

Master 551

Chapter 551

Alivia's smile deepened with every thought that danced through her mind. She was done getting her own hands dirty dealing with

Brielle. Why bother when she could manipulate others to do her dirty work as she had done with Tessa? She just had to sit back

and reap the rewards

Take Sydney, for instance. She was nothing more than a pawn in her game. No matter how much rage or frustration bubbled

within Sydney, without Max's heart in her grasp, she was merely clay in Alivia's hands.

Alivia's gaze skated over Sydney's face with undisguised contempt. "Keep looking at me with those eyes, and believe me, I can

have someone gouge them out before you can even blink,"

she hissed.

Sydney shivered, fear creeping into her bones, and she quickly looked down. "Ms. Alivia, I've done as you asked. Can't you just

let me be now?"

Alivia stood up, patting Sydney's cheek condescendingly. "Next time I tell you to jump, you ask, 'How high? Your little plans are

transparent to me. This building is full of mirrors, Sydney. Take a long look at yourself. With that pitiful, sour expression, do you

really think Max would spare you a second glance?"

The scorn in Alivia's eyes was impossible to miss. Sydney clenched her teeth so hard her gums ached, her eyes reddening with

suppressed anger. But she was helpless, forced to watch Alivia strut away with her designer bag, leaving her to stew in her own

turmoil.

Sydney's breathing was shaky as she swept the documents from her desk in a fit of rage. She had to stay calm. After all, getting

Max to forget Brielle quickly was also in her best interest. Only then could she climb the ladder.

Upstairs, Max sat staring blankly at the black rosary beads on his desk, memories of Brielle wearing them flashing through his

mind. He massaged his temples, the headache intensifying, and then his phone rang—it was Brielle.

The rosary lay beside the phone, a stark reminder that she hadn't taken it with her. He stood, reaching for the documents

underneath, inadvertently sending the beads clattering to the floor. The sound of the phone and the beads mingled as he

stooped to pick them up. wrapping them in a tissue.

After rescheduling all his meetings online, he headed straight back to the Premier Palace. Upon arrival, he handed the rosary to

Wesley. "Sanitize it."

Sydney had touched it, and who knew who else had?

Wesley knew the significance of the beads. Aware of his boss' preference for cleanliness, he quickly took the wrapped item and

sanitized it thoroughly before returning it.

Max then placed the rosary inside a box. He did not want to deal with the confrontation that would inevitably come from

answering Brielle's call. Instead, he merely sent her a message.

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[Focus on your work for now.]

Brielle received the text while sitting in a boardroom surrounded by the senior executives, many of whom had rushed in so

hastily that their suits were wrinkled.

Already in a foul mood, Brielle's face darkened further at the sight. "The HR department will note the names of those absent and

prepare their termination papers. I don't want to see them in this company again."

it was the first time so many employees were going to be dismissed at once, many of whom were deeply entrenched in the

company. The HR head hesitated, knowing the implications.

Brielle fixed him with an icy stare, "What, we don't have replacements ready for such a large company? If not, perhaps HR

should start recruiting online now?"

"Ms. Haywood," someone interjected, "letting them go so abruptly will impact the company."

Brielle's response was chilling as she tossed the document onto the marble table. "Oh really? Please enlighten me, does our

company's performance have any room to fall further?"

The room fell silent, the intent behind Brielle's words clear as crystal. With no further room for decline, the fate of each employee

rested solely on her current mood. After all, those seated around her held no shares, and the representatives sent by Dorsey

International had

veto power.

Brielle's gaze swept across each face. "I have an excellent memory. Until we have new hires, I expect to see these same faces.

I'm not interested in any excuses from those who failed to show up today. They've had their chance. They just didn't seize it. One

more word out of line, and you can hand over your seat to them and take their place in leaving."

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When Michael first brought Brielle into the company, he surely didn't anticipate that she would have the guts to ruffle feathers the

way she did.

As Belle made her stance clear, the room filled with tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. Everyone present was fuming,

but no one dared to speak up.

Keagan felt like he was sitting on a bed of nails. Most of the people who hadn't shown up were at his own behest, a move meant

to intimidate Brielle and put her in her place. But she wasn't playing by the rules, boldly considering firing a whole slew of them!

Did the higher-ups at Dorsey International have any inkling of her maverick moves? Damn it! Who in the upper echelons was

she cozy with?

"You do realize, Ms. Haywood, that stirring the pot like this on your first day—especially firing so many—might not sit well with

Dorsey International, right?" a voice dared to challenge.

A sly smile played on Brielle's lips as she thought of Max, still fuming. She would have to sweet-talk him later, but for now, she

wanted to wrap things up quickly. "Why don't you go ahead and let Dorsey International know? Their switchboard number is

plastered all over their website. Go on, make that call. See if anyone's interested in your sob story."

Her tone was casual as she stood up. "Also, hand over all artist contracts for my review. Those over the hill will get a golden

handshake and be shown the door. As for the up-and-comers, the company will pull out all the stops to secure them a spot in

showbiz. And the agents who've been collecting paychecks without booking a single gig for three years? Dead weight—I don't

need them. Fire them all."

Her words sent a palpable chill through the room; her presence alone felt as heavy as Mount Everest.

