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I nodded, indicating that I was going to go downstairs soon.

Ashton's voice travelled from the phone. "Joseph will be there soon. You should go over together!"

I knew he was worried about me, but I felt he was making a mountain out of a molehill. "Stacey and I will be fine."

"I told you to go with Joseph!" he barked.

Helpless, I could only nod and agree.

I noticed that it was late and said, "I'm leaving now. I'll call you when I reach home."

"Go back after you've had dinner and put on more clothes. Wear a thicker coat too," he reminded me.

I nodded. "Got it. It's spring now. Besides, this is J City, not K City. It's hot here!"

Many girls on the street had started to wear skirts.

He ignored my words and said, "Wear more clothes. Don't forget to call me when you reach home."

I knew that he was about to start nagging. I quickly curbed the onslaught by saying, "Got it!" I hung up the call.

So it was true. After being together for some time, our conversations were mostly filled with trivial chatter. This was probably how life was supposed to be.

Downstairs, Mrs. Eriksen had hung up the call. When she saw me come down, she said, "Letty, have dinner before you return home. Mr. Campbell is on his way here. He should be here by the time you're finished."

I looked at the phone she had just put down and asked, "Did Ashton call you?"

As I spoke, I walked to the dining table and took a seat. I started to eat and Summer watched me with twinkling eyes. "Mommy, you're just like a child. Mr. Fuller has to remind you to eat," she teased.

I placed a piece of food I knew she did not fancy into her bowl and snapped, "You're the child. Hurry up and eat."

Mrs. Eriksen set down a pot of soup in front of me and said, "Mr. Ashton told me to make this soup for you this morning. He said you have to drink it because it'll nourish you."

My mouth fell agape as I stared at the large pot of soup. My head started to ache and I choked out, "Mrs. Eriksen, there's no way I'll be able to finish all this."

She shook her head, her expression solemn. "No. You have to finish the soup. Mr. Ashton said that you won't eat much at the auction. All you ate were desserts. Too much dessert is bad for you."

I had a sneaking suspicion that Ashton was not in K City at all, rather he was in J City. He tracked my every movement like a shadow.

I sighed and silently gulped down the soup. Once I was done, I was too full for any more food.

I looked at Mrs. Eriksen vexedly and asked, "Are you satisfied?"

She seriously inspected the pot before scooping out some of the ingredients and placing them in my bowl. "You have to eat these. They're good for you," she said.

The rumble of an engine could be heard coming from the yard. I stood up and said to Summer, "Summer, finish these ingredients."

"Mrs. Erickson, Mr. Campbell is here. I'll be taking my leave. Please take care of Summer tonight."

"Hey, you haven't finished the food!" yelled Mrs. Eriksen from behind me.

I quickly climbed into the car and said to Joseph, "Head towards the southern suburbs. I'll send you the address through WhatsApp."

Joseph nodded and started up the engine. He looked out at Mrs. Eriksen who had come out of the house and remarked, "Mrs. Eriksen's legs are in great condition."

Are you kidding me?

She followed me all the way out here. Her legs must be very strong. Thankfully, the car had started to drive away and Joseph did not seem to intend to stop.

During the journey, Joseph stole glances at me. He seemed to be hesitating to speak.

After a few glances, I could not help but blurt out, "What's wrong? Do you have something to say?"

As he maneuvered the steering wheel, he said, "The Murphys are the number one petroleum conglomerate. They might have a deeper reason for choosing J City to be the site of the auction."

I nodded and replied, "I know. I heard that the eldest grandchild of the Murphys is coming. He always fancied holding auctions in various locations. When he finds a treasure that he likes, he always snaps it up at high prices."

Joseph glanced at me and paused before replying, "It's best if you stay on your toes. Mr. Fuller wants you to be careful."

I nodded. Ashton seemed overly cautious. Although the Murphys were powerful, every large clan had members with hobbies. In the past, kings had concubines, riches, and artifacts.

It was normal for the Murphys to have a member that was obsessed with antiques.

Fifteen minutes later.

The car stopped outside the museum where the auction was being held. I climbed out of the car. "Mrs. Fuller, you go in first. I'll join you soon," said Joseph.

