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I pursed my lips and looked down at my fingers. "Give yourself a break."

He got up, and before heading to his study, he turned towards me. "Actually, there are still some things I need to deal with. I'll try to get it done asap, and see you in a bit."

I mellowed as I saw him walked further away. When I finally came back to my senses, I realized I forgot to check if he wanted dinner.

Regardless, I went to the kitchen, made some spaghetti, and brought it upstairs.

The door was left ajar, and I could see him on the phone.

I wasn't sure what the conversation was about. The fountain pen in his hand landed so heavily on the contract that it pierced through it. The ink spread into quite a sizeable area from the persistent pressure. Something vexatious was brewing.

Those solemn dark eyes of his noticed what'd happened, but his hand was still driving the pen deeper into the table.

"Are you done?" Fury shadowed his face.

The person on the other end of the line seemed to sense the tightness in his voice. Nevertheless, the conversation continued.

"Brothers? Him and I? You don't know what the market is like," Ashton growled.

Yup, he is angry.

After he hung up, ferocity lurked in every corner of his narrowed eyes. He glanced at the patch of ink, lifted his hand, and proceeded with signing as if everything was okay.

Splash! The flick of his wrist spilled his coffee.

He maintained his poise, pulled a few sheets of tissue, and pressed his desk dry.

All these years jostling in the market had made him stoic. A poker face was his go-to expression.

After going through certain phases in life, a man would know clearly what he desired and what he'd rather keep his hands off. Those were the means of survival.

Knock, knock!

Ashton looked towards the door and saw me standing outside. "So, what have you brought me?" The gloom that was on his face a second ago vanished. A faint smile supervened.

I smiled back and walked into the room. After putting the spaghetti on his desk, I wiped the remaining coffee off, feigning oblivion.

After that, I scooped the tissues from his hand and chucked them into the bin. "I've made some meatball spaghetti. It's my first time making it though."

He gave out a warm twinkle, sat himself down, and munched away as if what happened just now was a trivial event.

"By the way, how's Aunt Sally?" I asked as I tidied the desk.

Sally was Marcus' stepmother. Thus, it wasn't wrong to say that Ashton and Marcus are cousins.

"Umph!" He responded with spaghetti still bunged up in his mouth.

My eyes looked towards the documents on the desk. It was the proposal of the acquisition on White Corporation drafted two years ago.

Why was it only signed now?

I scrunched some tissues and dapped on the spread ink.

"It won't come off!" I whined. "Ink is the hardest thing to remove. Moreover, it's on paper." Coming from behind was his low and calming voice.

I curled my lips and put down the document. I couldn't get myself to ask him about what happened.

Looking at the empty plate, my sense of accomplishment launched me into an attention-seeking puppy. "How was it?"

He nodded. "Invigorating." Then, he kissed me on my forehead. "Also, Hannah should be discharged soon. Let's pay her a visit tomorrow."

It was amazing how he kept track of such paltry matters. "Sure thing!" I bobbed my head, and as I tilted my chin up, I purred, "Ashton, shall we make an appointment to remove the vasclip?"

"Hmm?"

"The past should be left in the past, shouldn't it? Summer was born to the Crest family. I love her as much as I love you. With Jared visiting her every now and then, she'll be showered with more love."

There was a short pause before he laid his eyes on me. "You've given Jared the green light to see Summer?"

I nodded. "I'm in no position to oppose as he's her father after all. Plus, I'd love to have a child of our own."

His muscles went taut upon hearing those words before his smile grew wider. "Yes, Ma'am!"

He was with me on this.

Finally, something to cheer our day up.

As for the thing between him and Marcus, I guessed it'd be better if I stayed out of it.

After putting the fork and plate onto the tray, I headed back downstairs.

Summer was as active as a hungry squirrel after sleeping for the whole day. She was running around with Snowfluff in the living room.

It was nice to have a dog to keep her company.

Contrary to the tranquil and snowy landscape outside, Ashton was so wrapped up with work that I almost thought he was at the office all the time.

“Mommy, does Mr. Fuller have tons and tons of work to do? It looks like he’s having a hard time.”

“Summer, one has to bite the bullet and endure extreme pain to gain the respect of others. Physical pain is nothing.”

The toughest pain to undergo would be the torment in the deepest corner of the soul.

