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The rest of the staff filed into the office. They caught sight of Colin passing an ointment to me but ignored us promptly.

Since it wasn't a serious injury, I shooed Colin away. "I'm fine. Go and do your work!"

Thinning his lips, he glanced at me, then at the female employees who were staring in our direction before complying.

Just then, Joyce returned to the office as her shift had ended. When she noticed the medical plaster on my knee, she mocked, "The sight of a wealthy and influential person must have weakened the knees of an uneducated peasant like you. Such a disgrace!"

I pressed my lips together but did not retaliate. Although I was in a rush just now, I knew the true reason I had tripped.

I knew everyone working in the hotel, and there had only been a few people around me at that time. It made sense that Joyce, who had been standing closest to me, was the culprit behind my injury.

After tending to my bruised knee, I walked to the water dispenser and filled a cup with boiling water.

I neared Joyce and asked coolly, "Your face or hand – what's your choice?"

Her face turned a ghastly white when she noticed the hot water in the cup. "Scarlett, what are you trying to do? I'm warning you. My father is the county mayor of R Province. If you dare lay a finger on me, I'll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life."

I nodded nonchalantly, unfazed by her threats. "I suppose I'll just wait and see!"

Before she could react, I seized her arm and poured scalding water on her porcelain skin. She screamed in agony, but I kept my grip on her and emptied the cup.

As she thrashed around in pain, I said emotionlessly, "Ms. Newton, please plan your schemes better next time. I will let you off easy this time, but I fear your pretty face will have to bear the consequences if this happens again."

"You—"

I cut her off as a thought struck me. "By the way, since you claim that your father is such an important official, it might be good for him to retire now. After all, R Province never flourished under his management despite its advantageous environment. Our economy has been stagnant for the entire time he was in office. It's about time he stepped down."

With those parting words, I took the ointment and left the office.

By the time I reached the ground floor, Colin had pulled up at the entrance. "Get in!" he beckoned.

I raised an eyebrow and was prepared to reject his offer when I remembered my limping gait. Resigned, I slid into the car and put on my seatbelt.

His gaze swept over me. "I'll drop by the pharmacy to buy medicine before sending you home," he announced.

I looked down at my ankle, which had almost doubled in size by now, and did not protest.

"You and Ashton know each other?" Colin blurted after we had long since left the hotel.

I froze before chuckling humorlessly. "Do I look like someone who has connections with the filthy rich?"

He pursed his lips and contemplated solemnly. "Yes!" There was a lapse before he continued, "He was staring at you the whole time just now. It looks like things are complicated between you two."

Smiling, I didn't admit nor deny his speculation.

By the time I reached home, I had given up battling my swollen ankle and slumped unceremoniously in a rattan chair.

Unexpectedly, I fell into a slumber, only to be awoken by a loud knock on the door.

Streaks of tears wetted my face.

It had been a long time since I last cried or dreamt of that child. He had grown up well. He looked healthy and was heavier than I remember.

The incessant knocks on the door urged me to hurry up. I wiped away my tears and splashed some water on my face to wake myself up.

I swung the door open.

To my surprise, Ashton appeared in my line of sight. Backlit by the sun, a golden halo surrounded his lean frame. His expression was somber, and his dark eyes were deep as ever. His Adam's apple bobbed when he saw me, giving away the churning emotions within him.

A large hand grasped mine before I could utter a word. "I can't do it. I can't act like I don't know you. I've tried to let you go for the last four years, but you're stuck in my head. I can't forget you," he admitted.

He has changed!

He's not the same anymore. The Ashton I knew would never say anything so corny.

I sighed softly and withdrew my hand. "Mr. Fuller, please come in for a seat," I offered, my tone courteous but distant.

I suppose I wasn't too astounded. This encounter was not filled with heartache and yearning as I had imagined. Four years was enough to heal a lot of wounds.

Even my resentment for him had faded into nothing.

He stepped into the yard and sat on the rattan chair. I offered some fruit I had picked the day before as I would any guest. A smile stretched across my face, but my tone was detached. "This is home-grown. The texture is lovely if I do say so myself. Please have a taste."

He stared at me, his gaze deep and unwavering. After a long moment, he nodded and took a small bite of the peach.

He savored the fruit before looking at me. "It's sweet," was his earnest compliment.

I nodded in response. Four years had stolen my love for chatter.

At that moment, Colin came home with Summer and Michael. He faltered when he saw the man in our yard. However, as a man of culture, he quickly composed himself and bowed his head in greeting. "Good evening, Mr. Fuller!"

