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“Since you’re so adamant on keeping our relationship under wraps, I shall fulfill your wish,” Michael coldly replied and stormed out of the door without even sparing a second glance at me.

I was baffled to see him infuriated. I don’t think I said anything wrong, so why is he so angry? Could it be because of that message?

As I thought of that message he sent me, I was overwhelmed with guilt once again.

I hurriedly shook my head to get rid of any thoughts relating to Michael and directed my attention back to continue with dinner preparation.

Nonetheless, he did not return when dinner was ready. I sat at the dining table and waited for him, yet he never appeared even after two hours.

Every night, we would eat dinner together in this house without fail. That had slowly become a habit of mine. As such, I could not get used to his absence that night and only ate a few bites before going for a bath and then to bed.

I had always told myself not to hold Michael in a special place in my heart and to learn to be indifferent and composed so that there was no way I would fall in love with him.

After all, the one who got aroused first will be the loser between the two of us.

That night, Michael did not return. I was worried and had no idea where he went, but I suppressed the urge to call him.

In the next few days, he did not set foot at Birchwood either. I had only seen him in the company during the day. I desperately wanted to ask if he had gone to the mansion, or perhaps he had gone to some other woman’s house instead.

Nevertheless, I knew that I was in no position to ask those questions because I was the one who had asked him to keep a distance. Thus, my question would only add to his displeasure.

I grabbed a document, headed toward the CEO's office, and chanced upon an opportunity to knock on Michael's room door when no one was noticing me.

I waited till his voice sounded from inside before I pushed open the door and walked in.

I came in to see Michael, with his head lowered, focused on going through the documents. I was a little hesitant as I came in front of him, unsure of what to say.

When he finally raised his head to look at me after a long time, he furrowed his brows as he asked, "What's the matter?"

"Umm... I need you to look through this document and sign it too."

The moment we exchanged glances, I forgot everything that I had wanted to say as my mind went blank. It took me a long time before I recovered from my stupor.

"That is the work of a secretary. Why are you, an employee from the design department, sending the document and asking for signature?" Michael exposed me mercilessly while looking at me coldly.

I only wanted to find an excuse to get in his room, so I did not think much else at all.

"I-I..."

"Tell me. What's the matter?"

I had wanted to explain myself, yet Michael did not give me a chance to do so. He did not spare me another glance after saying those words to me.

"Were you staying at the mansion for the past few days? You haven't been back at Birchwood..." I hesitated for a long time before finally putting those words out in a low voice.

"It's within working hours now. Do you think it's appropriate for you to discuss private matters now?"

Michael's gaze turned colder and I could sense that suffocating chill from the look in his eyes.

"I..."

Panic rose in my heart instantly as I did not expect him to lose his temper. I wanted to explain myself but was interrupted by him.

“Get out of here!” he snarled.

My eyes flickered. When I finally regained my senses, I felt sad as I could not believe Michael would let out his frustration on me.

Tears welled up in my red-rimmed eyes, but I forcefully held my tears back even though I felt indignant about it.

I turned and hurried out of the CEO’s office and returned to my desk.

On my way back from the CEO’s office, many eyes swung at me, all of whom held a trace of ridicule on their faces.

Even though it felt like my insides were tearing apart, I ignored their mockery and tried to keep my composure in front of them as I did not want them to see me at my weakest state.

While in the company for the past few days, Michael did not even spare me a glance at all, let alone talk to me. Who knew it would end up this way when I finally decided to take the initiative to approach him today. Of course, I felt disheartened and miserable.

Besides, I just had a streak of bad luck recently without any reason. There had been too many unlucky incidents—I could not find my documents; the saved files on my computer went missing, and the office chair broke apart.

I had a creeping feeling that someone had been setting me up intentionally because unlucky things could not have happened continuously.

Then again, it was pure suspicions in my mind. After all, I did not have any substantive evidence to support my claims, and everything that had happened could purely be due to my crappy luck.

In the late evening, after settling my physiological needs at the washroom, I was about to get out when I realized I could not open the door at all. It felt like something had blocked it from opening.

I tried to push the door hard, but it did not budge even a little. I began to panic at the thought that there would barely be anyone visiting the washroom as it was almost time to get off work.

“Anyone there? Is anyone out there?”