Camelia appeared in our yard out of the blue. But since she was here, it was only right of me to extend my hospitality.

Her face and ears were crimson red. “Scarlett, I thought you were trying to help Marcus when you gave him all your savings. Now I see your foul intentions! How could you set him up? You and Ashton are the same!”

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I was utterly flustered. “Wait a minute. Tell me what’s going on, and we’ll talk about it.”

I kept my cool.

She followed up with a sneer. “The money you channeled to Marcus for extra cash flow was HiTech’s earnings throughout these years. Has it come to your mind that this illegal loan would crush him? If the media disclosed this, White Corporation’s stocks would plummet and pulverize the White family. You are one cold-blooded cunning b*tch, Scarlett.”

“Illegal loan?” I didn’t get it.

HiTech’s profits had always been under my account, but I’d never used it. If it weren’t for Marcus, it would’ve remained as it was.

“The money loaned was all legal earnings. How on earth would it be illegal?”

“You should ask your husband.” She let out a contemptuous grin. “You couple are so good at playing good cop bad cop and would show no mercy.” Okay, that only made me more flummoxed.

My tongue tied up for a bit but managed to unravel itself eventually. "If this mess was caused by the money I'd loaned, I'll take full responsibility. Please leave as it's really late now."

We were still friends after all. I didn't think it was nice to be too harsh with my words.

On top of that, it was understandable that her emotions got the best of her since she was currently pregnant.

After seeing her out, I went to Ashton's study. He was taking a puff on the balcony.

The smoke fogged the room, and it wasn't friendly on the nose. I looked at the clock and stood behind him. "Hey, it's already eleven. Wanna call it a day?"

He kept quiet. His slender figure somehow felt alien to me.

My eyes wandered onto the table and saw the same acquisition contract lying on the desk.

"I was the one who gave Marcus the money. He saved my life, and thus, I owed him one. If he weren't desperate, he wouldn't have accepted it. Now we're even."

Ashton didn't budge. The smoke from the cigarette between his fingers stung every strand of my olfactory nerves.

I then recomposed myself and carried on. "If you are upset because I didn't talk to you about this? Then, blame me. It has nothing to do with White Corporation. Ashton, if you're acquiring White Corporation because of this, you're doing Marcus injustice."

"Injustice?" He wrenched around and glared at me. "Tell me, Scarlett, what's justice?"

That irked me. "Ashton, didn't we say that the past is the past? What's bothering you?"

Was it jealousy that drove him cruel? Was it because he still couldn't get over the fact that Marcus gave me a month of tender love and care?

He clammed up as his squinted eyes, brimming with anger, pierced through mine. "Who was here?"

I could feel foulness creeping onto me as he inched closer. "Or did Marcus call you?"

Out of natural instinct, I clenched tight to my phone and took a few steps back.

“Ashton, this shouldn’t be happening!”

He raised his brows. “Be a good girl. Give me the phone.”

I looked down and bit my lip. It wasn’t that I have anything to hide from him, but it was his intimidating stance that made me held on to my phone so dearly.

Snap! He snatched the phone over.

The last call was from Camelia.

“Trying to be ‘best friends’ with her, eh?” He gave a scornful grin.

Startled by his mockery, I gaped at him.

“Stop overthinking. We’re different. I don’t burn bridges unlike you. I’d never push anyone to a dead end, expose all my fiendish intentions, and execute them unscrupulously.”

I was calm and composed when I uttered those hurtful words, thanks to the hell I had been through in the four years.

Crash! Ashton slammed the phone on the floor, and it was in bits and pieces. His pent-up fury got the best of him.

We’d been together for seven years, and never had I saw him exploded with wrath. It almost made me believed that his vehemence could eat me up alive.

Stupefied, I stared at him blankly as this dark and bloodthirsty character simmered inside him.

There was one moment where I actually thought he would hit me.

But he only smacked his lips and spoke. “Sever the ties between you and Marcus and stay out of anything that has to do with him. As for Camelia, stop talking to her.”

To have myself hurt for the benefit of others was just not worth it. It was funny how rage could overthrow one's gentility and propriety.

Ashton's sudden burst of anger was the result of repressed emotions.

I understood where it came from and decided to tolerate it. We all needed to channel our frustrations somewhere somehow, right?

