

Master 331

Chapter 331

Suddenly, the sky was pierced by the roar of a helicopter. Reinforcements. They actually had reinforcements.

At this moment, the only person Brielle felt sorry for was Kenzo, who was completely an innocent victim in this mess. No, she

couldn't give up. Even if it meant dying here, she had to save Kenzo.

Brielle gritted her teeth, and the taste of iron filled her mouth. She could no longer stand, so she crawled on the ground, inching

forward. The roar of the chopper grew louder as if it were right above her.

Through her blurred vision, she could make out a figure in a sleek suit approaching swiftly. Without seeing his face, she knew he

was in a panic.

Max?

It was probably just a dying hallucination..

Brielle felt a profound sense of injustice. On the brink of death, she still didn't know who was targeting her. They had come after

her with such force.

Blood stained the cobblestones as Max's heart shattered. The world around him faded, leaving only the expanding image of

Brielle, seared into his retinas in shades of red.

"Brielle!" He hastened to her side and lifted her. His cool presence threatened to shatter the very air around them.

This wasn't an illusion. Had Max really come? Brielle squinted, hearing distant gunfire, and quickly grabbed his arm. "Max?"

His heart trembled at the sight of her blood-stained fingers. Her leg wounds, barely healed, were injured once more.

Max pulled her into his embrace. "What happened?"

Brielle didn't have time to ponder why Max was there; her eyes reddened in an instant. "I..."

She choked up but then remembered Kenzo, forcing herself to be calm. "Kenzo is still over there. We need to go back quickly."

Max didn't move but instead took out a tissue to wipe her palms. His long fingers tremble slightly, his gaze unsettled. "Kenzo? You went to the Radiant Light Church with him?"

"He wanted to take some photos."

Kenzo indeed loved seeking inspiration in various places. It seemed his encounter with Brielle was a mere chance.

Max held her close. "I'll have someone look for him. You come with me."

Injured as she was, Brielle was of no use here. But with Kenzo's fate uncertain, how could she leave without worry?

"I want to find Kenzo."

Now that reinforcements had arrived, they should go back for Kenzo.

Max remained silent, a sharp taste crossing his heart as if he had bitten into a lemon. "My people will find Kenzo and ensure his safety."

Brielle's mind cleared. It seemed that fate had been kind to let her see the person she most wanted to in her dying moments. It

was enough.

Sensing her reluctance to leave and the blood dripping from her fingertips to the ground, Max felt a sudden pain in his chest. "Let

me first stop your bleeding."

Only then did Brielle glance at the wounds on her leg and palm; though minor, the blood made them look frightful. She sat on a

nearby rock, feeling a chill throughout her body.

Max's backup was swift; several more helicopters flew in, scouring the woods. The gunfire had stopped; the assailants had likely

retreated upon seeing the reinforcements. If so, then Kenzo should be safe.

Brielle's heart settled, and her gaze fell upon Max. He took a bandage from a subordinate and knelt to tend to her leg wound. His

dark eyes were cast down, and his brows relaxed.

Feeling out of place, Brielle instinctively drew her leg back, fearing even the slightest stain on her shoe might tarnish his pristine

fingers.

Max had promised to join her here but had bailed, and now he had descended like a deity. If making someone fall was a talent,

then Max truly had a gift.

He caught her leg firmly, a serious look in his eyes. "Don't move."

Her face flushed, and she quickly looked away.

Once he finished, she stood, fearing another moment might compel her to ask the questions bubbling inside her.

Why did he come? Why was he so gentle?

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"I'm going back for Kenzo." Her head bowed, she walked had come.

Max couldn't dissuade her and followed, but his phone rang again. As she walked, she heard him answer. "I've discussed it with

the doctor, use the new medication and a sedative to stabilize her mood."

"Yes, I've had a situation here, I'll be on my way shortly."

Brielle wasn't attentive, so she had a misstep, expecting to fall onto the rough stones, but was caught by the waist and pulled

into a cool embrace.

"Be careful." The words were for her. Max ensured she was alright, before he continued with his instructions on the phone. I'll come in person to sign off for the use of the new medication."

After hanging up, he stepped in front of Brielle and crouched down. She stepped back, alarmed. What was he doing?

"Get on."

"But..."

Before she could finish, her hand was pulled firmly, and she found herself hoisted onto his back.

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The chill of his presence was an oddly comforting shroud as Brielle leaned against his back. Exhausted to her core, the sting of

tears threatened to betray her when Max hoisted her up effortlessly.

Taking a few steps forward, Max's broad shoulders offered a smooth ride, while his bodyguard, trailing behind, dared not linger

his gaze and hastened into the forest to look for Kenzo.

Brielle's fingers clutched at the fabric of Max's suit, and after a moment's hesitation, she rested her chin on his shoulder and

closed her eyes. Ten minutes ago, she thought she was a goner.

"Brielle, you're not crying, are you?" Max's voice was even, his stride unshaken.

