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"Mrs. Fuller, I'll need to check your wound," the doctor told me.

I paused before pulling up my skirt, exposing the bruise on my knee.

Ashton's arms around me tightened as he reminded the doctor, "Be gentle. She's quite sensitive."

The doctor nodded and pressed on my bruise lightly. "Does it hurt?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I'm fine." It was just a slight fall, and Ashton was exaggerating.

The doctor nodded and applied some ointment on my bruise. He handed the ointment to Ashton and stated, "Apply this on her wound every morning and night. Massage it gently. She'll be fine after a few days of rest."

Ashton nodded and ordered Joseph to send the doctor out.

All the while, he kept his arms around me.

I knew he was worried about me. The quieter he was, the more guilty I felt.

Raising a hand, I tugged his shirt gently. "Ashton, I haven't had dinner yet."

I was starving after the huge outcry earlier.

A chuckle escaped his lips as he asked, "Sure. What do you want to eat?"

"Anything will do!" I was just hungry and didn't have any specific cravings.

He nodded and kissed my forehead gently before pulling the covers up for me.

After he left, I let out a sigh. Today's incident must've caused Fuller Corporation's situation to worsen.

Feeling parched, I rose to my feet. The bruise wasn't painful at all.

When I arrived downstairs, Ashton and Joseph were huddled together in the kitchen. Both men were tall and attractive. Just looking at them was enough to have one sigh in admiration.

Something was bubbling on the stove. Ashton was washing something while Joseph was helping him. They seemed to be engrossed in conversation.

I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a glass.

"How did Scarlett's whereabouts get leaked out?" Ashton inquired.

Startled, I turned to look at them.

They were so engrossed with what they were doing and didn't notice I was there.

Joseph washed the ingredients while explaining, "Mrs. Fuller bumped into Ms. Ludwick at the hospital."

Ashton arched a brow. "Ms. Ludwick?"

"Kristina Ludwick."

Discarding the stuff in his hand, Ashton's gaze landed on the bubbling pot. "What happened?"

"It seems that Mrs. Fuller and Ms. Larson had a fight at the entrance of the hospital," reported Joseph. "Ms. Ludwick cursed Mrs. Fuller."

"What did she say?" Ashton pressed on. He proceeded to throw the ingredients into the pot calmly.

Joseph touched his nose uneasily before replying, "B*tch!"

Ashton's expression hardened upon hearing the answer. His hands paused midair as he grunted, "Mm."

Everyone who knew him well could tell that he was angry.

Joseph washed his hands clean before asking, "What do I have to do?"

Instead of giving him an order, Ashton queried, "Do you know what women care about the most?"

Joseph was taken aback. "Their looks?" he guessed.

A hint of mirth appeared in Ashton's gaze.

"She'll only learn her lesson after something she cares for the most gets destroyed."

Joseph quirked his brows and answered, "Got it!"

He wiped his hands dry and retrieved his phone, about to leave.

Ashton removed the pot from the stove. "She's a woman, so spare her slightly. Inform Jared before taking any action. If it bothers him, teach her a lesson. If he isn't bothered, do as you see fit."

Joseph nodded and exited the kitchen.

As I was in the living room, I overheard everything. Joseph spotted me immediately. He seemed slightly surprised, but quickly composed himself. "Mrs. Fuller!" he greeted me politely.

He left after that.

I stood rooted to the spot as Ashton came out. He noticed that I was barefooted. "Why aren't you wearing slippers?"

Gaping, I explained, "I was in a hurry and forgot to put them on."

Ashton picked me up and brought me back to the bedroom.

He was going to head downstairs when I pulled on his sleeve. His eyes crinkled up in amusement as he asked, "What's wrong?"

"I'm thirsty!" I wanted to get some water but overheard their conversation accidentally.

Nodding, he responded, "Okay. Wait for me."

When I finished the glass of water, he brought dinner up and served it to me. "Here you go. Rest well after dinner, alright?"

I nodded obediently. There was no need to ask about Kristina. After all, none of us were innocent.

Even though I was starving earlier, I no longer had any appetite after a couple of bites.

Since I stopped eating, Ashton frowned. "Do you not like the food?"