I used all my might to push the washroom door as I yelled for help. However, there was no reply. There was only dead silence outside, as though no one was around.

When I remembered I could use my phone to call for help and tried to reach for it, I realized that I had left it on my desk. That meant I could not contact anybody to come and save me.

Helplessness and fear struck me once again. I did not know what I should do at that moment.

So if I can't get out, does that mean I'll have to spend the night inside this washroom?

"Anybody there? Please help me!"

Refusing to give up, I continued to scream for help. Similarly, no one replied from outside.

Time was ticking, but no one came to my help. It was made worse by the wind from the air conditioner in the washroom that only seemed to get colder than before.

Technically speaking, the air conditioner was usually switched off after working hours. Why is it still so cold?

I squatted near the door of the washroom, and the increasingly cold air only made me shiver uncontrollably. I could not wrap my mind around who the person was behind this incident.

No one had ever locked the door to the washroom in normal circumstances. What's wrong today? Who is behind this?

I was now certain that someone indeed had deliberately locked me up in here. Even if I were so out of luck, it was impossible that a series of unlucky events happened to me continuously.

Even so, there was nothing I could do. I could not even get out of the washroom, and I reckoned I would not be able to hold out any longer if the temperature remained cold in there.

A long time had passed, and I could only feel my whole body freezing. The washroom was so cold that I felt no trace of warmth even when I curled myself up in a corner.

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As time passed, I felt like I was floating in thin air as my body felt frozen. I knew I was unable to endure it any longer.

Yet, amid such desperation, what appeared in my mind was the image of Michael's figure. I was puzzled. Every time I encountered trouble in the past, he was the one who helped me. How I wished he would appear right before me and saved me like how he always did.

Nevertheless, Michael would never know that I was trapped inside the washroom, which meant he would not come and save me. At this rate, with the air conditioner's temperature so low, I really could be dead in here.

The frigidness pierced my skin like a thousand needles, and I felt my eyelids getting heavier as I started feeling more groggy. I knew I could no longer pull myself together.

Spending the night in such torture only made it felt like forever. I had no clue how I persisted through the night till the next morning, and neither did I know how I got out of the washroom.

By the time I opened my eyelids again, I was already at the hospital, with Michael was standing beside me. He looked down at me with a face filled with worry as he knitted his brows.

"Where is this place? I was locked up in the washroom."

My throat was parched and my body felt weak and tired.

"So you actually know you were locked inside the washroom? I wonder if there is any woman who is dumber than you?"

After hearing my words, the worry in Michael's eyes faded immediately. His face turned darker while his tone was full of reproach.

"Someone locked me in there on purpose."

I stared at him, displeased.

I'm so weak right now, so can't this guy say something nice and comforting? How dare he calls me dumb? Does he not know he's the reason why someone in the company is targeting me behind my back?

After hearing my words, Michael was stunned and a hint of fury flashed across his eyes. "You're saying someone intentionally locked you up inside? Who was it?"

His reaction left me speechless. It seemed like he was clueless that that was a deliberate act.

"I have no idea. But I'm sure someone must be behind this."

I was pretty sure someone was targeting me deliberately, though I was unsure who it was.

"I'll get to the bottom of this."

As Michael said that, a hint of ruthlessness flashed across his eyes. The look on his face at that moment got me freaked out a little.

My head was still spinning, and my body was aching all over. I had no strength at all. I thought I would have died inside the washroom when I was on the verge of fainting last night.

"Oh yes, how did you save me? Who found me?"

The first person I saw when I regained consciousness was Michael. Till now, I still had no idea who had opened the door and saved me.

"The cleaners in the company. They found you when they were cleaning the washroom. I just arrived at the office then," Michael explained after taking a glance at me.

No wonder Michael sent me to the hospital. So it turned out it was the cleaning ladies who saved me. Since the cleaners would finish cleaning before working hours, there were probably not many people in the company when Michael sent me to the hospital. Or else he would never do that as he tried to keep our relationship below the radar.

"I'll need to thank the cleaning lady then. If not for her, I would have been doomed."

I tried to suppress the feelings I had in my heart and forced a smile on my face as I told him that. I then kept my silence right after finishing my sentence.