Realizing that Ashton had no recollection of Colin, I interjected, "He's the hotel manager."

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My prompt registered immediately. Ashton stood up and proffered a hand, suave and refined. However, his gaze lingered on Summer and Michael when he noticed them.

Michael seemed to be a late bloomer, at least in comparison to Summer. Both of them were five years old, but Michael appeared a year younger.

Ashton's expression darkened, but I waved it off. "What would you like to eat?" I directed my question to the children.

Summer seemed to be in a foul mood. While her eyes were still on Ashton, she replied, "Anything you make is fine, Mommy."

Michael caught sight of my injured ankle and suggested, "Let Daddy cook for us tonight."

This was nothing out of the norm, but Michael's words were piercing to Ashton's ears.

I offered no clarification. Instead, I looked at Colin and teased lightly, "Looks like it's your turn to show off your cooking skills tonight."

Colin could be rather tactless at times, and his ability to read the room was failing him at the moment. Though he was taken aback by Ashton's presence, he invited graciously, "Mr. Fuller, please stay for dinner with us. We cook with homegrown produce. You should try some."

Ashton masked his emotions and nodded, his eyes dark and unfathomable.

I glanced at the children and instructed them as usual, "Both of you pick some vegetables from the back garden. Summer, don't bully Michael, understand?"

Summer pouted but nodded obediently. "You're so unfair, Mommy. You always help Michael."

Amused by her childish accusation, I explained, "Michael is already shorter than you. If you continue to bully him, he'll never grow taller!"

"Okay, okay, I won't bully him!" Summer picked up both baskets and told Michael indignantly, "Mommy says that I can't bully you, so I'll help you carry your basket, okay?"

Michael, the small gentleman he was, corrected Summer, "Daddy says that I'm a strong man, and strong men should protect girls. You're not bullying me. I'm protecting you!"

The two children walked toward the back garden, bickering all the way.

I shook my head in resignation, but my lips curled upwards involuntarily. I had always worried that Summer would feel lonely, but seeing how Summer and Michael were closer than biological siblings put me at ease.

As I retracted my gaze, I felt someone's eyes on me, snapping me back to reality. I turned to find Ashton burning holes in me with his scorching stare. A myriad of emotions flashed in his dark eyes.

Stunned by the intensity of his gaze, I blurted, "Please make yourself at home while I check if my help is needed in the kitchen."

Long fingers wrapped around my wrist, pulling me back. His voice seemed to rumble in his chest as he asked, "Have you been well all these years?"

My heart skipped a beat at the simple question. I met his gaze and replied with conviction, "I've been good. These four years have been the most peaceful years of my life."

Pain flickered in his eyes as he chuckled ruefully. "Yeah, you do look happy."

I nodded slightly. "Make yourself at home while I help out in the kitchen," I repeated as the conversation ran dry.

"Can we be friends?" Ashton asked timidly, his voice helpless and distant. "I've tried numerous ways to numb out in the past four years, but my mind has been cruel to me. The more I try to forget, the clearer the memories become. It's all engraved in my brain. It's impossible to erase."

I heaved a sigh, wishing I had the right words to console him. I turned to look Ashton in the eye. "Mr. Fuller, you'll have to move on someday. I'm doing great here. Staying by your side only filled me with hate and resentment. It would break me. Perhaps it might have seemed like I had plenty of friends and family in J City and K City, but I was dying inside. There's no way I can come to terms with my suffering. R Province is my home. Here, I can be the person I aspire to be. I hope you understand my choice, Mr. Fuller."

Ashton held my gaze. His eyes were gentle yet pained, reflecting the conflicting emotions within. A loud silence fell upon us. Seconds ticked by before he finally spoke. "Fine!" The weight of a single syllable pressed down on both of us.

He left soon afterward. I exhaled heavily as I watched his retreating back. Everyone's biggest enemy is themselves.

I entered the kitchen to find Colin preparing the ingredients. He stilled when he saw me. "I can handle this myself. Go and keep Mr. Fuller company."

"I can wash the vegetables," I insisted.

He quickly declined when he glimpsed my ankle. "It looks swollen again. Go and rest!"

Colin could be stubborn at times. Realizing that I wasn't going to change his mind, I surrendered and returned to the yard where I found Joseph waiting for me, expressionless as always. His back was stiff, and his eyes followed me as I approached him.

"Mr. Campbell, is there something I can help you with?"

He handed me a plastic bag and explained, "Mr. Fuller told me to pass this to you. It's medicine for your injury."

