bridge. “What do you plan to steal?” he asked.

“I’ll take all your money!” I answered as I ruffled his hair with my fingers in a playful manner.

In a swift move, he turned around and pulled me onto his lap. “Mrs. Fuller, you can take anything you want,” he rumbled, “But you should repay my generosity before you leave.”

“Your guest is downstairs,” I said with a mischievous grin as I wrapped my hands around his neck. “Won’t you be embarrassed if there’s a commotion?”

“You don’t need to worry. He has left.” He reached out a hand to pinch me. His dark eyes were fixated intently on my face.

As soon as he uttered those words, the loud noise of a car engine echoed downstairs.

“Mr. Fuller, I have a serious question. Is Mr. Campbell’s impeccable timing a talent or skill that he trained?” I asked.

“Both!” his lips curled into a smile.

“Why do you keep calling me Mr. Fuller? Scarlett, shouldn’t you address me with more affection?” He caught my chin in his grip and bit my lip cheekily.

“We both have our own names,” I replied with a saddened pout. “What do you want me to call you? Baby? Sweetheart? Darling? Or Hubby?”

These loving titles seemed out of place for such a stoic person like Ashton.

Although we have been married for many years, I could not recall the last time I referred to him in such an intimate manner.

Ashton remained silent; his dark gaze was unreadable and impossible to decipher. “Hubby?” I asked tentatively.

The usually solemn Ashton seemed to be stunned by my words.

His flustered face nearly made me laugh aloud. How adorable! “Hubby!” I crooned gently and leaned on his chest.

According to Nora, there was a key technique when it came to flirting or being coy. A woman should sport a flirtatious gaze and a gentle voice; this would give the recipient an electrifying experience.

I felt a hint of glee when his muscles stiffened under my touch. It seems like Nora's advice worked!

After my brief moment of triumph, mortification swept over me. Something feels off...

A crimson red blush painted my cheeks as I stared at Ashton. "You..." I didn't expect to receive such a huge reaction!

Besides, we just did it last night...

"You are the worst!" The words slipped out through clenched teeth.

"I can't hold back when you call me hubby!" Ashton rasped as his grip around my waist tightened.

"Say it again!" he demanded. He lowered his head until his nose bumped against mine. I could feel the warmth of his breath fanning my cheek.

My face warmed upon his request. Of course, I wouldn't call him hubby again!

Quickly, I slid off his lap in an attempt to flee. "Go ahead with your work. I'm a little hungry; I'll find something to eat."

Before I could take another step, Ashton enveloped me in a back hug. My back was pressed against his broad chest as his chin rested on my shoulder. "How can you walk away after teasing me?"

"How is it my fault that you have no self-control?" I raised my hand to halt his advances. My face flushed in a mixture of frustration and embarrassment.

Ashton lifted me in his arms with ease and carried me to the table. "You can't leave things unfinished," he rumbled in a deep voice.

After so many years, Ashton knew my body like the back of his hand. A simple touch from his fingers was enough to strip my resistance away. It felt as if a cat had sunken its claws into my heart.

"Ashton, you were too rough last night! I can't do it now!" I cried and reached out my hand against his chest to stop his advances.

He seemed to take my rejection as an invitation instead. Ashton didn't stop his movements as my pleas were in vain. On the other hand, he seemed to redouble his efforts.

"Of course, I'll get excited when I see you." He clamped a hand over my mouth. "How can you be so cruel to neglect me?"

I was utterly speechless.

Yet, the arrow had been released from its bow. It was impossible to bring it back.

In the autumn days of September, the nights had begun to turn longer as the days shortened. Although it was seven in the morning, the sky remained dim. There was only a sliver of light that illuminated the clouds.

The sharp ringtone of my phone echoed noisily throughout the room. Before I could reach out to grab my phone, Ashton pinned me in place. It took several tries before I could grasp it in my hand.

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“Hello!” I answered the phone as I cleared my throat.

“Scarlett, Nora is awake. She wants to meet you,” Armond said over the phone. His voice sounded deep and exhausted.

“Alright, I will hurry over right now!” I exclaimed with a jolt of shock as all traces of my drowsiness vanished into thin air.