I shook my head and leaned into his embrace. "It's yummy, but I don't feel hungry anymore."

He didn't force me to finish the food lest I puke it all out.

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Ashton knew me better than I do.

We embraced each other silently as time ticked by.

Gradually, I drifted to sleep. Halfway through the night, I sensed him taking my hand and muttering, "Scarlett, I'm sorry!"

His voice was low and blurry, and I soon dozed off.

The next morning, John showed up bearing gifts.

Most of them were for Summer.

My face was unnaturally pale, so he ignored Ashton and suggested, "Why don't you move to the Stovall residence?"

The Stovall residence was located in the city center and guarded heavily by the military. If the reporters barged in, they would be punished severely.

I shook my head. Summer didn't go to school today. She was pleased with his gifts and kept fondling the toys adoringly.

Recalling Hannah's situation, I furrowed my brows. "Have you visited Hannah?"

Stunned, he responded, "Mm."

I knew he was brushing me off. Feeling an incoming headache, I demanded, "John, if you don't love her, you could've broken up with her ages ago. Why did you force her to stay by your side and ignore her? Have you ever considered your child's future?"

Frowning, he massaged his temples and exhaled in frustration. "Scarlett, stay out of this, will you? Hannah gave birth to my child, so I won't mistreat her."

I fell silent. After a long pause, I inquired, "Did you fall for Yvonne Wilde?"

His frown deepened. "It's nothing. Don't overthink things."

"Mommy, I saw Granny when Uncle John picked me up. She said she'll visit you soon," announced Summer suddenly.

I was astounded. Looking at John, I repeated dully, "Granny?"

He nodded. "Yes, it's Cameron. She's involved in charity work now. I ran into her in Summer's school and chatted with her briefly."

I pursed my lips and fell silent.

If Summer hadn't mentioned her, I would've forgotten about our relationship.

As I said nothing, John hesitated before adding, "I know you despise her, but she gave birth to you and searched for you all her life. She had no other choice. Scarlett, perhaps she's suffering more than you can imagine."

I held on tight to the warm glass in my hand. "John, when I first met her in Pear Garden, Mr. Clinton said I resembled her a lot. I went back home and stared at my reflection for a long time. Back then, I thought that I'd look like my mother a lot if she hadn't abandoned me when I was a child."

"When I was young, Grandma told me I was a dandelion. My mother took great care of me, but the wind blew me away and brought me to Grandma's arms. In fact, I've never blamed her. Grandma might've brought me up, but she never told me I was abandoned. I was just a kid who was blown away by the wind."

Summer crawled into my lap and consoled me. "Mommy, it's fine. You have me!"

My lips curled up into a smile as the bitterness in my heart faded away.

Staring at John, I continued, "I've never blamed her for abandoning me. When I found out Rebecca was her long-lost daughter, I felt envious. She then showered her love on Rebecca. I envy her for having such a loving mother. Unfortunately, she chose to harm me in order to protect her."

I let out a laugh at the absurd way things had turned out.

A flash of sympathy appeared in John's gaze. He took a deep breath and answered, "Scarlett, we can't live in the past, right?"

I knew that very well, but there was no use denying what had happened.

"I dare not hate or despise her as we're related by blood, after all. I buried the pain deep down and licked my wounds alone." Wincing in pain, I added, "John, I'm not that generous. Do you know why I couldn't bear seeing Hannah's predicament? That was because I used to be like her. I used to be inferior in love."

"Because of my background, I felt blessed to marry Ashton. I knew he treated Rebecca differently. Whenever there was thunder, he'd wake up and spend hours driving over to her house to be with her. I was terribly jealous of her back then. I was afraid of the thunder too. However, I couldn't call Ashton as he had to take care of someone else. I had no choice but to bury myself under the covers and bit my lip through the whole ordeal."

The memories were etched in my brain forever. If I didn't recall them, they'd still be there somewhere. But my heart would still ache the moment they were brought up.

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I guess that was what memories were meant for.

John parted his lips to comfort me, but the words choked in his throat at the sight of someone behind me.

I immediately knew who it was. Turning at my shoulder, indeed, I saw Ashton with a gloomy expression on his face.