Brielle, who had felt a twinge at the tip of her nose, stifled it, "How could I be?"

A soft chuckle escaped Max as he glanced into the distance.

Brielle, fighting back her emotions, quickly changed the subject. "Patrick took me to that old warehouse where we planned to trap

Spencer. We were ambushed then, too. It's got to be the same group—they're well-trained." Her voice was calm and analytical.

"Right."

As Max carried on, a loud boom echoed from afar, and a fiery blaze erupted in the woods. A car had exploded, igniting a wildfire.

Thankfully, it wasn't summer; otherwise, the blaze would have been hell to control.

A shiver ran down Brielle's spine as she clutched tighter at the fabric on Max's arm. Her palms were sweating with anxiety.

"Don't be scared."

Max's soothing voice comforted her as he attempted to call Patrick, only to find no signal on his phone. The reception in the

woods was hit or miss, and sometimes it was non-existent.

"We're better off by the clearing." Max noted.

"Mr. Dorsey. I hid Kenzo in a different spot. The fire shouldn't reach there, but I'm not sure if those guys found him."

"Just direct me, and I'll take you there."

Brielle felt a surge of relief and nodded, wrapping her arms around his neck. The cool forest breeze brushed the faces of the

unlikely pair.

Max followed the path upward, noticing sporadic drops of blood—Brielle's—and felt a pang of distress.

Brielle's voice sounded weary with fatigue as she whispered near his ear, "About 500 meters more."

Max nodded and was ready to press on, then he heard her delirious murmur. "I thought I'd never see you again." Was she

delirious?

Max pursed his lips, recalling the car he'd noticed earlier but hadn't identified as Brielle's until Patrick's call. He was going

abroad, and it would be days before he returned. He felt the need to speak with her, face to face. But on his way, he saw the

smoke rising from the woods.

Brielle's car had crashed. The realization sent shivers down his spine.

When he found her sprawled by the river, his heart skipped a beat. At that moment, nothing else mattered—just that Brielle was

alive. "Just stay alive," he silently pleaded.

Max's grip tightened as he softly called, "Brielle?"

She felt like slipping into sleep, eyelids warring against each other. At the sound of his voice, her head stirred, and her lips

brushed against the skin of his neck. Max tensed, his voice a shade huskier. "Don't move around. Just guide me."

Brielle lifted her head. "Turn right, straight ahead. I covered our tracks with some branches."

Overcome by exhaustion, she nestled onto his back and drifted off.

"Brielle?" Max called again, receiving no response. He gently settled her onto a protruding rock. He tapped her face lightly.

Brielle's eyes fluttered open to see the surroundings shrouded in fog; the visibility had reduced to mere meters. "Is that fog?"

Max nodded, checking her forehead. She wasn't feverish, just drained.

"Yeah, it's thick. The fire's died down. Our guys should have found Kenzo by now."

But without cell service, they were cut off.

Winter fog was common in these well-preserved woods, and the mist was thick and persistent. It felt like when it rained, it

poured.

Max tucked a stray hair behind her ear, his tone gentle. "Once we're out of here, there's something I need to tell you."

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Brielle couldn't guess what he was about to say, but that single sentence had injected a jolt of energy into her weary bones.

The thrumming of the helicopter blades was audible, yet with the mountains shrouded in a thick mist, it was impossible to

pinpoint someone's location once they strayed.

Max crouched down again, gesturing for her to climb on. "I'll take you back. Kenzo's already been picked up."

It seemed Kenzo's injuries were serious; otherwise, the chopper wouldn't have hovered directly overhead. They must have sent

a winch down from high above to haul him up. Thankfully, they weren't dealing with a dense fog; otherwise, evacuating Kenzo

would have been a nightmare.

"Are you sure Kenzo has been rescued?" Brielle wrapped her arms around his neck again, whispering close enough that her

breath tickled his skin.

Max looked down, his eyelashes casting shadows on his cheeks as he murmured a subdued "Yeah."

Brielle felt an overwhelming sense of relief. The fog grew thicker, to the point where even the ground beneath her feet was nearly

obscured, wrapping the world in an ethereal haze.

Later on, when Brielle would recount this episode to Aubree, she would mention she always felt as if they had been surrounded

by chaos, unsure where heaven or earth lay. Perched on his back, she watched him navigate the fog-enshrouded terrain, a vast

expanse where it seemed

the only two souls left.

they!

She wished this path would stretch on indefinitely, without end, but she knew all too well that this brief, blissful moment was no

more than a beautiful yet fragile castle in the air, so precarious that pulling out a single brick could bring it down like an

avalanche.

As the fog began to dissipate, the stream ahead gradually came into view. Brielle's eyes drooped with a touch of sadness.

Max walked with a steady gait, noticing that a group had gathered in a clearing up ahead, waiting. It seemed that the fog had

been too dense, and after finding Kenzo, everyone had retreated.