After I ended the call, Ashton’s hand was still draped across my waist. As the blankets slid off my naked body, I felt a hint of shyness due to the exposure.

Quickly, I set my phone aside. “Nora is awake! I have to go visit her,” I told him urgently.

Ashton nodded sleepily. Although he had just woken up, his handsome features gave him a very alluring look.

Just as I was about to rise to my feet, Ashton captured me in his embrace. “Stay a little longer...” he rasped lowly.

“Nora is awake! There must be a reason for Armond’s early call! I must visit her,” I said and pushed his hand away.

“Okay,” he mumbled in response and did not comment any further.

I felt a tinge of childish frustration when he closed his eyes. Without hesitating, I bent down and blew a puff of air into his ear.

Immediately, his body stiffened in surprise. “Are you teasing me?” Ashton’s gaze darkened as he gazed at me.

“I was just trying to wake you up,” I replied innocently.

Without warning, Ashton flipped my body and caged me underneath him.

The sudden movement left me stricken with shock as I stared at him with widened eyes. “Ashton, you...”

“You don’t have to rush. Instead of waiting for a woman’s help, Armond should be able to handle it himself. Let’s settle the more urgent matters first!” Ashton murmured before he kissed me affectionately.

It took an hour before we stopped.

Immediately, I scurried to the shower and changed my clothes in fear that he would continue.

When I emerged from the bathroom, the lower half of Ashton’s body was clad in a towel as he scribbled in his notebook. Hearing my footsteps, he handed over a box clutched in his hand. “Eat two of these!”

“Are these vitamins?” I asked as I took the box from his hand and peered inside before looking at the handbook. It was filled to the brim with supplements.

“Aunt Sally brought them from Archulea.” He nodded and flipped the notebook shut. “It is good for your health.”

Despite my reluctance, I did not want to waste my elder’s gift. Thus, I forced myself to consume the supplements.

“Hurry up and shower,” I urged Ashton when I noticed his languid movements. “Then you can accompany me to visit Nora!”

Along the journey to the hospital, Ashton gave me an apologetic gaze after he finished talking on the phone. “I don’t think I can visit Nora with you.”

“It’s alright. Why don’t you stop the car right ahead? I’ll hail a cab to the hospital!”

I did not receive a reply from Ashton. It looked like he had no intention to halt the car too. Upon seeing his actions, I decided to play along.

In order to avoid any delay, I grabbed my purse and prepared to leave the car.

However, Ashton did not unlock the door. Instead, his dark gaze remained fixated on me.

“What’s going on?” I asked in confusion.

“Are you planning to leave like this?”

“Is there something wrong?” I replied and nodded my head in confirmation.

His mood seemed to sour when he heard my answer. As I observed his expression, Ashton seemed to have a helpless look on his face.

In a rush to leave the car, I decided to discard that thought. With a quick wave, I began to stride towards to hospital.

As I approached the building, I caught sight of a young couple. The young lady clung to the man and refused to let him out of her arms. “When my mum’s sickness is better, I’ll come and visit you. Don’t get angry, please.”

Her partner simply nodded his head in compliance. Despite that, he still looked dissatisfied.

The woman raised herself on the tip of her toes and kissed his cheek. "I promise to keep you company for a long, long time. Are you happy now?" she asked.

The woman's adorable antics and sweet kiss must have warmed his heart. Immediately, he nodded his head in approval, albeit he still seemed unhappy with her decision.

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. Young love is so passionate!

Right at that moment, I couldn't help but recall Ashton's parting words. Are you planning to leave like this?

Realization dawned upon me as I hurriedly made my way back to where he had dropped me off.

Ashton was still in the midst of reversing his car at the hospital entrance. A wide smile graced his face when he caught sight of me.

"I'll see you tonight!" I ran towards the car and told him softly. Following that, I planted a delicate kiss on the side of his cheek.

The sight of his baffled expression was amusing to me as I bid him farewell and headed to the hospital.

"I'll see you tonight!" His deep voice resonated behind him.

With a bright grin, I bid him farewell and made my way into the hospital.