"Have a good rest here, then. Someone will come and look after you later," Michael uttered as he took a peek at me.

After saying his piece, he turned around and strode out of the room.

Without Michael inside the ward, I was somehow slightly disappointed. At the same time, I was rather curious about what he had just mentioned. He said somebody is coming later? Who will that be? Has he hired a caretaker for me?

Just as my mind was wandering, someone opened the door. I looked up in that direction, and when I saw the person, my heart started pounding rapidly. It was my mom.

“Mom, why are you here? How did you know I am here?”

I was surprised at her presence and tried to bring myself up immediately. Nevertheless, I was weak and could barely pull myself up.

“Stay still. You don’t have to get up. Mr. Shaw told me you’re sick, and he asked me to come over to take care of you.”

My mom kept her poker face as she walked toward me. She did not seem to be concerned about me.

So the person Michael said would come and take care of me is Mom?

Somehow, I was slightly agitated inside because Mom had never taken care of me. I suddenly thought it was not a bad thing to be locked up last night.

And Michael too, I was extremely grateful to him. I understood that he did it for my good. He wanted to let me feel my mom’s love and care. It turned out that he knew my mind and what I wanted was my mom’s heartfelt concern.

“Thank you, Mom.” I lifted my head and expressed my gratitude while looking into my mom’s eyes.

“I’ve made you some chicken soup. Drink some while it’s still warm.”

My mom then placed the thermal food jar in her hands onto the table in front of my bed and proceeded to pour a bowl of chicken soup before passing it to me.

When I smelled the chicken soup, tears rolled down my cheeks uncontrollably. That was a bowl of chicken soup my mom had specially made for me.

“Have it while it’s warm. It’ll turn cold very quickly.”

Even as she said so, her face was still as calm as before. But there was a drastic difference as compared to the attitude she had toward me in the past. Although she did not treat me like how she would with Steven, I was still contented.

After finishing the bowl of soup, I looked to Mom with a face full of joy. For this once, I thought it was totally worth falling sick.

“All right, since you’ve finished the soup, I’ll head back to take care of Steven. I’ll come back at night.”

My mom got ready to leave after packing the thermal food jar.

“Mom, are you leaving so soon? Can you stay and accompany me for a while more?”

She had only been here for over ten minutes; obviously, I was crestfallen to learn that she wanted to leave so quickly since I had hoped she would accompany me for longer.

“If I stay here, then what about Steven? You aren’t extremely ill; you don’t need someone to be around you to take care of you,” she uttered in an indifferent tone.

Hearing my persuasion for her to stay, my mom became slightly impatient. She lifted the thermal food jar and headed toward the door right after.

Initially, it warmed my heart to see Mom coming over to look after me. Yet, the words she just said had pushed me deep into the abyss again.

Apparently, my mother thought that I was not someone who needed to be taken care of since I was not in a life-threatening condition.

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But I’m her daughter. Shouldn’t she feel at least a bit worried when her own daughter has fallen sick? Yet, Mom had been undeniably calm and indifferent. She had left me alone so easily, not sparing even a second to accompany me.

Once again, the ward plummeted into silence with no one else inside but me. I felt small and pathetic inside the spacious room. That was the first time I truly felt sorry for myself. After all, who else would be left completely alone, abandoned by their own family but me?

I turned to look out the window. Tears were beginning to slide down my cheeks. I tried to wipe them away with the back of my hand, but no matter how hard I tried, my tears continued pouring. It wasn't long before I fell into a full-on sob.

As strong as I looked to the outside world, I was just as vulnerable as most women. For one second, I longed for someone who would stay by my side, someone to care for me.

Just then, my phone began ringing from underneath the pillow. I quickly gathered up my thoughts and hastily wiped off my tears before picking up, craving for any scraps of human contact.

"Hello?"

My voice was hoarse and raspy, definitely a result from all that crying.

"Is anything wrong, Ms. Garcia? Your voice sounds different."

After a moment of silence, Ronan piped up from the other end of the call. The concern could be detected in his tone.

"It's nothing."

I was surprised by how attentive Ronan could be. He had managed to figure out something was amiss despite me only saying one word.

"I have mastered the art of picking up hints from a woman's tone. Have you been crying?"

Ronan's voice rang out once more. Even though there was a slight hint of a smirk behind his voice, anyone could hear that he was worried.