A man approached Max. "Sir, Mr. Kenzo's been taken to the local clinic for stitches. Once he's patched up, he'll be able to return

to Beaconsfield."

Curious eyes swept over Brielle, but she quickly looked away.

Brielle's injuries were superficial. She tugged discreetly at Max's suit jacket. "Put me down, I can walk."

Max set her down but, worried she might trip over the stones, so he kept an arm around her waist and announced to the others,

"Let's head back."

15:12

Their curiosity was palpable, but nobody asked any questions.

Max helped Brielle onto the helicopter and sat beside her as it took off, rising higher and higher from the ground.

Brielle gazed out the window, feeling a sense of loss. Was this return journey a sign that everything was over? Was this a happy

ending?

Overcome by exhaustion, she couldn't resist leaning against the side and falling asleep.

Max glanced at her and gently shifted her head onto his shoulder. With that done, his thoughts began to drift.

Both of Brielle's brushes with danger had been because of him. Without his involvement, someone with her background wouldn't

have faced such threats in Beaconsfield.

Who could it be? They were well-trained, tactful, and attacked without leaving a single trace.

His lips pressed into a thin line, his eyes cutting sharply through the air.

The helicopter soon landed at the Premier Palace. Brielle was asleep, and barely aware that she was being carried into a warm

embrace; she mumbled groggily. "When can Kenzo return to Beaconsfield?"

She was too drowsy to open her eyes, yet still worried about Kenzo.

"Patrick's taking care of him; don't worry."

Relieved, Brielle snuggled into his chest and drifted off again.

Max carried her up to the second-floor bedroom. The bathtub was already filled with hot water. and he gently lowered Brielle into

it.

Wrapped in the warmth, Brielle finally stirred awake. Realizing she was naked, her cheeks. flushed a deep crimson as she

lowered her gaze, pretending to be still asleep.

What was happening? How did she end up in Premier Palace, and what was Max doing? Her cheeks burned with

embarrassment.

Max, meanwhile, grabbed a loofah, poured some fragrant body wash on it, and began to scrub her body gently.

Brielle's blush deepened, spreading from her cheeks to the tips of her fingers.

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Max was cautious around her wounds, not daring to let her soak in the bath for too long. He washed her swiftly, then carefully

lifted her and placed her on the bed.

After ensuring she was settled, he turned and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower himself. He emerged shortly after,

pulling on a pair of pajama bottoms and tying the drawstring at his waist. His physique was striking—broad shoulders, narrow

waist—and as water dripped from his damp hair, he exuded an undeniable allure.

A knock came at the door. It was Wesley. "Sir, Ms. Alivia has called. She seems quite anxious and hopes you can join her abroad

as soon as possible."

Max paused in the act of drying his hair and opened the door to issue a command, "Fetch some antiseptic cream."

Wesley nodded, and within a minute, he handed the cream to Max.

Max turned back, taking hold of Brielle's foot, and gently applied the ointment to the fine cuts that had not become inflamed after

soaking. After smoothing the cream over her wounds and additional spots on her legs, he went to wash his hands. Upon his

return, his phone rang. He answered, massaging his temple, which throbbed with tension.

"Yeah, I'll be there in two hours."

He hung up and looked down at Brielle, whose dark hair fanned across the pillow, contrasting with her skin like a fallen fairy in

the night.

Max swallowed hard and called out

"Brielle?"

She slowly opened her eyes, her gaze quietly meeting his. No words were exchanged, just a silent space hanging between

them.

Brielle was so tired it felt like a dream, as if she had been transported back to the beginning. Her eyes misted over as she looked

at Max. The tips of her lashes were slightly drunk with sleepiness, as though she'd had too much wine.

Max ended the call and moved closer, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He intended to leave after that simple gesture, but

Brielle bit down on his fingertip. There was a tiny imprint where her teeth had been, and then, tilting her head, she licked it like a

kitten.

Max's breath hitched, and he inhaled deeply, attempting to pull away. But she wrapped her arms around his waist, and her lips

found the tense muscles of his torso through the open collar of his shirt.

The frost in his gaze began to melt, revealing a fervor as red as blooming blossoms. He leaned in, pulling her close and setting

her down by the window ledge.

The cool breeze from the open window brought her back to her senses; the fog in her eyes cleared.
“Mmm,” she managed,

unable to form words. Max insisted on her awakening, on her realizing exactly what was happening.

Afraid of falling backward, Brielle clung to his neck.

“Scared?” His voice was a deep, raspy whisper, grazing her nose.

Brielle’s mind had come rushing back, and she was fully aware of what she had just done. Her embarrassment caused her

fingers to curl into her palm.

The temperature seemed to rise, their lips meeting with the intensity of lightning striking dry timber. Eventually, Brielle opened

her mouth and bit down on his collarbone, leaving a glistening mark.