In the ward, Nora looked pale as she lay in bed with her head heavily bandaged. Armond sat by her bed while peeling fruits. "Was there heavy traffic?" he asked when I entered the room.

"No." I shook my head in slight bashfulness. "I left my house a little late."

"Is she feeling better?" I shifted the topic back to Nora.

"She just ate and is fast asleep right now. You should stay here and keep her company. I have some matters to attend to," Armond said with a nod of his head.

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With that, he grabbed his jacket and left the room.

Armond's absence from Murphy Corporation whilst he was in the hospital must have caused many issues.

I did not comment any further and merely wished him a safe trip. After he left, I took a seat beside the bed and waited for Nora to arouse from her sleep.

Half an hour later, Nora finally awoke from her slumber. "Scarlett, you are here!" She still seemed a little muddled, and her voice sounded raspy.

“How could you venture to the base all alone? It is a place covered in dirt and mud! I thought that you disliked getting dirty!” I asked and helped her into a sitting position.

“Would you trust me if I said that I did not head there alone?” she said and pinched her brows together.

“So, you met someone else last night? Was it someone you recognize?” I nodded and asked in shock.

“I wasn’t exactly close with that person,” Nora replied, “I have a feeling that I’ve met the person before.”

“What is the situation?”

“Originally, I was picking some fruits at the yard. However, someone else was also present. I thought that he was someone working at the base. After a brief chat, he told me that he was more familiar with the other area and said that he could bring me to a place with sweeter fruits. Thus, I decided to trust him,” Nora said after a brief pause.

“So you followed him and ended up like this?” I facepalmed in frustration.

“I had no idea as well! Why would he want to harm me when I’ve never provoked him! It was the first time that I visited the base!” Nora replied innocently.

I couldn’t help but think of the past events. Maybe it wasn’t really a coincidence!

“Have you told Armond about this matter?” I asked her.

“I did.” Nora nodded. “He said that there were numerous workers at the base. It was normal for women to be preyed upon by those men.”

Although her words were true, the incident at the base had only occurred recently. Was that incident really a simple accident?

Seeing that further discussion of this topic would lead to no results, we decided to halt our talk.

When Tabitha and the others caught wind of Nora’s situation, they all dropped by to visit in the early afternoon.

“Tessa, we haven’t met since the last incident. I have some questions for you,” Nora called out when she saw that Tessa was present.

“What do you want to ask? Well, you could’ve called or talked about it in the group. Is everyone so busy?” Tabitha replied in confusion.

“Yeah, things have been hectic lately,” Nora replied with a nod of her head.

“What do you want to talk about?” Tabitha bore a serious expression when she noticed Nora’s solemn gaze.

“We are all friends who have experienced life-threatening situations together. Our encounters include the incident in Venria and Lavelian Village. If we were to break our ties, then something serious must have happened. Otherwise, we’d always offer a helping hand to each other, right?” Nora said as she locked gazes with Tessa.

Her last sentence was aimed specifically towards Tessa. Both Laurel and Tabitha nodded in agreement to Nora's statement. "Yes!"

"Nora, get straight to the point," Tessa said with a nod of her head.

"I'm puzzled. Didn't you say that you were going to get the help that night? Where did the help go?" Nora replied.

I thought that Nora had forgotten about this incident. Who would have expected her to remember it?

In that split moment, her bold question left everyone stunned as they traded glances with each other.

"That's right! I nearly forgot about this matter!" Laurel added as she turned to address Tessa, "When Scarlett fell into the hole with the three of us, you told me to stay behind with Scarlett and volunteered to get help. Yet, you disappeared and never returned. Where on earth did you go?"

Under the heavy scrutiny of everyone's gazes, Tessa's face turned ghastly pale. "I-I was too anxious and got lost!" she stammered nervously.

"You, of all people, should know better than to lie. When Scarlett was rescued, you were already in the tents. Are you sure that you got lost? You never called for help in the first place, did you?" Nora sneered.

"Tessa, is this true? Do you know how disappointed we were?" Laurel questioned her in disbelief.

“Aren’t you unscathed? Aren’t you safe? Why won’t you drop it?” Tessa snarled all of a sudden. Her ferocious gaze turned to me as she lashed out like a cornered beast.