That was why I quietly left the room. We weren't kids anymore.

When emotions kicked in, despite how hysterical it became, even to the extent of howling in your heart and wishing to part, we couldn't just smash things, nor should we simply run away.

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Grown-ups were conditioned to mask all crumbles and rumbles with insouciance.

When I got back to the bedroom, I went on with my routine—I took a shower, brushed my teeth, blew my hair, and went to bed.

However, I was just tossing and turning.

This very night, Ashton didn't come to bed.

Both of us had our own emotions to deal with. To talk it out would only cut deeper into our wounds.

As I finally started to zone out a bit in the wee hours of the night, a man opened the door. "Scarlett." In a deep soft tone, he called out my name.

He walked up to my bedside and murmured my name a few more times but eventually stopped. I wasn't responding

"I'm sorry." His voice whispered contrition.

I couldn't be bothered, and let my self sink deep into my sleep.

By the time I batted my eyelids open, it was already late afternoon.

I got up and went down to Summer's bedroom. That was when I saw a middle-aged lady in the living room.

Her name was Flora, the new caregiver Ashton hired. She greeted me affably and went back to her task.

Ashton had hired her to take care of Summer.

Summer had gotten much better, and was playing with Snowfluff in the yard.

Seeing this sight, I decided to let it be, and just as I started to head back to my room, Flora called out. "Madam, lunch is ready. Would you like me to send it to your room?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll be right down." And I trod back to my room.

After freshening up, I sat at my dresser, and only then did I notice how long my hair had grown. It was around my waist now.

Back in university, I'd always preferred to have it cropped to my shoulders. Macy once made a joke about it, saying that I could use my short hair to turn down love confessions. All I had to do was tell the person to wait till my hair grew to my waist and never let that happen.

The guy would get the message sooner or later.

I chuckled from the thought of the past. What might seem silly for that instance had turned into a heart-warming memory that could be savored forever.

Serendipity worked in its own peculiar ways. No matter the twists and turns our lives took, what was yours would always fall into your hands. On the contrary, despite persistent efforts, you'd eventually lose what was meant for someone else.

Tap, tap, tap... That must be Flora.

I turned around while braiding my hair. To my surprise, it wasn't her but Ashton.

Slowly, I swiveled back, and everything went half the pace.

Didn't we quarrel last night?

His hand softly caressed my shoulders, and I could see his gentle eyes observing my every braid through the mirror. There wasn't a tinge of viciousness.

I kept my gaze low, refusing to meet his, and kept on with my business. But there's a limit to my hair length, meaning I had to come to a stop eventually.

I chose silence, and so did he.

Huh!

I took a breath, and right before I could ask my question, Ashton put out his. "We're going to visit Hannah later. Do you wanna put on some makeup?"

Oh my, it totally slipped my mind! We spoke about this last night.

I appreciated his initiative. He never had to give in since he'd been treated like a king his whole life, so I had to say or do something.

I nodded and opened the drawer as I took out the hairband, and tied my hair with it.

"Do you still have to go to the company?" I rubbed my lips with chapstick.

I forwent the idea of putting on make-up as I wasn't really in the mood for it. Plus, it'd take time to remove it. A chapstick would do the trick.

"You are so pretty!" He tried to butter me up in a childlike manner.

That put a smile across my face as I stood up and went into the wardrobe.

At the dining table.

I wasn't hungry in the first place. Ashton's phone rang when we were few bites into our late lunch. It was Joseph.

Ashton assumed that it must've been about the company and excused himself.

He got on his feet as he answered the call and turned his back towards the table. His conversation was a string of technical terms, which sounded like a foreign language to me.

One thing that I was positive about was that he was acquiring White Corporation progressively.

The jacket potatoes on my plate didn't manage to whet my appetite. Scrape! My chair dragged the floor as I got up.

Seeing that I was about to leave, he ruffled and hung up. "Hey, what's the matter? Is the food not to your liking?"

Flora was definitely on edge when she heard that. After all, it was her first day at work, and a complaint would send her straight home.

I shook my head and said, "I'm not particularly hungry."

Then, I went upstairs to grab my purse. I need to stop sandwiching myself between Ashton and Marcus, regardless of my intentions. Me handing him the money instead of Ashton would send out a different message.