Max paused, pushing her hair aside and taking her wrist in his hand, tracing upward until their fingers intertwined, sending a

shiver through them both.

Fireworks seemed to burst in her eyes. Even the upward curl of her lashes looked like a dangerously intoxicating bloom, sharp

and feverish.

“Brielle, wait for me to come back,” he murmured hazily into her ear.

Confused, she looked up at him; her long lashes were reminiscent of a bird’s feathers. Max dropped his gaze and was hooked

once again as their lips met anew.

He had promised to leave in two hours, but it turned into four as he reluctantly pulled away from her lips, savoring the taste he

was reluctant to leave behind.

Brielle’s cheeks were flushed, and she felt as if she was still caught in the tempest, her body not her own. After Max left, she

slowly opened her eyes to the familiar ceiling and couldn’t help but pull the pillow close, burying her head into it.

He had said to wait for him to return: perhaps he had something to say.

She could barely remember, and was so overwhelmed by the intensity of their lovemaking, as if they were trying to engrave each

other into their very bones. It seemed he did care about her, after all.

was of

He had stood her up for their trip to Radiant Light Church to pick up Alivia, and now he with Alivia again. Surely, there was

something she didn't know. She decided to take a chance this time, to wait for him to come back, to wait for him to say it in

person.

A heavy rain had started to fall in Beaconsfield, the sound of it pitter-pattering against the windows. Brielle slept through to the

next day, waking up exhausted. The night had taken its toll, leaving her feeling completely drained.

Wesley's respectful knock came from outside the door. "Ms. Brielle, are you awake?"

It was then she remembered she was at the Premier Palace. Quickly, she went to freshen up, but upon seeing her reflection in

the mirror, her face flushed red. Her neck was marked with many traces of love bites, and she remembered—hadn't she also left

a bite on Max's collarbone?

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"That was a bit reckless," she mused aloud.

After freshening up, she deliberately pulled her collar higher and opened the door, finding Wesley still waiting outside.

"Ms. Brielle, why don't you head down for some hot soup to chase away the chill? Mr. Dorsey instructed me, before he left, not to

let you step out of Premier Palace. Mr. Kenzo is still recuperating in town, and if the Barnes clan traces his last known

whereabouts to you, I reckon they might drag you into this mess."

A bitter taste spread in Brielle's mouth; Kenzo had met with disaster because of her. She glanced at her frail form and wondered

if she could withstand the wrath of the Barnes family should they decide to come after her for this incident.

As she sipped her soup, her mind was racing. Twice now, she'd been targeted, yet the assailant left no clues. Who could it be?

With her status, how could she have attracted such a vendetta?

She almost immediately concluded that it was her connection with Max that had brought this peril upon her.

Beaconsfield seemed like a gaping maw, ready to swallow her whole, an insignificant player in its grand scheme. She didn't want

to sit around like a sitting duck, always waiting for Max to return. Besides, Max had never made any promises about choosing

her.

If she truly cared for Max, she was willing to sprint towards his world, to bridge the gap between them at all costs, but the one

thing she couldn't do was muster the strength to make

a move if he didn't care for her in return.

So long as he harbored some affection for her...

She needed a game plan.

After finishing her soup, she called up Tiffanie. Tiffanie was out in the boondocks, a place an unbridled heiress like her had never

experienced before.

Tiffanie's eyes lit up when she saw Brielle's call, and she hit the answer button with enthusiasm. "Brielle, what's up? Got another

thrilling task for me?"

Brielle couldn't help but smile at her friend's excitement but quickly regained composure. "Is Mason gone?"

"Mason, huh." Tiffanie glanced at the man mingling with a group of kids nearby, her heart softening just a touch. "Nope, we're

down in a rural part of Beaconsfield. Let me tell you, this place is dirt-poor. Cars can't even get through. Mason wanted to hike it,

but I just called in a chopper. And would you believe it, he didn't even thank me."

Tiffanie sounded a bit aggrieved. "It's not my fault I'm rich. Honestly, I get him here faster, and he distances himself from me."

After her little rant, she regained her composure. "So, what do you need Mason for?"

"I'm thinking of investing in his company, In my own name."

A sharp glint passed through Tiffanie's eyes. "Got it. We'll head back tonight. Want to meet up?" "Sure, I'll wait for you guys at

Pearl Estate."

Tiffanie nodded, hung up the call, and looked over at Mason, who was still chatting with the modestly dressed children. Her

extravagant appearance, complete with tattoos and bling, probably intimidated the local kids, as none dared to approach her.

She walked over to Mason and tapped his shoulder. "Brielle says she wants to invest in you. Your startup is just getting off the

ground, right?"

Mason brushed off her hand. "Brielle?"

He stood up, his impression of Brielle bringing a sparkle to his eyes. "Investing in her personal capacity, huh."

Tiffanie's mood soured at once. "I offered to invest before, and you flat-out refused. Now Brielle wants in, and you're all starry-

eyed."