John rose to his feet and bade goodbye to us.

Summer ran out to the yard to play with Snowfluff. Ashton and I were left alone in the living room.

After letting out a soft sigh, I looked down at my phone as I had no idea how much he had overheard earlier.

Suddenly, his coat fell on my shoulders. "It's wintertime. Remember to put on more clothes."

His drawl was attractive and sexy.

Nodding, I pulled the coat around my body. All of a sudden, he took out a cigarette and lit it up.

Knitting my brows together, I watched as he puffed on it elegantly. I hadn't seen him smoke in a while.

It seemed like Fuller Corporation was in huge trouble.

"Will it snow tomorrow?" I broke the silence.

He took a long puff and held the cigarette between his slender fingers.

"Let's watch the snow tonight," he suggested out of nowhere. Strangely, I was delighted with his suggestion.

I was born in the south. I might be familiar with snow, but I've never seen a snow landscape. That must be stunningly beautiful.

Standing up, I went to him. With a smile, I replied, "Sure. I've never stayed up to watch the snow. It sounds exciting."

He looked at me as his familiar fragrance permeated my senses blended with a slight hint of tobacco.

Moving the cigarette out of my sight, he said, "Scarlett, you can choose not to see her."

I looked up and met his gaze.

Spotting the flickering cigarette, something came over me. I grabbed the cigarette from him and took a puff.

Immediately, the smoke caught in my throat. It wasn't as pleasant as it seemed. Luckily, it didn't choke me badly.

"What are you doing?" Ashton snatched the cigarette from me and stubbed it out quickly before throwing it into the trash can.

His gaze landed on me. "If you feel unhappy, you can vent it out on me."

I flashed a smile and shook my head wearily. "Ashton, I'm tired." Indeed, I was exhausted from all the recent events.

He took me into his arms. As he tightened his arms around me, I felt my heart throbbing dully.

"I was happy to make her acquaintance. Back then, I thought she was blessed to age gracefully." I paused briefly before continuing. "When she locked me in the warehouse and killed my baby slowly, no one could imagine the hatred I had for her. I swore if I could survive the horrible ordeal, I'd make sure she suffers ten times the pain my child went through."

At the mention of my child, the pain in my heart intensified.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down. "Never in my wildest dream did I expect I'd pay the price. I wish I never knew her, never married you, and never came to J City in the first place. Perhaps it might be a blessing if we had not known each other."

He hugged me closer. I could feel his pain too as the pain in my chest intensified.

He was breathing heavily. Clearly, he was trying to tamp down his feelings.

I continued like a wooden puppet on strings. "Four years ago, when I first left, I was full of hatred. I wanted to stay away from you and have a clean cut with everyone else in my life. Just like how I was abandoned at birth, I wanted to leave everyone behind."

"Yet, things didn't go the way I hoped for. After meeting you in R Province again, I realized I no longer bore any hatred for you. It was as though venting out my feelings was a luxury. I knew if I couldn't bring myself to hate you, I wouldn't hate her as well. She's my mother. No matter what happened, I have to accept that fact without any complaints."

I had buried my hatred and anguish deep down, allowing them to grow wild without restraint over time.

Everyone wanted me to move on and start all over again, but my despair would continue to grow under the nourishment of the hatred I bore.

Ashton revealed. "When you left me four years ago, the villa felt really empty. I'd jolt awake at night after hearing a child crying and your cries of pain. It was as if someone was choking my throat, and I couldn't breathe. Joseph told me to move out, but I refused. After all, you used to live here."

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He added, "Scarlett, we're broken souls. Fate has brought us together and our lives are intertwined, and my life is not mine alone but shared with you. We're meant to be together."

His gaze was soft. "Here." He pointed at his chest. "You're the only one who has ever been here."

I pursed my lips and let out a long sigh. We shouldn't get sucked into the past.

Rising to my feet, I told him, "Ashton, I wish to be left alone."

Suddenly, I realized I couldn't bear to hate Cameron. She was my mother, and her actions stemmed from Ashton.

If Rebecca wasn't the one who returned to the Moore family, everything wouldn't have happened.

Rebecca, Cameron, and Ashton were all innocent.