I nodded and fished the invite out of my bag. I tilted my head to admire the steps that seemed to extend forever. For some reason, architects liked to include long flights of stairs at the entrance when they were designing meaningful sites.

Were they trying to enforce the message that one needed to work hard in order to enter houses of knowledge?

Several people dressed in military uniform stood at the museum's entrance, their backs ramrod straight.

A member of the staff dressed in a suit was checking out invitations.

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I handed my invitation to him. He smiled and gave me a paddle before gesturing me to walk forward.

I entered the auction hall with the paddle in hand. Many of the seats inside were already filled.

I found my seat. Stacey had already arrived. When she saw me, she said, "I thought you weren't coming."

I gently sat down and looked around at the large number of people in the auction hall. I could not help but exclaim in surprise, "I didn't expect this auction to be on a large scale. There are so many people here."

Usually, only influential individuals were invited. However, the guest list seemed to be more complex this time.

She leaned into my ear and whispered, "All the VIPs are seated in front. The seats at the back are just glorified audience members."

A smile tugged at my lips. I felt she was exaggerating and checked the number on my paddle. The number one hundred was inscribed on it.

Evidently, there were at least a hundred people present at the auction.

I scanned the surroundings and noticed that black was draped over items that were situated all around the area. I could not help but ask curiously, "What's all those?"

She lowered her voice and said, "Those are the treasures collected by various specialty stores in J City. Once the auction starts, the black cloth will be removed to reveal the treasures. It's so the participants can check them out."

I nodded. This was my first time at such an auction.

My phone vibrated. The call was coming from Joseph. I picked up and he said, "Mrs. Fuller, please come to the front."

I was stunned and looked over at Joseph, who was standing near the stage. "I can sit at the back," I replied.

"Mr. Fuller has made the arrangements. You'll have a better view from the front," said Joseph.

Stacey noticed Joseph and said excitedly, "You'll be able to see the items clearly from the front. Most importantly, you'll be able to rub elbows with the wealthy people of J City."

She looked at me with puppy eyes and whimpered, "Scarlett, I know Mr. Fuller has arranged everything nicely for you. Please bring me along."

With my phone in hand, I was at a loss for what to do. I thought it over before asking, "Joseph, can I bring Stacey along?"

Joseph paused for a moment before nodding. "Sure!"

I thanked him, hung up the phone, and looked at the eager Stacey. "Let's go!"

If not for the silence imposed by the large number of people present, she would definitely be screaming for joy.

She could only cover her mouth and whisper, "Great! You're the best, Scarlett."

I smiled and walked to the front row with her.

The law, schools, and teachers always extol those things should be done fairly. Every citizen should receive equal treatment and people should judge their fellow man fairly.

But when I thought about it, I realized that equality was a mirage. From the moment that people were born, they were sorted into different classes. In school, the teachers favored the smart. In society, the disparity is all the more salient.

This auction was a good example. The point of being in attendance was the same. Yet, the people at the front were relaxed and served refreshments. The people at the back had naught.

Society established a pecking order, and one's treatment was decided accordingly.

At the front row, Joseph switched out Stacey and my paddles. He handed me a black card.

I was confused and asked, "What's this?"

"Mr. Fuller said that you can bid on whatever attracts your attention. This card should cover it all," replied Joseph.

"Damn! Mr. Fuller is being so blatant!" blurted Stacey.

"How do you stand this?" she asked Joseph.

Joseph scratched his nose and coughed wryly before replying, "I'm used to it!"

Stacey gave him a thumbs up. "I salute you!"

I could not help but say, "Don't be ridiculous. I won't be using this card because I have no intention of buying anything. I only came here to watch."

The minimum bids at this auction were one million. Besides, I had no interest in collecting artifacts. Even if I did, I would not splurge on an antique that I could only enjoy with my eyes.

All I could do was return the black card to Joseph. He did not accept it and said, "Hold onto it. Mr. Fuller told me to give it to you. Even if you don't use it today, you'll be able to in the future."

I knew he was not going to take it back and I did not insist. Almost all the people had arrived.

After the host onstage unloaded a lengthy speech on us, the auction began.