"It really is nothing. I'm just feeling a bit under the weather."

Even though I denied having cried, it was not a lie when I said I was feeling unwell. I hardly had any energy left in my body as I slipped in and out of consciousness.

"I still think something's wrong. Where are you now? Are you ill?"

Upon hearing my answer, Ronan became even more concerned. Even his voice became serious.

"Yeah. I'm in the hospital right now."

I told him the truth that time round, attempting to shake him off so he would not try to ask me out again.

“I’m coming to see you now!”

After saying that, Ronan hung up the phone abruptly before I could get a word in.

As the disconnect tone traveled into my ear, I could not help but frown and feel baffled by his actions.

How can Ronan be so impetuous? Even though he wants to visit me as soon as possible, shouldn’t he at least ask which hospital I’m in?

I let out a helpless sigh, feeling slightly irritated.

The loneliness one would feel when left alone in a hospital ward with no one to talk to could only be understood by those who had experienced it themselves.

Half an hour later, I heard a knock at the door. I turned my head towards the sound. As the outline of the person became clearer, my eyes widened in shock.

It was Ronan.

“How... How did you know which hospital I’m in?”

I gaped at Ronan, puzzled by how quickly he was able to find me.

“This is the only big hospital around here, and it’s said to be the best. So, it is not that hard to guess that you’ll be here.”

An amused smile blossomed on his face as he made his way towards me.

His logical explanation made me in awe of his intelligence. For some reason, Ronan reminded me of Michael, despite their personalities being polar opposites.

I flashed him a weak, wordless smile, too tired to talk. Moreover, Ronan and I were practically strangers. There was nothing to talk about.

“You look terrible. What happened?”

All of a sudden, Ronan stretched out his hand and touched my forehead, worry written all over his face.

Feeling his touch on my skin, I instinctively jolted away. Even though we had met each other a few times, I still barely knew him. The sudden intimacy made me feel uneasy.

“You’re burning up. You have such a high fever. Why aren’t your friends or family here to take care of you?”

Ronan frowned as he stood up abruptly, taken aback by the temperature of my forehead.

“It’s fine. It’s no big deal. I don’t need to be taken care of.”

Ronan’s words reminded me of Mom’s parting words. I felt a sharp pain in my heart as if it was being stabbed by a thousand needles.

“No big deal? Do you know how hot your skin felt? I’ll stay here with you. You are not to be left alone at a time like this.”

Ronan’s eyebrows inched even closer, and his eyes were filled with concern. In that second, I saw the warm-hearted and caring man behind the playful façade. Admittedly, I was touched by his offer to stay with me.

“You don’t have to take care of me. I’m fine on my own.”

Even though I was moved, I still would not allow Ronan to stay. After all, he had no obligations to take care of a stranger like me.

“What do you mean you’re fine? Are you still putting up a tough front? Do I need to remind you of the high fever you are having? It’s not a weakness to ask for help.”

Ignoring my protests, Ronan took a seat next to the hospital bed and began peeling an apple.

Soon, he passed the freshly-peeled apple to me. “Here, have an apple. You probably don’t have a huge appetite right now since you’re unwell, but fruits have the essential nutrients for you to recover faster.”

His lips curled up into a small smile as he spoke. For once, it was missing the usual tease.

With my eyes on the apple, a lump started to form in my throat. I was touched to the core by his actions. In the past, no one else had shown me any form of care when I was sick, not even my own parents except Natalie.

At the thought of the treatment I received from Mom and Dad, my eyes began to well up again. Silent tears gushed out the next second.

“Why... Why are you crying? Did I say something wrong?”

At the sight of my tears, Ronan panicked. He clumsily wiped the tears off my face.

“Please stop crying. Just tell me if I say anything wrong. I’ll change. Please stop crying. Seeing a woman cry is one of my biggest fears.”

Seeing that I cried even harder, Ronan grew even more anxious. He kept wiping away my tears with tissues and trying to calm me down. All traces of his usual mischief was nowhere to be seen.

His genuine concern for me broke down my guard against him. I sat up and pulled him into a teary embrace, despite the fact that I hardly knew him. All I wanted to do was to cry out all of my misery in his arms.