Everyone merely took action out of overbearing concern for their loved ones. It was a misfortune for everyone, so even though we were all hurt in many ways, we couldn't bring ourselves to despise each other.

Ashton wanted to say something, but I pushed him away. We shouldn't delve into the past or risk hating everyone involved.

I went back in the bedroom, I locked Ashton outside.

He stood outside silently.

I didn't know where to vent my frustration. In the end, I could only blame myself for kicking up a fuss over nothing.

That very night, it snowed just like the weather forecast had predicted.

I sat on the balcony and watched the snow the whole night while my heart ached silently.

I knew I should move on, but the past would still haunt me when no one was around.

It was midnight when my phone started ringing incessantly. I had nodded off on the balcony. Picking my phone up, I realized it was Joseph.

Why is he calling me at midnight?

I answered his call. Before I could say anything, he spoke hastily, "Mrs. Fuller, Mr. Fuller is at the yard of Moore Residence. Can you please come and convince him to leave?"

Huh? Why is Ashton at the Moore Residence?

After a pause, I asked, "What happened?"

He hesitated, seemingly stumped. "Mr. Fuller wants to atone for his sins and came to the Moore Residence. He's been here for a few hours. It's snowing heavily, so I'm afraid of his health."

My nose started prickling uncomfortably as I didn't know what to say. Some memories were best left untouched lest they bring harm to someone else.

"Okay, I'll be there!" I promised.

Summer was asleep. I left the villa, but there was no cab available due to the heavy snow. I could only drive there myself.

Luckily, the roads weren't blocked. An hour later, I arrived at Moore Residence.

The brightly lit Moore Residence stood out against the dark of the night. It was late at night, and everyone else should be asleep by now.

When I pushed the gate open, I saw Ashton almost buried by the layers of snow as expected.

He was kneeling in front of the door. Snow had piled up on his custom-made black coat. It seemed like he had been here for some time.

His back was straight and determined. Clearly, the snow didn't bother him at all.

Cameron and Zachary stood at the entrance under the roof, seemingly torn.

My appearance broke the tension in the air. Cameron's gaze landed on me. Sadness clouded her features.

I avoided her intense gaze, I went to Ashton and stood behind him silently.

Joseph's face lit up at my appearance, but when he realized what I intended to do, he froze instantly.

Sensing my arrival, Ashton turned and rasped, "Go back and rest." His lips were purple and numb from the cold by now.

I pressed my lips together, opting to ignore him.

Furrowing his brows, he looked at Joseph. "Send her back."

Seeing this, Joseph came to me and sighed helplessly. "Mrs. Fuller, let's go. You're too weak to stand the cold."

I uttered, "I'm already here. Why would I go back now?"

At a loss for words, he blurted guiltily, "I'm sorry. I didn't think this through."

Quietly, he came to stand beside me.

Ashton's face clouded over in fury.

Zachary's gaze was full of adoration and anguish as it landed on me. The couple seemed to have aged over the past four years.

Time was indeed capable of ruining the wonderful things in life.

"Ashton, is this how you atone for your sins?" asked Zachary. There was a hint of fury in his voice. "Because of your selfishness, we ended up in this state. What are you doing now? Forcing our daughter to accompany you in this weather so we'll have no choice but to forgive you?"

Ashton's back stiffened as he gazed at the man silently.

We had reached a point where someone would get hurt no matter what happened next.

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At the villa, Emery walked down the stairs with a wool sweater and draped it over me. With a slight frown, she said, "In order to let go of the past, one has to be willing to endure the pain that comes with it. Scarlett, come in with me. The only thing you have to do is to accept everyone's apologies graciously."

I pursed my lips and looked at Ashton, well aware that things started to go wrong when he hid the DNA report which resulted in the switch in places between Rebecca and I.

That was also the beginning of all the pain and suffering.

Cameron looked at me. Her voice choked up as she said, "My dear, stop torturing yourself. We should be the ones bearing the consequences for our own wrongdoings."

After she said that, she removed her coat, socks and shoes and stepped onto the snow-covered path. With the cold wind blowing against her face, each step she took seemed extremely difficult.

Zachary was heartbroken seeing his wife doing that but did not attempt to talk her out of it.