The first item up for bid was a gold hair ornament. It was supposedly the favorite accessory of a queen.

Stacey pursed her lips and muttered, "Only the Murphys are capable of auctioning off such items."

I was slightly confused and asked, "What do you mean?"

She pointed at the gold hair ornament. "Items from that era are usually passed through the generations and most of them have been snatched up by museums. However, the Murphys are in possession of such a beautiful gold hair ornament and are even auctioning it off in a museum. Isn't it ironic? If the Murphys were a less influential family, they would have been sought out by some organization ages ago and given some petty compensation in return for this artifact. Look at how blatant the Murphys are being. They kept this in their home for years and now they're auctioning it off just like that."

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As the bids were continued to be yelled out, she whispered, "Listen carefully. The bid is now at ten million. Normal people won't be able to offer more than five hundred."

I pursed my lips and sighed. There were some rules that we could never change.

The higher one rose, the more unscrupulous affairs they would witness. One wrong slip and you would end up amongst the muck, an accessory to the thugs.

Finally, an elderly person won the gold hair ornament with a bid of ten million.

Such events were common.

There was no point in being surprised.

The second item up for bid was a blood jadeite. Apparently, Robert had brought it back for his wife when he went overseas for business in the nineties.

Although this was premium jadeite, it lacked a bangle. Thus, the bid only went up to five million.

Joseph frowned and he seemed to be trying to puzzle something out.

The auction was starting to bore me, so I chatted with Stacey.

Stacey's gaze had swept the entire auction area and took in all that there was to see.

She introduced all the artifacts to me and sighed in awe. "Wow, these are all worth tens of millions. These collectors are hoarding all these riches. Some of these items are priceless."

I looked around and agreed with her. "If someone stole one of these, the money they would make off of it would last them for a lifetime."

Stacey's lips twitched and she deadpanned, "See? The items are being protected by diamond containers, and there's two highly skilled personnel assigned to each item. There's no way a regular person could dream of getting close to any of the items. A professional comes to do a check every five minutes as well."

It was tough.

"The sandalwood box is here. Look!" Stacey said as she pointed towards the stage and patted me.

I turned to see. On the stage was the exact replica of the box that Grandma had given me.

The host was enthusiastically introducing the sandalwood box. "All of you must be curious to know why we're auctioning off this seemingly unassuming sandalwood box, right?"

The audience members nodded.

The host continued speaking, "To tell you the truth, this box has unbelievable meaning. Although it looks plain, if you take a closer look, you'll see that it was made from hundred-year-old sandalwood. You can't find such wood anymore. It's completely extinct. Moreover, I have to point out the box's workmanship. I know it looks ordinary from the outside!"

The host turned the box for the audience to see.

A commotion broke out amongst the audience. The host spoke again, "From this noise, I can tell that you're having the same reaction as I did. This is actually a box. The special part

of this box's design is that it looks like it can be opened. However, upon closer inspection, you'll realize that it can't be opened. Actually, this box has a pair that comes with it. As of now, we have no idea where its partner is. You'll only be able to open this box if you find its pair."

"See, I told you!" exclaimed Stacey excitedly.

I nodded and looked at the sandalwood box on stage. As I peered closer at it, I could see no difference between it and the box Grandma had given me.

However, there must be something special about them.

The host continued to speak, "The bid for this sandalwood box starts at two thousand. You may begin bidding."

With such a low price, there should be bidders. However, the bid only reached a hundred thousand and stopped there.

I was confused and asked Stacey, "Why aren't they bidding for the box?"

Stacey said to me in a hushed tone, "It's simple. No one knows if there's anything inside the puzzle box. You have to find its pair in order to open it. If the pair can't be found, there's no point in owning the box."

"But it's a precious collectible. Even if you can't find the other box, it has great workmanship. If they keep it as an artifact, the value is sure to increase after a hundred years."

Moreover, compared to the items that were worth tens of millions, a few hundred thousand were peanuts.

Stacey chuckled. "Many people know this box belongs to Robert Murphy and that he treasures it. The young master of the Murphy family must have slipped up by putting it up for auction. He wouldn't dare to sell it off."