Who knew what horrendous actions Ashton would take if I were to put my oar in again? The only way out was to stay out of it.

I reached for the gold bracelet that I bought for Hannah. It was meant for her baby's one-month-old celebration.

John mentioned before that due to the freezing weather in K City, they'd just celebrate the occasion over a nice dinner with their family.

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Ashton's cheeks plumped up when he saw me coming downstairs. He was in the middle of telling Flora the dos and don'ts around the house and with Summer.

"All set?" he asked. I nodded, and we headed out.

Once I got into the car parked in the yard, Ashton carefully placed a box in my hands and started the engine. "This is HiTech's latest model."

I staggered before lifting the cover. Inside lay a classy new phone with a diamonds cast gold rim. Quite fashionable, I'd say.

Right, he smashed my phone last night.

I then took it out from the box, gave it a rough scan, and slid it into my purse.

Our journey to Hannah's place was in absolute silence.

John bought Hannah a villa in South District. It was baroque-inspired, and the yard was a medley of flora. Unfortunately, the deep snow took center stage this season.

John hired two caregivers to take care of Hannah and the baby. He wasn't home when we got there.

Hannah was still in confinement. She came down to the living room when she heard our car's rumbling engine coming to a stop.

She was in her warm puffy pajamas and looked rather pale as if she was just done with the delivery.

It took her some effort to squeeze out a smile. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Not bad. But you lost so much weight!" I couldn't help but noticing how gauntly thin she had become.

"This is what happens once the baby's out," she chuckled.

She then gestured for us to take a seat and had the caregiver bring us water.

I looked around but saw no signs of the child. "Where's the baby?"

"He's sleeping upstairs." She then passed me a glass of water. "You know, he's premature and will need to lounge a bit longer in the incubator."

Despite her light-hearted statement, I still felt sorry for her.

“Summer was like that too. But things got better as she grew up,” I sighed.

Ashton sat quietly like a totem pole. He would pick up his drink or hang up an incoming call once in a while.

Hannah started noticing it and decided to break that drill. “Ashton, I bet that you’ve never seen a one-month-old baby. Why don’t you go upstairs and check it out? At least you’ll know what it’s like when it’s you and Scarlett’s turn.”

He looked at me for a bit and nodded before being led up to the second floor by the caregiver.

Once he was out of sight, Hannah asked, “You had a fight, hadn’t you?”

“No, why?” I denied.

“Come on. It was as obvious as a garish billboard! What made the almighty Mr. Fuller reduced into a gawper, listening to our dull conversation and declining calls from the company? You guys must’ve been in a fight for him to tiptoe around you.”

Was that considered a fight?

I just tilted my head and smiled. Period. End of discussion.

We chattered on till it was time to go home. As Ashton and I left, I blurted, “Let’s go to the hospital.”

“What’s wrong?” His worried eyes swiveled towards me.

“Your vasclips.”

His mind went blank for a couple of seconds before turning the car around and drove to the hospital.

As I waited outside the operation room, his phone rang. It was from Joseph. I was fully aware that I shouldn’t be meddling with his calls, but it had been buzzing relentlessly. Thinking that it might be something urgent, I picked it up.

“Mr. Fuller, the Bureau of Industry and Commerce is running an investigation on White Corporation, meaning it would be closed for some time. Do you still want me to give the media the video clip of Mr. White’s mother?” Joseph spewed his updates the moment the line got through.

Sharon’s video?

“What video?” My fuddled mind demanded an answer.

“Mrs. Fuller?” Joseph was taken aback. Little did he know that I’d be on the other end.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Fuller.”

“Joseph, Ashton is occupied at the moment. But let me tell you something. We need to know where to draw the line.” I tried to sound less pushy. “I’m in no position to tell him how to run his business, but you, someone who’s been working for him for so many years, should know what his rash decisions would lead to. To exterminate a fellow businessman is a big no-no. It wasn’t only his capability that kept the ball rolling in K City for the past four years, but also the acceptance of the big shots he was dealing with.”

It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there. Yet, there’s a limit to how vicious you can be to your opponent to ensure amity among allies. Who knows they might be next in line?

A pause ensued. “I understand, Mrs. Fuller.”

After I hung up, I tried to get a grip on myself. It was since Emery’s wedding that Ashton turned so irascible.