Even though I was not able to describe my feelings being in such a situation, I knew it wasn't anything pleasant.

Everyone was punishing themselves in their own ways, willingly bearing the consequences for their actions. It seemed like it was time for me to move on as well.

"What are all of you doing?" I spoke calmly. Looking at Ashton, who was trembling from the cold, I let out a dry laugh and said, "You know how much I love you and would never want to see you suffer or get hurt. Why did you still do that? You should have just let me bury the pain deep inside my heart and not dig it up ever again. Do you know how unbearable the pain is for me? What are you expecting from me torturing yourself like this? Am I supposed to stop you from doing that and tell you it's OK and that I forgive you with tears streaming down my face? Do you want me to tell you that I forgive you for changing my life, for inadvertently causing the death of our child and for everything you've done? Ashton, do you think I'm a saint who can forgive and forget all the hurt you and everyone else caused me?"

Actually, we didn't have to come to this point. If I had a choice, I wouldn't mention all those so that I could pretend nothing ever happened. I guess I would have been able to carry on with the love and care he was showering me with.

"Ashton, why did you have to revisit my wounds and even dig your nails into them?"

I could see his pale lips quivering. He opened his mouth but was unable to say a single word.

Then, he lowered his head and let out a self-deprecating laugh. With a grimace, he said, "Sorry, I wasn't thoughtful enough."

Trying my best to suppress my feelings, which was a mixture of heartache and fury, I said, "Ashton, what do you want me to do now? What do you want from the Moore family? Do you expect people to get over it and continue to get along like before?"

Yup, I was not able to let go of the pain. But by doing so, I would only continue hurting.

That was not what I knew atonement to be.

Looking at Cameron, who was still standing in the snow, I was at a loss for words. "Do you know what you're doing right now? Are you trying to gain sympathy and expecting me to tell you that I'm not mad at you anymore and no longer blame you? Please, don't torture yourself this way. What's done has already been done. Even if you would like to be punished, this isn't the way to do it. What's your objective for doing all these? Is it to tell the whole world that by using your pity tactics, I'm forced to forgive all of you? And if I don't, it would show that I'm petty and merciless as knowing that all of you might die from the cold, I'm still not willing to budge. Are you guys trying to announce to the world that I am heartless?"

"Scarlett!" Cameron's face was drained of color after I said that.

She opened her mouth, but seemed to be at a loss for words.

I removed the wool sweater which Emery had put on me and returned it to her. "Thanks!" I said unemotionally.

She took over the sweater with a nod and said, "It's already so late. Do you want to stay here tonight?"

"I drove here." I shook my head and rejected her offer.

Without looking at those people still standing in the snow, I left the Moore Residence resolutely.

The snow was exceptionally heavy that night.

I wasn't sure if Ashton had eventually returned to the villa. After I went back, I stayed inside the bedroom but was unable to sleep at all.

Since things had already progressed till the current stage, nothing could make things right again.

Right before dawn, the glow from the sparkling snowflakes had already penetrated through the windows and lit up my bedroom. A lovely snowy landscape outside greeted me in the morning.

After staying awake the entire night, I glanced at the clock and realized it was already 5 a.m.. It was time for me to wake up.

After putting on my jacket, I went downstairs and saw that the lights in the living room were still switched on. Apparently, Ashton did not come back last night.

As usual, I headed to the kitchen to prepare breakfast for Summer while waiting for her to wake up. After breakfast, I sent her to school.

I guess we had reached too early as the school gate was still shut.

“Mommy, we are too early. I’m so sleepy,” Summer said as she yawned. Then, she lay against the car seat, wanting to catch more sleep.

I tousled her hair and told her that I’d wake her up when the gate was opened. At that moment, I was feeling rather emotional but I wasn’t able to pinpoint exactly what feeling that was.

The school gate finally opened almost half an hour later. After sending Summer off, I realized that I had nothing else to do.

I only saw the news about Kristina when I was scrolling through my social media after I returned to the villa and realized that Ashton was still not back yet.

Initially, it was the headline of that article that caught my attention. It was only after I clicked on it that I realized it was about Kristina being a school bully when she was in college. Someone had even recorded a video of her in action.