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I was curious about the son of the Murphy family. I looked around the auction area and asked, "Where is Mr. Murphy? I don't see him."

She pointed at several places around the area and replied, "The place is filled with surveillance cameras. The young master of the Murphy family is watching everything from the shadows."

I pursed my lips. He sure liked to waste his time.

I looked back at the box onstage and said after a moment's pondering, "Are you sure the Murphys won't auction it off?"

She shrugged. "I can't say for sure."

"Okay. The current bid is four hundred and fifty thousand. Are there any more bids? Four hundred and fifty thousand going once, four hundred and fifty thousand going twice..." announced the host.

"One million!" someone yelled out, cracking the calm atmosphere.

The bid had come from Joseph. I was appalled and asked in befuddlement, "Mr. Campbell..."

He looked at me solemnly and replied, "Mr. Fuller has requested that I buy this box. It might be able to open your box."

I was stunned. "The thing in the box belongs to Grandma. I just want to take a look inside. But, it doesn't matter whether I'm able to open it or not. I'll always keep it."

He smiled a small smile. "Mr. Fuller hopes that you'll be able to find out what's inside."

The host continued calling for one million...

Stacey leaned towards me and whispered, "It's not a huge loss to buy it for one million. You have both boxes now, which means double the value. They can become family heirlooms."

I thought her words over. It seemed like a good idea. I could not open the box on its own. It was a good idea to open it. They also had value as collectibles.

The host called the bid thrice and was about to bang the gavel. I was sure the box was mine.

Suddenly, a deep voice bellowed, "Ten million!"

A roar erupted amongst the crowd. The bid had far exceeded the box's value.

Joseph frowned. He was about to bid a higher price, but I stopped him. "Don't do it."

It was fine if the box was never opened. If we really wanted to open it, we could always try asking the eventual buyer of the box.

It was not worth it to spend so much money on this box.

I looked around curiously until I found the person who had called out the bid.

From the front seat of the VIP section, Stacey sighed. "This must be the assistant. The boss is still hiding!"

I looked at the man who had raised the paddle. He was dressed in a black suit and his hair was immaculate, giving him a stern aura.

I asked Stacey, "How do you know he's not the boss?"

Judging from his charisma, he had to be a successful person. He seemed like a boss to me.

Stacey glanced at me and shook her head. "You're not observant enough. Take a closer look at his clothing choices. His clothes are all branded and must cost at least a million. He's very well put together."

She looked at Joseph and said, "Now take a look at Mr. Campbell. Do you think his clothes cost less than one million?"

I furrowed my brow. "So expensive clothes aren't a sign?"

She slapped her forehead and whispered into my ear, "I mean that the man and Mr. Campbell are of the same level. They're above ordinary people but not elite enough to be bosses. Think carefully about what Ashton wears. What does he usually put on?"

I had never paid attention to the brands of Ashton's clothes. "Ashton's clothes are all custom made. Moreover, he only wears one color. There isn't anything particularly special."

It was true. He always wore black. This was probably the reason why he needed to have his clothes custom-made.

She scoffed and replied, "Do you think custom-made clothes are worse than branded clothes? The clothes he wears come from designers that charge earth-shattering prices. They're also handmade and made from the best materials. Additionally, his clothes seem to be limited edition. The designers are prohibited from selling the rights to the design. As such, the clothes are one of a kind."

I knitted my brows and stopped talking. I was not knowledgeable about this field. My clothes were supplied by Ashton's instructions to Joseph. To me, they were just pieces of cloth used to cover and protect our bodies. Whether they cost tens, hundreds, or thousands made no difference to me. All that mattered was that they were comfortable.

The box that cost hundreds of thousands was bought by the man in the black suit. The box was not precious to me. All I wanted was to open it.

After a moment's consideration, I told Joseph to ask the man in the black suit for his number. If the opportunity arose, I'm sure he was also curious to know what was in the puzzle box.

The rest of the auctioned items were accessories and antiques. I was not interested and planned to leave soon.

Stacey was a member of the staff and needed to stay to clean up afterward.

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Joseph and I came out of the museum. We had barely taken a few steps when someone called out to me.

"Miss, please stop!"