"Please relay my thanks!" I accepted the plastic bag with a nod.

Joseph mirrored my action. He thinned his lips before divulging, "Mrs. Fuller, Mr. Fuller has been waiting for you. He knows well that he could have easily found you in the past four

years if he wished to, but he's afraid. He's afraid that you still hate him and that you would push him away. So he's been patiently waiting—waiting for you to let go of the pain... Waiting for you to come home."

A faint smile played on my lips. Though heartfelt, Joseph's words did little to sway me. "Help me thank Mr. Fuller," I responded. "Please tell him that each person has their own path to take. There's no need to stay entangled in the past."

Joseph opened his mouth to reply but stopped when he heard the finality in my words. He sighed, perhaps in disappointment, and left.

The next day, my ankle had healed significantly. After dropping Summer off, I headed to the hotel.

At the entrance, I ran into Joyce, who was flanked by two burly men.

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I coldly stared at her while suppressing my rage.

"Scarlett, if you kneel and beg for my forgiveness, I might consider letting you off for hurting me and let you continue working in the hotel. Else..."

"Else what?" I asked.

She scoffed, "Else, your daughter would be the one to suffer."

I frowned. Being youthful was supposed to be a beautiful thing, but she just made it really annoying.

My gaze fell on the man behind her. "You can try."

Her temper sparked from my remark and said, "Alec, David, did you hear what she just said? Show her what you're capable of. I want to see if she's still haughty then?"

Status was everything in this tiny city. There weren't many wealthy people here. Even if there were, they wouldn't even concern themselves with these folks.

Joyce's arrogance was partly attributed to her father's position. He had maintained his position for so many years that he was considered the local tyrant.

Seeing the two men approached me, my brows snapped together, and I scoffed, "Joyce, didn't you investigate one's background first before you offend the person?"

Joyce sneered, "Investigate? What is there to investigate about you? You're just a nobody."

I pulled out my phone and called Louis while keeping my gaze on her. "I've warned you before. Because of you, your father would lose his position, and you deserve it."

Her face darkened at my warning, then she ordered angrily, "I want her dead!"

Once the call connected, Louis asked, "Scarlett, did something happen?"

I pressed my lips together and answered, "Uncle Louis, the R Province's county mayor Stanley oppresses and exploits its residents. He pocketed the funds used to alleviate poverty. Please send someone here to investigate!"

Louis grunted in acknowledgment and reconfirmed, "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine. They wouldn't dare to do anything to me!"

He continued, "I'll drop by later tonight, so be sure to take care of yourself. Leave the rest to me."

I nodded and ended the call.

Joyce paused briefly, then scoffed, "Scarlett, didn't you only have a mother who's in dire straits. Why are you acting like some rich man's daughter?"

She demanded, "Alec, David, take her to a desolate area and torture her. Don't worry if she dies in the process. I'll bear the responsibility."

Alec and David still had their wits about them. They stared at me with hesitation and asked, "What's your family name?"

I arched a brow. "Stovall. Didn't Joyce tell you my name?"

The two men were dumbfounded and exchanged glances. "We know there's a Louis Stovall among the higher-ups. We even met him the other day when Uncle Stanley went to the city for a meeting. I heard that he was going to be promoted again."

Joyce mocked, "Oh please! She has been in R Province for four years. If she really does have connections with some powerful figure, she wouldn't have stayed here all these while with no visitors."

"It looks like you won't believe it until you see it."

The voice came from Joseph, who was leaving the hotel, followed by Ashton. The latter's eyes were cold.

Joyce was taken aback by their appearance. "Mr. Fuller and Mr. Campbell!"

Ashton didn't spare a glance at her and instead focused his gaze on me. "Are you feeling better now?"

I only nodded in reply.

Joseph glanced at the two brawny men by my side. "It would be best for the both of you to quickly apologize and return home to discuss a way out of this mess."

Both men were not dumb. They noticed Ashton had an elegance, similar to those born in upper-class families.

They hung their heads and swiftly apologized. "Ms. Stovall, sorry for the trouble. We hope that you could forgive us and let it be water under the bridge."

"Leave!" said Joseph as he waved his hand dismissively.

Before they left, both men persuaded, "Joyce, don't do anything rash. You better hurry home as well!"

Joyce's face turned red with rage. "Scarlett, aren't you just good at seducing men? Maybe..."