Ronan froze, yet he did nothing to stop me. After a few stiff minutes, Ronan placed his hands gently on my back and patted me on the back awkwardly.

“There, there. Stop crying. You’re ill at the moment. Crying will strain your body even more.”

Ronan’s voice was gentle and soothing as he comforted me. He felt like a giant teddy bear. As I sobbed, I remembered the fact that Ronan was about the same age as Steven. How nice would it be if Steven could show me half of the concern Ronan did?

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Ronan continued to comfort me. A strange sense of warmth exuded from his embrace.

Formerly, I thought of Ronan no more than a flirtatious playboy who was only trying to get me in bed. However, I had come to the realization that he truly did care for me.

Ronan did not stop me as I squeezed him tighter. Only when I was exhausted from all the crying did I let him go. As I pulled away, I noticed a huge stain of my sweat and tears on his shirt near his collar.

“Sorry for making your shirt dirty...”

Embarrassed to see the mess I have created, I mumbled sheepishly while avoiding eye contact. Overwhelmed by my emotions, I only cared about letting it out before I drowned in my own tears, forgetting that I had no relation with the man in front of me.

“It’s okay, as long as you have stopped crying. You almost scared me to death just now. I thought I had said something wrong that drove you to tears.”

Ronan shrugged and peered nonchalantly at his dampened shirt before turning to face me, concerned.

“It’s not your fault. I just thought of something upsetting.”

Utterly grateful that he had allowed me to cry on his shoulder, my perspective towards Ronan started to shift.

“Do you want to talk about it? After that crying session we just had, we should at least be friends now, right?”

A bright smile bloomed on his face as he looked at me carefully.

His big eyes made him look like an oversized toddler. However, I was surprisingly at ease by just staring into his sparkling eyes.

After a few minutes of hesitation, my lips parted as words started to spill out. I told Ronan everything that was happening between my family and me. It was not that I wanted his sympathy. I just needed to vent.

“Your parents had gone overboard this time. When we first met, you were kicked out of the hospital ward. Was it because of this?”

After my rant, Ronan’s eyes were filled with newfound pity. I pursed my lips subtly. Truth to be told, I did not like being pitied.

I nodded in silence.

“How can your parents treat you this way? Plus, what happened with Steven was not even your fault. Why did they push the responsibility onto you?”

Ronan stared at me sympathetically. Even so, his facial expression indicated his anger towards my parent’s behavior.

“It’s fine. I’m used to it anyways. It has always been like this since I was a little kid. They just made it even more obvious recently.”

I shrugged, feigning a look of nonchalance as I said that coolly.

“If you really are used to it, you wouldn’t have cried so hard just now. Also, given how sick you are, your parents still choose not to take care of you but be with your brother instead. That’s totally unacceptable.”

Ronan clasped my hands in his while looking at me. Heartache was written all over his face.

Overwhelmed with sorrow, I forgot to pull away from his touch. Instead, I let him continue holding my hands.

For the whole afternoon, Ronan stayed with me inside the ward. Time and time again, he would ask the nurses to take my temperature. His meticulous care for me touched me deeply.

However, there was something peculiar that I had noticed. For some unknown reason, all of the nurses seemed to treat Ronan with extra caution. All of them were very obedient to his orders. Is it because Ronan looks handsome?

No matter how hard I tried, that was the only reasoning that I could come up with.

Before long, the sun began to set. Ronan had taken care of me for hours. I was starting to feel sorry for taking up so much of his time. Just as I was about to ask him to go home, the door of the room swung open.

In walked Mom with a box of food in her hands.

“You must be hungry. I brought you some dinner. Eat up.”

Mom placed the food in front of me before pouring me a cup of water.

At the sight of my Mom, I could not help but feel my heart squeezed. After she left this noon, she had not visited me again, albeit Steven’s ward was on the same floor as mine.

I averted my gaze, refusing to showcase my tense relationship with Mom in front of Ronan.

Upon opening the box, I noticed there were only two types of greens with plain rice inside.

I glanced up at looked at my mom. Even though I was not satisfied with the food, I swallowed my disappointment while reminding myself to be

grateful that Mom was willing to bring me food. Without another word, I picked up the cutlery. Before I could eat, Ronan interrupted.