“Is this how you see it?” Tabitha exclaimed agitatedly. “Tessa, are you joking right now? We see you as our close friend. Yet, you treat us like a bunch of fools. I can’t believe that you have the audacity to continue preaching about your so-called morals and values! You turned a blind eye when you could have called for help!”

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“Your actions are no different from a murderer!” Laurel added, “I genuinely thought that you got lost along the way! If Scarlett wasn’t rescued from the hole and got into harm’s way, would you have rejoiced over her injury?”

Tessa seemed to flinch in fear as everyone berated her endlessly. “How can you accuse me when you have no evidence? Are you pointing your fingers at me because of Nora’s claims? Can’t you think for yourself?” she rebuked fiercely

“Alright, why don’t you explain yourself?” Nora challenged her.

“That night, I suggested seeking help after Scarlett fell into the pit. The plantation is huge! Besides, I was never good at directions. After I got lost in the wilderness, a heavy downpour began. When I returned to camp, I saw that you have returned. Due to my exhaustion, I decided to retire to my tent!” Tessa defended herself confidently.

Yet, Nora burst out in laughter upon hearing Tessa's excuse. "Why don't you tell me who brought Scarlett back?" she asked in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Who else could it be?" Tessa jolted in shock before she replied, "I heard your voice when I was in my tent. I missed the specifics of your return!"

Nora laughed humorlessly. "Earlier, you claimed that you saw us when you returned. Now, you are saying that you were in your tent when we arrived at camp and missed our arrival. Tessa, you are a hypocrite!"

"You..."

"Stop it!" I interjected, "It's no longer important!"

"However, what do you think would have happened if Nora did not find Laurel and me? The mountain is prone to landslides. If something happens, we would have been in grave danger. Have you ever thought about the consequences of your actions?" I asked Tessa solemnly.

Tessa hung her head in shame as she remained silent.

"Tessa," Tabitha called out, "I think it's best if we stopped contacting each other. Although I do not understand your actions, I cannot befriend a person with such malicious intentions. Let's pretend that we've never met! You should take good care of yourself!"

"Amongst friends, I understand that we should be forgiving. Yet, you've crossed the line this time. I've always regarded you highly! Today, I've finally realized your true colors!" Laurel added.

“Scarlett, you are using other people for your own sake again!” The mortification on Tessa’s face shifted into fury. “How disgusting!” Tessa said as she swept a resentful gaze over everyone.

“You must be proud of yourselves! However, I’m not the villain here! Instead, Scarlett is the one that you should be accusing! Look at her! She has remained silent the entire time whilst everyone speaks on behalf of her!” Tessa cackled.

I scowled at her remark. How annoying! She is distorting the truth to her advantage!

“Leave!” Nora ordered coldly, “This is your last warning! You should stick to your own lane and stop your antics! If you don’t, there’s no guarantee that I won’t lash out.”

“Do you think that I’m afraid of you? You are nothing without your family’s help! How pathetic!” Tessa scoffed haughtily.

After her last statement, she left the ward without another word.

Nora would have leaped to her feet in anger if it weren’t for Tabitha’s restraint.

After Tessa’s departure, the mood around the room seemed to drop. After all, we had all experienced the same hardships. Tessa’s betrayal left everyone emotional.

As Tabitha and Laurel had matters to attend to, they decided to leave the hospital. On the other hand, I chose to remain and keep Nora company.

“Where did Armond go?” Nora asked when she realized his absence.

“After you got into the accident, all projects in Lavelian Village have been put to halt. He must have a lot to deal with because of these continuous incidents. I don’t think he can visit you so often,” I told her.

“That’s true. He hasn’t slept a wink last night! In addition to his workload, he must be under tremendous pressure!” She nodded in agreement.

“You should nurse yourself to health before taking care of him,” I advised her with a gentle smile.

All of a sudden, Nora turned to me with a sly gleam in her eyes. “Armond told me that you moved in with Ashton? What happened last night? Did the two of you sleep together?” she teased cheekily.

This woman had such a dirty mind! “How can you think of such stuff all the time! Are things between you and Armond smooth sailing?” I replied.