I wasn't in the mood to fight with her, so I ignored her and entered the hotel, but she held on to me, not letting me leave. "Why are you running? Didn't you say you know someone powerful? Well, where is he? Aren't you going to investigate my father? I'm waiting!"

My brows drew together, and I fixed my gaze at her. "Ms. Newton, I was curious from the start as to why a county mayor's daughter was working the front desk in a hotel. But now I understand. Your father is smart enough to know you're dumb. So, instead of letting you hold any important position, he asked you to work here. Else, his future would've been shot."

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"You..."

I pushed her away then headed straight for my office in the hotel.

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Finally, it was afternoon.

There was no more trouble from Joyce since the morning. It could be that she had left work early due to being in a bad mood.

Deep in thought, I didn't notice Joseph standing at the entrance to my office until I heard the excited screams from my female colleagues.

"Ms. Stovall, may we speak in private?" inquired Joseph.

I felt the prying glances from all around me, so I nodded uneasily. "Sure!"

We left my office and came to a quiet area. "Mr. Campbell, is there anything I can help you with?"

He pressed his lips into a thin line. "Mr. Fuller wishes to see you."

I instinctively wanted to reject but nodded after some hesitation. "Where is he?"

"The hotel's parking lot!"

I nodded. "Okay!"

When he saw me walking back towards my office, he continued, "Ms. Stovall, Mr. Fuller is already waiting for you downstairs."

I turned to look at him silently before saying, "I know. I need to get my purse."

Baffled by my answer, he acknowledged, "Then I will wait for you here."

"Fine by me."

These two had worked together for many years, so their behaviors were getting more and more similar.

Once I had my purse with me and exited my office. He let out a relieved sigh. He acted as if I would turn around and leave right away.

Moments later, we arrived at the parking lot.

When Joseph noticed the door to the black Mercedes-Benz was left open, he immediately turned and left with a feeble excuse.

I got in the car and saw Ashton was reading a document intently and elegantly.

"It's two o'clock. I still have to work later," I reminded.

He paused briefly, snapped the document closed, and focused his gaze on me. "After lunch, I'll send you back here."

R Province was small, so there weren't many good-quality restaurants around. However, Ashton managed to find one and a Chinese one at that.

Since it was pre-booked, once Ashton and I were seated, the dishes were served promptly.

I glanced disinterestedly at the view outside through the window. Time passed by so fast, and it was already July. Soon, summer would end in a blink of an eye.

He kept silent and placed some food on my plate. He halted once my plate was full.

He glanced at me and said, "Try it. These are all your favorite."

I lowered my gaze, looking at the table. Indeed as he said, all of them used to be my favorite dishes.

However, as time passed and people changed, my taste changed after I had left J City. So I sat still, staring at him, and said, "Spicy food is bad for health, so I've adapted to a light diet."

Since young, Summer wasn't able to eat spicy food, so I stopped eating too. I would even skip garlic and ginger in my cooking because they would be spicy.

He gulped to keep his emotions in check. After a while, he nodded and said gently, "I'll change the food!"

He waved down a waiter and asked for all the dishes to be changed to light food.

I wanted to stop him but felt that it wasn't necessary, so I stared indifferently at him and let out a sigh.

The waiter served new dishes and changed the plates. He continued to place food on my plate. "Eat more. You seemed thinner."

My mouth set in a hard line. I stared at the mountain of food on my plate without any appetite.

Four years had passed, and I became more taciturn. In the past, I would have taken the initiative to ask him for my purpose here.

But now, I didn't want to talk much, so I ate in silence.

He placed a glass of water in front of me. "Eat slowly. There's no rush."

I lowered my gaze in silence.

Half an hour had passed when lunch ended. He didn't touch any of the food, only stared as I ate.

When I put down my cutlery, he questioned, "Finished?"

I nodded and wiped my mouth.

I noticed the time was already half past one. "Thank you for the meal. It's late now, so I have to return to work."

I excused myself from the table and left the restaurant.

I wasn't acting cold towards him, nor was I pushing him away. I only wanted to leave the past, in the past.

He followed me out. "Let me send you back."

I nodded because flagging down a taxi in R Province was difficult.

The whole car trip back was silent.

He noticed that I had no intention to speak, so he spoke up. "Let me handle Joyce. You only need to focus on your job."

My brows knitted into a frown. "There's no need!" I already got Uncle Louis to help, so I didn't need to involve Ashton.

Moreover, Louis was investigating corruption cases all over the country, so I was only helping him.

Ashton lowered his gaze and didn't reply further.

Once we reached the hotel, I said, "Thanks for the ride!"