Mason patted one of the kids on the head and handed over the clothes, toys, and furniture he'd bought to the village chief. "You

and her... you're different."

Tiffanie crossed her arms. "What's the difference? We're both women, with two nostrils and a mouth."

Mason gave her a look and strode back to his temporary quarters.

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They had been holed up in this rural escape for three days already, and everyone had figured Tiffanie, with her high-

maintenance ways, wouldn't last an hour, let alone plant her roots. Yet, here she was, having chased Mason all the way from

Beaconsfield, and now seemingly refusing

to leave.

It was back in Mason's senior year of high school when he followed a band of college students to teach in the countryside that he

stumbled upon this place. The stark poverty had struck them all dumb; kids were studying on desks made of piled stones,

trudging miles through the mountains to school in the dead of winter while their hair was dusted with frost.

Once they returned home, they all continued to donate to this place over the years. Those who earned a bit more gave a bit

more, and those with less gave what they could.

Now, there was a school and a road in the area.

Mason stayed in a wooden cabin prepared by the locals, with Tiffanie's room right next door.

Tiffanie was the boldest woman he'd ever come across. Just last night, she had tried to sneak into his room, of all things. If he

hadn't been too anxious to fall asleep, tossing and turning until the wee hours, she might have actually succeeded. It was

ridiculous; a grown man like him was feeling like he was the belle of the ball that the town bully had taken a shine to.

As soon as he walked in, Tiffanie followed suit, smoothly shutting the door behind her and wrapping her arms around his waist

from behind.

"Look here," she said, "what's not to like about me? Check out this face, this figure, this family background. Tell me, which guy

wouldn't be dazzled by me?"

Mason's lips twitched as he pried her hands away, feeling his body heat up to an almost unbearable degree. Part of him was

embarrassed, the other part mortified. "Can't you act a bit more like a lady?!"

Instead of taking offense, Tiffanie sprawled onto the bed with a carefree chuckle. "Hah? If I were shy in the pursuit of a man, he'd

definitely never be mine. Don't you get it? I'm all about taking the initiative."

Mason, seeing her so casually lying on his bed, felt his ears burn hot with embarrassment. He'd met plenty of bold women, and

many who'd wanted a fling with him, but he'd never felt so awkward and helpless.

Frowning, he sat down by the window and grabbed a cup of water, only to be interrupted by Tiffanie's rebellious suggestion.

"Mason, how about we get hitched?"

The water went flying out of Mason's mouth as he coughed and spluttered. His cheeks blazed red, feeling like his insides were about to roast him alive.

Tiffanie raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "What, you're so thrilled you're speechless?*

"Cough, cough." Mason kept his head down, coughing, refusing to look at her.

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15:12

But Tiffanie was on a roll, leaning in close. "Don't tell me, you're still a virgin."

"Tiffanie!!" He jumped as if he had been stepped on, exploding in protest.

Her lips curved up in a satisfied smile.

Mason headed for the door, his whole body radiating heat. "Weren't we supposed to be heading back to Beaconsfield? Let's go,

Brielle is waiting for us."

Tiffanie looked regretful, glancing at the bed. "Are you leaving already, Mason? Are you not up for it? I've chased you all the way

here, and you do nothing and want to take me back? If others heard about this, I'd be so embarrassed, Mason!"

She followed him out only to see Mason stop abruptly, nearly colliding with his back.

Mason turned around, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on her. After a minute, he suddenly cupped her face in his hands and

solemnly planted a kiss on her forehead. "Happy now?" He released her quickly, striding even faster toward the helicopter.

Tiffanie stood frozen, slowly lifting a hand to touch her forehead. Then, seeing Mason's awkward walk, she burst into laughter.

"Of course, I'm happy. I've been marked by you, and now I belong to you."

Mason was stepping onto the aircraft. When he heard her words, he slipped and almost fell.

Tiffanie strode over, a wide grin spreading across her face as she snatched the safety helmet. and plopped herself into the

driver's seat. "Hey, buckle up! We're off to see Brielle."

Mason's cheeks were still flushed, but the cool breeze wafting through the valley quickly dissipated the heat. He glanced down at

the ground, now far below, and the corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly.

It was a faint smile, but Tiffanie caught it. She chuckled along, making a mental note to tell Brielle later. After all, Tiffanie was

about to snag herself a bona fide gentleman.

After hanging up with Tiffanie, Brielle told Wesley she needed to head back. Wesley wore a look. of consternation. "Ms. Brielle,

Mr. Dorsey said to wait for him here."

But Brielle shook her head. "Wesley, I'll explain it to him later, but right now, I really want to go back."

Seeing that he couldn't stop her, Wesley reluctantly arranged for someone to drive her back to Pearl Estate.

On the way, Brielle gazed blankly out the window, lost in thought. Once home, she took a moment to relax on the sofa.

After whipping up a simple snack for herself, she powered on her laptop, forcing herself to get some work done.