“What kind of dinner is this? There are barely any nutrients. Anna is a sick patient right now, so she needs nutrients for her to get better. This food is not going to do anything for her recovery.”

Ronan shot a glare towards Mom. His voice was laced with displeasure and contempt.

“Anna, who’s this? A friend of yours?”

With a frown, Mom peered at Ronan before directing her question to me.

“Mm hmm. He’s my friend.”

Before that day, I would have never called Ronan my friend. However, after the attentiveness he had shown me that afternoon, I realized that he had a kind heart despite his sharp tongue.

“Your friends are getting more and more impolite! Not only did he not greet me when I entered, but he even complained that the dinner I prepared for you is terrible!”

Knowing that Mom had always been petty, I had no doubt that she would hold a grudge against Ronan over what he had said.

“Mom, he has no ill intentions. Forget about it.”

I glanced at Ronan out of the corner of my eye before explaining softly.

“Thanks for taking care of me this afternoon. It’s getting late, and you must be tired. You should go home and get some rest.”

I then turned to look at Ronan, signaling with my eyes for him to leave. The memory of Mom getting furious at Natalie for defending me still burned in my mind.

“It’s getting dark soon. How am I supposed to not worry about you being alone?”

Ronan frowned at my suggestion, knowing full well that no one would be taking care of me.

“It’s alright. I have been on drip for the whole day, and I’m feeling much better. I can take care of myself just fine.”

Touched by his concern, I gave him a smile before reassuring him.

“Alright then. In that case, I’ll ask the nurses to come here more often so that you can ask for assistance if needed.”

At the sight of my persistence, Ronan stopped pressing onto the matter. Even though he was preparing to leave, he was thoughtful enough to ask for certain arrangements to be made for the sake of my comfort.

After a long time of not experiencing what it was like to be cared about by someone, Ronan’s actions brought warmth into my heart. Despite the two of us being just friends, he was willing to sacrifice his day to take care of me, unlike my own family.

I nodded at Ronan with a smile. He then picked up his jacket and started to make his way towards the door. As he passed by Mom, he stopped in his tracks and turned to face her with a serious look in his eyes.

“Ma’am, Anna is your daughter. Now that your own child has fallen ill, I hope that you can show her a little bit of love and concern, not endless demands.”

With those words, Ronan strode out the room.

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Staring at Ronan’s silhouette, Mom frowned before turning her gaze to me. Her eyes were filled with anger and displeasure.

“This is the kind of friends you make? How ridiculously rude!”

“Mom, don’t speak of him that way. He has been taking care of me the entire afternoon.”

Hearing Mom berating Ronan, my anger flared up that I defended him. Despite everything, Ronan did take care of me the whole afternoon. I would be lying if I was not blaming Mom for not even checking in with me.

After all, I was not a saint. It would be impossible for me to feel indifferent if my own mother did not love me.

“Taking care of you the entire afternoon? What’s going on between you two? Is he your boyfriend?”

At the news of Ronan taking care of me, Mom's eyebrows knitted even tighter. Her voice became solemn as well.

"No, Mom. We're just friends. You're reading too much into it. He's younger than me. How could he have been my boyfriend?"

Although taken aback by Mom's sudden accusation, I still answered her truthfully.

"You're not young anymore. It's time for you to find someone and settle down. It's because of the whole fiasco between you and Justin that your father and I still feel humiliated. We can barely look at anyone back home."

At the mention of my boyfriend, Mom started bringing up the incident with Justin again. She had repeated it so many times that I pretty much had it stored in my memory.

Even so, I still felt hurt every time Mom brought that up. My past with Justin was a deep emotional trauma. Mom's repeated recollection of the past was a huge disregard of my feelings.

I had sincerely wanted to marry Justin back then. It was he who cheated which caused the wedding to be canceled. Must I be blamed for that as well? Was it my fault that he cheated?

"Mom, can you not talk about this again? I have yet to find a suitable match for me, and I am not planning to look for one for the time being."

I snapped at Mom in frustration, irked by her words.

"What do you mean you have yet to find a suitable match? I think Michael is a fine young man, wealthy and handsome. If you were to marry him, you would never have to worry about anything else in your life!"

All of a sudden, Mom somehow included Michael in the topic. Upon hearing that name, my eyes gleamed as my heart ached.