He nodded, being the gentlemen he was, and kept his good manner and elegance.

Louis arrived shortly at the hotel at five in the evening. An hour later, the county mayor and mayors of neighboring cities arrived one after another as well.

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They were joined by a few local wealthy businessmen.

Louis arranged for someone to run a check on the county mayor and dismissed the rest.

He glanced at me and sighed, "Scarlett, you've gotten thinner."

I smiled faintly. "Are you hungry? Why don't you come over for dinner? You can visit Summer as well."

He chuckled, "I thought you would never ask! I'll be more than willing to join you."

I gave a vague smile. "I hope the food would be to your liking!"

He frowned. "Scarlett, what are you talking about? You are registered under the Stovall family register, so you're my daughter. Since when did our relationship distance to this extent?"

And so I brought him to my house.

Earlier, I had asked Colin to help pick Summer up. When Louis and I arrived, Colin and Summer were already home.

Summer lifted her head and stared at Louis. "Uncle, I've seen you on Mommy's phone before."

Louis and I were bewildered by her remark. "Do you recognize me then?"

Summer nodded. "Yes, you catch bad guys."

I quickly realized that she probably saw Louis in the news because, at times, I would pay special attention to K City's happenings when I watched the evening news, so naturally, Louis would appear then.

Summer had an excellent memory, so it wasn't unusual for her to remember him.

Holding on to Summer, I said, "Summer, let's be polite and call grandpa."

Summer lifted her head again to look at Louis. "Grandpa, could you help me catch bad guys?"

Louis bent down slightly and said, "Who is the bad guy you need me to catch?"

Summer thought about it for a while and answered, "The bad guy in Mr. Johnson's hotel always scolds my mommy. She also calls me a bastard."

Children were pure in nature. I had brought Summer to the hotel for housekeeping before because I was worried about leaving her alone at home. We would occasionally bump into Joyce, and she would even curse at children.

I thought that Summer wouldn't remember such a minor detail, so I wasn't expecting her to expose Joyce under such circumstances.

I smiled as I held on to Summer. "Summer, grandpa is here for dinner today, not for work. So catching bad guys would have to wait. I'm going to give you a small task. Why don't you and Michael bring grandpa to the back and see what he likes and bring those back?"

Summer nodded. "Sure, mommy!"

She paused briefly as if she remembered something and tugged Louis. "Grandpa, let's go. The grapes Mommy grew around the fence are ripe now. Let's pluck them."

Summer had forgotten all about catching bad guys and was already tugging Louis to the back.

Colin noticed my unusual mood. "You're Louis Stovall's daughter?"

How should I explain this?

"Four years ago, he acknowledged me as his daughter by fate. So yeah, I'm his daughter."

He went silent and didn't pursue further.

The optimal relationship between people was by maintaining a polite distance and not probe for one's secrets.

Mid-way through dinner, the doorbell rang.

Being the active little girl Summer was, she ran to get the door once she heard the bell rang. I got up and followed her.

Summer's words reached me before I could understand the situation. "Mommy, there is a bad guy outside our door!"

I jumped in shock and rushed towards Summer. I saw Joyce barging in with red, puffy eyes and a haggard look.

Before I could react, Joyce dashed towards me. She held on to me and knelt.

She sobbed. "Scarlett, it is all my fault. My father is innocent, so do whatever you want to me, but please let me father go."

Hearing her words, I was able to guess what happened. Louis was efficient in his work, and there weren't many who would doubt his decisions.

I thought the investigation would take place the next morning since Louis had just arrived at R Province.

Just a few hours had passed, and Joyce was on her knees begging in front of me.

I pursed my lips while I removed her hand and took a few steps back to keep my distance from her. "Ms. Newton, I think you're mistaken. Why are you on your knees begging me for help here? This is not a church or temple."

Hearing the commotion, Louis and Colin came to see.

They were baffled at Joyce's appearance, then frowned at her behavior.

Joyce surprisingly recognized Louis despite not watching the news often. She came up to him and sobbed. "Mr. Stovall, please let me father go. He was just an average person. He has always been an honest man and followed the law strictly. It was me who caused trouble. I shouldn't have behaved arrogantly.

"Please, it is all my fault. If you're taking revenge on me by abusing your power, please don't involve my father. Mr. Stovall, you're a person with high status. I know you're not afraid of anyone, but we're different. All these years, my father had abided by the law. He had never done anything bad. He was only a petty official. Every step forward was difficult for him. He couldn't win against you."