All told, her various cards currently held a total of around two hundred million dollars.

Mason's company was still in its infancy and not yet profitable, but this amount of funding was more than enough to get started.

She rubbed her tired eyes, knowing that the company's future growth was what mattered most. She needed to draft a detailed

plan.

At ten in the evening, her living room doorbell rang. When she opened the door, there stood Tiffanie and Mason.

Mason was holding a modest gift from the supermarket, while Tiffanie's hands were empty. Her smile was wide and carefree.

"Good evening, my friend! I've been up in the mountains, spreading some love by feeding the wildlife," Tiffanie declared with her

usual whimsy.

As Brielle ushered them in and turned to pour some drinks, she caught Tiffanie slyly touching the tips of Mason's fingers. Her

lips twitched in amusement. Mason discreetly scooted away, creating some distance. Ever since the helicopter ride and that

forehead kiss, Tiffanie had been strutting around with pride, as if she had a tail wagging to the sky.

Pretending not to notice the exchange, Brielle brought over the drinks, only to hear Tiffanie dive into gossip. "So, I heard Kenzo's

in trouble. Is that true?"

Brielle's grip twitched at the news. Who could have leaked that information?

Max was supposed to keep things hush-hush and prevent the news from spreading.

Settling down with a feigned calm, Brielle hid her bruises beneath her clothes. After resting earlier in the day, her energy had

returned, along with her cool composure.

Tiffanie sighed dramatically. "Kenzo was one of my favorites—so gentle and talented. Such a shame. If the rumors in the circuit

are true, the Barnes family is going to flip, aren't they?"

Brielle's heart pounded as if it were about to leap from her throat.

Sharp as ever, Tiffanie noticed her reaction. "Hey, Brielle, you don't have anything to do with Kenzo's disappearance, do you?"

Brielle hadn't intended to hide anything, so she recounted the pursuit incident from start to finish. When it came to serious

matters, Tiffanie's face lost its usual mirth. "Who knew you

were with Kenzo at the time?"

Brielle shook her head. Their encounter had been by chance, and Kenzo had even kept her name a secret from Alivia, so he

surely wouldn't tell a soul.

She trusted Kenzo not to do so.

But on her end...

Suddenly, it hit her—the phone call from Aubree. She realized with a jolt. Aubree knew she had been with Kenzo.

Brielle lowered her eyelashes, a gesture that Aubree, her confidant of many years, knew all too well. Aubree wasn't the type to

spread rumors carelessly; Brielle's secret was safe with her.

"I've only told Aubree, but I trust her completely."

Tiffanie, deep in thought, stroked her chin. "You and Aubree have known each other for ages, and she's mostly above suspicion.

But if that snake Andrew is slithering around her, all bets are off. That guy has always had it out for you."

Brielle dropped her gaze. It wasn't an impossibility, but she was confident that Aubree would have taken her concerns into

account and made sure no one was around when she answered the phone.

The mystery was too complex, and the solution eluded her. Perhaps it was time to switch topics and ask about the Mason

Corporation.

Brielle turned to Mason. She lacked the courage to confront them about their true identities; it was too melodramatic, too

sensational, and she was just an outsider.

Mason still had that fresh-faced college student vibe, both in appearance and demeanor. When Brielle first met him, she

could've sworn he'd just left the campus gates. In any college setting, Mason would be the guy everyone fawned over.

Perhaps feeling Brielle's unabashed gaze, Tiffanie opened her arms wide, protective as a mother hen shielding her chick.

—

"Brielle, Mason's off the market he's mine. Stop looking at him like that. Besides, you've got Maxie. Time to rein it in."

The corner of Brielle's mouth twitched, and she caught Mason's flustered protest. "Cut it out!"

Tiffanie raised an eyebrow. "Right, I'm just talking nonsense. So that seal of approval kiss wasn't for me?"

Brielle pretended not to hear, sensing Mason was about to blush into flames. She remembered their first meeting; he'd been so

composed and so unruffled, even at a bustling reunion. She never imagined Tiffanie, the wildcat, would push him to the brink like

this.

Brielle cleared her throat. "Mason, I bet you've had tons of offers to invest in your company, or even buy you out completely. Why

didn't you sell back then?"

Mason regained his composure, and after a brief pause, he spoke. "I'm passionate about the company I built and adore my

team. When we, a group of young dreamers, hit wall after wall and returned to square one, we believed we could change the

world. It wasn't just me who didn't want to sell; none of us did."

"I've never told anyone, but three months after we started, a Wall Street financier wanted to buy us out. The offer was half a

billion dollars. I tossed and turned for a month, and to this day, I'm not sure if keeping the company was the right decision."

That was half a billion dollars after only three months in business.

—

Brielle smiled slightly. "If there's a reason not to sell, it's probably because only one company ever turned down a half-billion—

dollar offer in its infancy the Hartley Group." Today, the Hartley Group was a retail titan both online and off, a true global giant.