I turned around, saw the man who had bought the box at the auction just now and I smiled.
"Hi!"

He nodded. "Miss, may I buy you a cuppa?"

I glanced at Joseph to indicate that I would like to go. He had just told this man that we have another box.

Joseph nodded to indicate that I can accept the offer. I nodded and looked at the man.
"Mister, may I know your name?"

"My surname is Bates; you may call me Yuri." He spoke with the smile of a trustworthy man.

I nodded with a smile. "I'm Scarlett Stovall. Nice to meet you."

He smiled and gestured with his hand, "This way, please, Ms. Stovall!"

We followed him into a cafe bistro and seated ourselves. There was a live music performance going on.

Yuri took his time. He enjoyed the performance, and said, "The band is quite professional."

I did not say anything but Joseph looked at him and said in a dull tone, "Mr. Bates, it's better to go straight to the point."

Yuri looked at him indifferently, smiled, and then looked at me saying, "I heard that Ms. Stovall has a box that resembles mine. I'm very curious so I want to give it a try to test it out. Is it true that the boxes can open each other as they say?"

I pursed my lips. "Mr. Bates, those are my thoughts exactly but my box is kept at home. We have left our address. When it is convenient, you can bring your box to our place and we can try it out together to see if that could work.

He raised his eyebrows and sipped his tea, smiling. "Ms. Stovall, you have planned it well but I'm curious where you got your box from?"

I frowned and paused for a while. "My box was not obtained from an auction, rather, it was inherited from my ancestors."

For a moment, Yuri was stunned but he quickly recovered his composure and smiled, looking at me. "If that is the case, Ms. Stovall, you have come from an outstanding lineage. A normal family would not be able to afford craftsmen who can make this.

He thought about what he had just said and frowned slightly, "Even though I am not a native of J City, I still know a little about the city. I recall that J City does not have a prominent family by the surname of Stovall!"

I smiled and glanced at Joseph. He understood and looked at Yuri. "Mr. Bates, you are overthinking things. We are not from a prominent family but an ordinary one. Although this box is passed on by the ancestors, we don't know yet if the box you bought is a pair so we have to compare them to confirm."

"Oh, dear, we came out late. So much time has passed. We have to go home now."

Yuri frowned and he looked at me. "Ms. Stovall, why..."

I smiled. "I'm really sorry. I have a child at home. I must go home to check on her."

At that, I got up but Yuri seemed to have more to say. Nevertheless, when he saw that I was ready to leave, he held back whatever he had to say.

After leaving the museum, we got in the car and Joseph started the engine. He glanced at the rear-view mirror and saw a car following us. His lips leered in disdain.

I took a look and saw that it was Yuri who was driving the car. I said quietly, "Have you checked out who this Mr. Bates is?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, not yet. Tonight we'll know."

Looking at the Maybach, which was following us, I could not help but frown slightly. "There must be someone behind him."

Joseph nodded in agreement.

What puzzles me is why is Yuri attempting to trick information out of me?

"What are they planning to get from me?" I asked, somewhat puzzled.

Joseph shook his head slightly. "I would presume that they have designs on the box." After a pause, he looked at me and said, "Did you ask about the origins of the box before?"

I shook my head. "I have seen my grandma putting it in the cabinet since I was a child but I don't remember seeing it being opened before. I thought it was a jewelry box so I didn't care much and didn't pay much attention to it."

He grunted and then said plainly, "Yuri seems interested in finding out about the owners of the box."

I pursed my lips and made no further comments. These are things we need to investigate. Guessing won't help.

The car behind continued following us but it had put some distance in between for fear of being caught.

Joseph was driving towards the villa. Seeing this, I could not help but caution him, "It is too dangerous to let them see where we stay. Lose them first!"

After all, we have yet to know who Yuri is. It would be to our disadvantage if they know where we live and put us in a vulnerable position.

Joseph nodded and went into the next lane to speed up. Fortunately, he was very familiar with J City and it did not take long for him to drive around in a circle and shake off the car tailing us.

When we reached the villa, it was already dark and Summer had fallen asleep. Mrs. Eriksen had gotten ready the things required for visiting the grave and placed them downstairs.