The topic of their relationship seemed to put a damper on her bright mood. “Would you believe me if I said that we are platonic lovers?”

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A little astonished, I said, “You’ve never gone to the hospital?”

“I’ve suggested it many times, but he always refuses.” She shook her head. “He was alright in the beginning, but his condition gradually got worse. I thought it could be a psychological issue. However, I’m not familiar with his past, so I couldn’t ask him.”

“Well, you could try asking Linda. She’s been working under Mr. Murphy for a long time. She should know something useful about Armond.”

She hummed, deep in thought. “Do you think he might have been in love with a girl who later left him, traumatizing him and causing him to become unable to love? Why else would such a rich, handsome bachelor of his age still be unmarried and have no woman by his side?”

“Do you not count as a woman?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Um... I meant prior to me!”

“You should really consult Linda directly about this.” When trying to solve a problem, you had to start at the possible source of it.

Changing the topic to focus on me, she leaned in conspiratorially. “I take it things are going well with Ashton?”

I sighed. “I’m not too sure what I should do from now on, actually. So many unexpected things have happened. I continuously rejected Ashton and pushed him away because I think I’m not good enough for him. But I can’t deny the fact that I love him, and I miss him, and he will always be the first person I instinctively go to when I’m in trouble. I also know that no one on this earth will ever love me as much as he does.”

“You know what, Scarlett?” She rested her chin in one hand. “I’m envious of how persistent Ashton is towards you. I used to imagine what kind of man I would meet in the future. He doesn’t have to be wealthy or especially outstanding, as long as he’s truly, madly, and deeply in love with me. Too bad it didn’t turn out that way in the end. Although, to be honest, I know all too clearly that Armond may not love me a lot, and neither do I love him a lot. I’m sure the both of us understand that we’re expendable to each other.”

That was the first time that I had an insight into Nora’s perspectives on love. Her opinions somewhat surprised me but hadn’t been completely unexpected.

After a moment of silence, I spoke up, “I was lucky to have met Ashton. Even though I have been through a lot in the past several years, I’ve never since experienced the hesitation and aimlessness that I felt after first leaving Ashton. I think I can now confidently say from the bottom of my heart that no matter what, he and I are destined to be together.”

“That’s exactly why I envy you. I’ve never been in love. When my classmates started dating in middle school, I thought they were too immature and that I was too good to get myself involved with them. Everyone seemed to be falling in love with other people left and right at university, too. I guess it was fate that I never found anyone compatible even after graduating from university. I was so wrapped up in my own loneliness until I met Armond. He was the very definition of the Prince Charming that I’ve been dreaming about all my life—wealth, power, and good looks! But now, I’m learning that maybe, just maybe, he isn’t all that I made him out to be.”

“You only think that because your relationship with Armond is progressing too smoothly,” I reassured her. “You had a subconscious belief that dating such a great guy would bring about suffering and pain and hurt, but none of that happened. You just naturally and peacefully got together, and that makes it seem all the more unrealistic to you.”

“That sounds about right.” She nodded. “He’s way out of my league. In the beginning, I’ve thought up countless methods to try and make him fall for me because I thought it would be a painstakingly long process, but I never expect things to happen so easily.

“Maybe it was because we got together so easily that I ended up thinking, if I met another handsome, fine man one day, I would eventually fall in love with him, and if he met another proactive girl who took the initiative to pursue him, he would eventually fall for her too. These thoughts just kept bothering me so much that my mundane daily life with Armond started feeling more and more like it was just a dream, with no sense of security nor belonging.”

“Have you ever thought about whether he would stay with you if you weren’t Channing Oberick’s granddaughter?” I smiled softly.

“Of course he wouldn’t!”

“So, you both understand deep down that you are actually the most compatible partners. The Oberick family has clout, and the Murphys have wealth. He knows that you’re not like other girls. Other women may only like him for his fortune, but you didn’t. You genuinely fell in love with him and think he’s a good person, and you want to be with him. That kind of marriage is the most blissful, simply because you both like each other.”

Tilting her head to one side, she was rendered speechless. After a long pause, she sighed, “Whatever. I can’t wrap my head around this anyway, so I’m just going to stop thinking about it!”