A glint of ambition shone in Mason's eyes as he chuckled. "You're right. And in the world of the internet, I aim to be the next

Hartley Group."

Tiffanie leaned back, resting her chin on her hand, listening to the pair dissect potential deals. She yawned, oblivious to the fact

that this evening at Pearl Estate, two enthusiastic young people might've just been laying the groundwork for an internet empire.

Sadly, one couldn't foresee the future, and so the thrill of witnessing history unfold remained elusive.

After their discussion, Brielle noticed Tiffanie, curled up in a tiny bundle and dozing off in the corner. The room was chilly; they'd

forgotten to turn on the heat, and were too engrossed in their conversation to notice. But Tiffanie seemed too cold to move, not

bothering to ask for a blanket, possibly not wanting to interrupt Brielle's train of thought.

Feeling sleepy herself, Brielle was about to suggest that Mason and Tiffanie stay over when she saw Mason gently lift Tiffanie in

his arms and nod at her, ready to leave.

"Mason," Brielle called out, her heart feeling a sudden weight.

Mason was a decent person, and so was Tiffanie. Two pure souls brought together, caught in the tangle of their parents' past

grievances, couldn't stay untainted forever.

Chapter 339

Mason paused mid-stride, a hint of confusion shadowing his features as he turned back. "What's up? Did we miss something

important Just now?"

The two had just settled on the early size of their startup. Mason and his crew of techies hadn't quite cracked the code on

monetizing their venture, but Brielle, with her finance degree, was the one who had a handle on that aspect. She had already

outlined the company's trajectory for the upcoming year, and Mason had been on board with the plan.

Now, he looked perplexed.

Brielle opened her mouth, then slowly shut it again. "It's nothing. I'll transfer the funds to the company account soon."

Mason chuckled, his tone light and teasing. "Alright then, once we go public, I might just make you President."

Brielle didn't respond. Instead, she escorted them out. She hesitated multiple times, wanting to speak, but Mason, walking

ahead, didn't see.

Stepping into the elevator, Mason glanced back at Brielle. "Ever since I saw you handle that meeting with the Hartley Group's

CEO, I knew you were meant for big things. It's been a pleasure working together."

Brielle's lips curved into a small smile as she pressed the elevator button for him. "A pleasure indeed."

As the elevator doors slid shut, Brielle was left staring at the empty hallway. Her hand massaged her temples. A headache was coming on.

Brielle still hadn't managed to voice the complexity of her relationship with Mason.

In this world, there were two types of people who were simply drawn to each other. Mason had tried to resist and reject Tiffanie,

but if her influence was inevitable, then his feelings for her would eventually be either love or hate. Brielle knew this all too well, and it tormented her.

Back in her room, she felt utterly drained. She stared blankly at the ceiling, rubbing at her temples again. She was exhausted.

Grabbing the remote, she turned on the heater. As the warmth spread, her chilled limbs slowly came back to life.

It was two in the morning, and with a weary effort, she applied ointment to the cuts on her hands before falling asleep on the couch.

At six a.m., her phone rang. It was Patrick. "Ms. Brielle, Mr. Kenzo has woken up. He's hurt his leg, but it's nothing serious. The

cold has slowed down the infection, and the local doctors have managed it well. We'll be heading back soon, so don't worry."

Brielle let out a relieved sigh, hearing Kenzo's voice on the other end. "Patrick, is that Brielle?"

Patrick confirmed, "Yes, Ms. Brielle is quite concerned."

"Tell her I'm fine, and not to worry. This wasn't her fault."

Patrick nodded, then addressed Brielle, "Ms. Brielle, we'll be back shortly. Make sure you take care of that injury."

Rubbing her eyes, Brielle mustered her energy. "Which hospital will you be taking him to?"

There was a pause before Patrick, ever the rational one, advised, "Regardless of the hospital, it's best you don't visit. The

Barnes family is already suspicious about Mr. Kenzo's injury. Rumors are flying that it's because of you. If you show up, it'll only

confirm their suspicions, and they won't let you off easily."

Brielle's lips pressed together, knowing Patrick spoke the truth.

Kenzo's voice came through once more, taking over the call. His tone was still gentle. "Patrick's right, Brielle. I'll be fine. I heard

you're hurt, too. Take care of yourself, and once this gossip blows over, let's grab a meal together."

"I'm so sorry, Kenzo."

His voice sharpened. "You have nothing to apologize for. It's not your fault."

Even though he said that, Brielle knew she had inadvertently put him in harm's way. Thankfully, he was alright, or she would

have lived under a curse of guilt.

After the call, Brielle felt a weight lift from her chest. She even managed to make herself some Soup.

By early evening, Patrick called again to say they were back in Beaconsfield. Brielle finally felt at ease.

As she pondered how to spend Christmas Eve, her doorbell rang. It was Aubree.