"It's impossible for anything to happen between Michael and me, much less getting married."

Suppressing the disappointment I felt, I spoke calmly.

Michael had told me not just once but many times that our relationship was nothing but a fling. He would never take me as his wife. Besides, I knew my place. Someone like Michael would only marry someone of the

same family status and wealth, definitely not a nobody from a small village like me.

“How is it impossible? I think Michael seems interested in you. If not, he wouldn’t have paid for all of Steven’s medical bills and the follow-up treatments without a doubt.”

Mom’s eyes lit up as she recalled Michael’s generosity in paying for Steven’s bills. My heart sank. I had assumed that Mom wanted me to marry Michael for my happiness. Turned out she just wanted to leech off Michael for Steven’s sake.

“Michael and I are not dating, unlike what you had assumed. Besides, it’s absolutely impossible for us to be together.”

I looked up at Mom and announced in a firm manner.

“Why is it impossible? Anyone could tell Michael is well off. If you marry him, you will never have to worry again! Do you not think of that?”

Seeing the determination on my face, Mom looked disappointed. She did not even try to hide the panic she felt.

“Instead of saying I will never have to worry again, I think you mean Steven will never worry again. Am I right?”

I stared straight into Mom’s eyes as I finally stated what was on my mind. Even though she made it sound like she wanted the best for me, it was all just for show. Her true intention was to benefit Steven.

I had always been paying for most of our household expenses. In the meantime, Steven was basically living his days carefree with no occupation and throwing away money without a care. My ability to carry the financial burden alone was limited. If I dated Michael, his deep pockets would save Mom and Dad a lot of worries regarding Steven and his debt.

Upon hearing my honest thoughts, Mom’s expression went stiff as a subtle blush crept up her cheeks in guilt. However, it was not long before her face flushed in anger.

“If you truly end up marrying Michael, what’s wrong with giving Steven a little portion of what Michael has if Steven needs it in the future?”

Mom hollered at me, dismissing all of my feelings and emotions.

"It's exactly because of this that Michael and I will never be together! Mom, if you really want to fix this issue at the source, what you should do is ask Steven to get a job!"

Mom spoiling Steven to no end was the sole reason he ended up the way he was. If Mom had not spoiled him, Steven would never turn out that way.

"How dare you still reprimand your brother even at this time? Anna Garcia, it was all your fault that Steven ended up with broken legs! Yet, you still have the audacity to scold him? I truly have wasted so many years raising such a useless daughter!"

As usual, Mom lashed out at me for criticizing Steven. She despised any criticism towards her precious son, not even if it was for his own good.

"Mom, if you continue to spoil Steven this way, do not come to me ever again if he gets into trouble in the future. I'm not going to care anymore, for I no longer have the ability to do that."

Seeing how Mom defended Steven without missing a beat, I had no doubt that Steven would find himself entangled in a mess again. Since young, every time Steven made a mistake, she would somehow find a way to deflect the responsibility onto someone else. It was no wonder Steven could never learn his lesson since he grew up in such an environment.

"Y-you ungrateful brat! I truly have raised you in vain. Here I was kind enough to bring you dinner! I should have fed this to the dogs instead!"

Seeing Mom's face turned redder as her anger flared up, I stopped arguing and picked up the cutlery once again. Before I could take a bite, Mom snatched the box away and tossed it on the ground in rage.

The contents inside the box spilled all over the floor. Staring at the food on the ground, I held back my tongue. The messy sight reminded me of my own broken heart.

It was no secret that my words had completely enraged her. She shot me a death glare before marching out of the room without turning back.

With no one else but me in the room, I threw the covers over my head and started to sob, allowing all of my pent-up feelings to escape through bitter tears.

It truly baffled me how Mom would never listen to a word I said. Could she not tell that I said those harsh words for Steven's well-being?

Just like that, Mom left and never returned. Does she not care that I'm sick? Does it cross her mind that I have nothing to eat now that she threw my dinner all over the floor? Does she take into account that my body is weak at the moment?

In a span of one day, I had lost count of how many times I had cried. The same questions echoed in my mind again and again as I cried my heart out. My throat was starting to get sore from all the crying. I felt my energy being drained away from my already weak body, causing my body to become limp and haggard.