What did Marcus do to cause Ashton to brew such brutish intentions?

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Roughly an hour later, Ashton was out. He was in his usual poker face.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.” There was a gentle twitch at the corners of his mouth.

I shook my head and held his hand. “Does it hurt?”

I heard that it'd be awfully painful.

"So what if it does? What are you gonna do?" He gave a cheeky grin.

I closed my eyes and brushed my lips on his. "Will this work?"

Cough! The doctor tried to make his presence felt. "You'll need to come back for a check-up in a week, and try resuming intercourse only after a month's time."

"Thank you, doctor." It was pretty awkward to be seen smooching. My face was still blushing after saying my thanks.

We lingered at the hospital for another hour till the pain subsided.

It was already nightfall when we got back to the villa. After having dinner with Ashton, Emery called.

"Hey, remember that sandalwood box that I wanted to mail to you? I've been swamped, and it slipped off my mind. You free tonight? Let's grab a drink." She didn't sound happy.

"Okay. I'll see you later." It didn't take me long to say yes. Ashton was in his study. He had been warm and sweet recently, but I somehow felt that he had something in the back of his mind.

I went to his study only to see him flipping through a large pile of documents Joseph brought back.

He looked up when he heard my footsteps. "Are you bored?"

"Nah. Actually, Emery asked me out for a drink."

He nodded and closed the folder in front of him. "Right, what's the address? I'll send you there."

I didn't budge. "You still have a lot of things to do, and I can get there myself. Don't think you should be moving around much after the operation, anyway."

"Okay. So how long will you be there?" He raised his brows, waiting for my answer.

“Two hours.” I guessed that Emery must’ve been caught up with some relationship troubles.

His puckered his lips. “One hour. Give me the address, and I’ll pick you up after.”

“B—” He cut in before I could voice my discontent. “You being away for too long worries me.”

Since he’d put it that way, I dipped my head, gesturing submission.

I put on my coat, took the car keys and headed out.

Emery and I would be meeting at her club in Imperial Hotel situated in the city center.

As usual, the club was crazily buzzing. I saw her looking out from the second floor and a bottle of red wine on her table.

“Scarlett! Right here!” She waved. It seemed like she had been here for quite a while.

I sat myself down, snatched her glass of red wine, and got the attention of the waiter. “Excuse me, a cup of hot milk, please.”

“Hot milk? In a club? Stop joking, Scarlett.” She laughed, but her squinted eyes and droopy brows said otherwise.

The waiter obviously knew who she was. He left briskly after taking the order.

Emery rested her chin on the back of her hand as she gazed at the girls on the dance floor. “Scarlett, I’m not happy.”

I felt a pinch in my heart.

As I took a sip of the red wine, I looked at her. “Is it about Hunter? Or is it about your mother-in-law?”

If someone’s complaining only after a few days of marriage, these were probably the only reasons.

She looked back with her eyes slightly shuttered in a teasing manner. “Have you ever seen parents who insisted on living with their son after he got married?”

"Well, both Ashton and I don't have parents, and George barely interferes in our affairs. So, no." Those were my honest two cents.

She tittered. "You see, life always goes against our will. If only I didn't get married."

It was normal for a pregnant woman to experience fluctuating emotions. "Maybe they just want to help out and to take care of you since you're preppers."

"Umph. Let's talk about something else."

The waiter came and placed the milk on the table. She bulldozed it out of sight. Nope, not her kind of drink.

"You want some juice?" Those who were up the duff got nauseous easily. It must've been the fishy smell that turned her head away.

She bobbed her head. I looked at the waiter and ordered a glass of mango juice.

"How did you know I like mango juice?" Emery asked.

"I've seen you drinking it." And I looked towards the first floor.

"Is there someone you know?" She traced my gaze and asked.

"The young lady seated on the lounge sofa looks familiar." I shrugged my brows and looked down while supporting my chin with the back of my hand.

When Emery got a clearer picture, she clicked her tongue. "Look at the man beside her, and you'll know who she is."

Both of them had their backs towards me. I tried to get a glimpse of their side view.

"John?" I froze.

"You siblings have quite an uncanny connection, don't you?"

As I looked more closely, I noticed that the lady next to him was scantily clad. I still couldn't figure out who she was, though.