Wrapped in a scarf, Aubree marched in, unraveling it to reveal a neck covered in love bites. "Andrew made sure to mark his

territory before I came over to see you."

Brielle frowned but didn't comment, she just watched as Aubree presented her with a box. "Here, a belated birthday present."

Worried it was some extravagant expense, Brielle opened the box to find a beautiful diamond and breathed a sigh of relief.

Aubree looked around the room and settled herself on the sofa. "Bri, you hung up so quickly yesterday. I only found out about

Kenzo's injury today. What in the world happened?"

Brielle recounted the harrowing tale of their near brush with death.

Aubree's expression darkened. "But you decided to go to the Radiant Light Church on the spur of the moment, right? I didn't tell

a soul. Who could it be?"

Chapter 340

Brielle managed a wry smile, wishing she was in the know.

Aubree placed her hands on Brielle's shoulders firmly. "Is there something you're keeping from me? Bri, trust me, anything you

tell me stays between us. I've never breathed a word to Andrew, I know he's not your biggest fan, but you mean so much more

to me than he does."

Brielle trusted Aubree, of course, but the thought of her secret being out there still cast a shadow of worry across her face. Not

knowing who the puppet master was behind the scenes made Brielle feel helpless.

Aubree had also brought over a couple of bottles of wine. "Fancy a glass tonight?"

Brielle shook her head, and just as she reached for her phone, Aubree stopped her. "You really should just chill at home for a few

days, don't look at anything, don't think about anything. After such a big ordeal, it's easy to get overwhelmed."

Aubree wasn't good at lying to Brielle's face, so she spotted the fib instantly.

Aubree, uneasy, pulled back her hands and deflated into a nearby chair. "Fine, but if you go looking for news, don't say I didn't

warn you. You're just asking for trouble."

It didn't take long for Brielle to understand what "asking for trouble" meant. Just half an hour before, the media had been ablaze

with talk of the Barnes family and the Dorsey clan's upcoming nuptials.

The catalyst was a photo Alivia had posted on her social media. It featured two hands, side by side, each adorned with a black

bead bracelet, clearly a matched set.

The caption was equally romantic.

-No longer content to watch from the shore, he's ready to dive into the waves of passion.

Comments were flooding in by the tens of thousands, all of them well-wishes.

"The couple I've been rooting for! Matching in pedigree, looks, talent, and education!"

"There really is love in high society. With their looks, their kids are going to be stunners."

"I heard Alivia's the dream girl for plenty of Beaconfield's golden boys. Who knew she'd fall head over heels just like the rest of

us."

"When's the wedding? The courthouse is practically rolling out the red carpet for you two."

Aubree watched Brielle from the corner of her eye, noticing a slight tremor of Brielle's lashes as she scrolled through the

messages. Suddenly feeling a pang of empathy, Aubree snatched the phone and slapped it down on the table. "Stop torturing

yourself. He's just another jerk. You'll find someone way better than Max!"

Brielle's mind blanked for a second, but then she just smiled. "I'm fine."

Aubree wasn't convinced. She knew Brielle had a soft spot for Max, and now that he seemed on the brink of engagement, there

was no way she was just fine. She must've been too heartbroken to even realize it. "Bri, if you're hurting. Just say it."

But Brielle genuinely wasn't hurting; she just felt a bit stifled. Why would Max give Alivia such a photo op? She couldn't believe

that Max would tangle with her while planning a wedding with Alivia. If their wedding were truly imminent, Max wouldn't ask

Brielle to wait for his return.

She had a hunch he had something important to tell her; it was just that he had left in such a hurry that he only asked her to wait

for him.

Seeing Brielle's silence, Aubree knew her friend was still heartbroken and quickly tried to console her.

"There are plenty of fish in

the sea. We'll just find you a new one. You're not stuck like me, Bri. You've still got a shot. And hey, you've been with Max. You

didn't lose out. What does it matter if he gets engaged to Alivia? I bet they haven't even slept together!"

Brielle's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "And how would you know that?" Max and Alivia had known each other for years; it

was unlikely nothing had ever happened.

"Andrew let it slip, said you were Max's first, you know."

A sweet warmth spread through Brielle's heart, and her cheeks grew hotter. He was her first, too. Their firsts were shared,

something special. She had thought Max and Alivia had done it.

If last night hadn't happened, seeing that photo would have been a blow to her heart. She would have consoled herself by

thinking that so many women adored Max, and he couldn't possibly reciprocate everyone's feelings. Besides, she had been

prepared to play the lone role in her unrequited drama.

Her faint stirrings of affection had never been a thunderous explosion in Max's world, at best, a quiet sob.

Brielle looked down, feeling her heart bloom with every beat. "He's probably not getting engaged."

Aubree was surprised Brielle was still defending Max at a time like this. After a moment's thought, Aubree admitted to herself

that Max hadn't really done anything wrong. After all, he wasn't engaged to anyone. He hadn't let anyone down.