"And for those talents with potential, the company won't be stingy. If I catch wind of anyone cutting deals behind my back, I won't

be soft-hearted." Pushing back her chair, her gaze swept over everyone present. "You have one day to get this done. Anyone

who can't cut it—don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Her decisiveness was reminiscent of someone else—when Max first took the reins at Dorsey International, he cut the staff by half

and slashed numerous product lines. It was a case of out with the old to make way for the new.

As Brielle stepped out of the office, she saw Ricardo waiting for her, his eyes gleaming with admiration and excitement. Brielle

found it amusing. "You must have friends here. Go find out who's willing to stay and who's planning to leave. The company's

about to land some resources, and we'll be investing them in those cut out for this industry."

"Ms. Haywood, I want you to mentor me," Ricardo blurted out, his head dropping, hands clasped nervously behind his back. The

forthrightness of youth shone through.

Brielle was silent for a moment before responding, "I'll find you an agent. I've got company

matters to sort out for a day or two. Once the dust settles and the deals are done, you'll probably be on set."

Ricardo's eyes fell in disappointment. Brielle patted him on the shoulder. "Act your heart out. Your sister needs you, doesn't she?"

Money flows fast in showbiz. Make your mark, and if you decide it's not for you, you're free to leave."

His eyes sparkled briefly before dimming again. "I'll work hard to be a cash cow here."

Brielle wasn't particularly moved. After all, she figured she'd only be running the show for six months. "Sure thing," she

answered, dismissively pulling out her phone to call Max. As she dialed, she headed for the elevator.

Ricardo followed her, seeking a chance to be of service. "Ms. Haywood, let me escort you down."

"No need."

His newfound courage deflated like a punctured balloon as he stood still, glancing down at his patched jeans and faded jacket,

his cheeks flushing red.

Brielle's call to Max went unanswered, and although she saw the text he sent, she could tell he was still angry. She was about to

text back an explanation when Mason's call came through. "Brielle, we're about to scout locations and hold an internal online

meeting with our team. Do you have access to a computer?" Mason asked.

Feeling drained but unable to ignore matters related to her own business, Brielle mustered her energy.

"Yes, I'll head back to my

office now."

"Great, I'll invite you to the meeting in ten minutes," Mason confirmed.

Returning to what used to be Keagan's office, Brielle found everything replaced. The sign on the door now read 'President's

Office,' and even the computer was a brand-new setup. Despite its shortcomings, it seemed the company staff knew how to play

to their audience.

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Brielle booted up her laptop, and within moments, she was drawn into the virtual conference room

Mason made a brief introduction of himself before turning the spotlight on Brielle. “This is Brielle, the company’s primary shareholder, and our silent partner”

Applause echoed through the digital space, a virtual gathering of the brightest minds from Wall Street and Silicon Valley.

Typically, the financiers of Wall Street and the tech gurus of Silicon Valley didn’t see eye to eye, but they had put aside their

differences for this joint

venture.

Though weary, Brielle couldn’t help but smile at the thought of these individuals potentially becoming the new elite. “Hello,

everyone.”

These were the early adopters who had followed Mason from the start. With Brielle’s backing, the company had begun to turn a

profit, its user base had doubled, and it had successfully gone public. The room was buzzing with excitement and unwavering

loyalty.

Mason cleared his throat, signaling for some decorum. – after all, it was their first time meeting with the silent partner, and they

should at least show some maturity.

–

The room fell silent as a city map appeared on the shared screen. Mason voiced his opinion first, followed by a cacophony of

discussion, all waiting for Brielle to weigh in.

Brielle paused for a few seconds before asking, “Why not just in Silicon Valley?”

Like Wall Street, Silicon Valley was a paradise for investors and a hell for the uninitiated, the promised land for tech talent.

was global dominance, why. Most of the group hailed from Silicon Valley, and if the goal

was global dominance, why not establish the company at the heart of the tech world?

Brielle knew that land in Silicon Valley wasn’t just worth its weight in gold but probably in diamonds. “I understand the concerns.

Currently, we can't choose a central location in Silicon Valley. However, we can pick a spot close by with a view overlooking it.

When the company survives a few more rounds of funding and reaches a valuation of a hundred billion, I promise you, we'll

move to the tallest building at the center of Silicon Valley."

That first meeting with Brielle had the young entrepreneurs' blood pumping. No young person didn't dream of making it big in

Silicon Valley, but their current means were well short. However, with such a promise from the silent partner, it seemed she knew

exactly what they needed. They wanted to make a name for themselves in Silicon Valley, just as Max had once

done on Wall Street.

Mason, too, became animated, pointing to a specific location on the map. "I've visited this spot, and from there, you can see the

expanse of Silicon Valley. You all know the Father of Silicon Valley, right? This is where he started out."

Gordon Moore, revered by today's generation as the Father of Silicon Valley, was one of the founders of its culture.

Hearing this, Brielle had an idea of Mason's plan, which was shared by all the young people present. She tapped her fingertips

lightly on the desk. "Speaking of Gordon Moore, you must also know Noyce and Grove. They were called the trio of Silicon

Valley giants. In an interview, they once said a competent company needs a public face, a thinker, and a doer. I believe with

Mason here, you'll be excellent doers and thinkers. As for the public face, I'll strive to fulfill that role. Let's work well together and

live up to this era."

After the meeting, Mason sent her a message. [Not bad. You've adapted to the role quickly.]

Brielle chuckled, but thinking of Max, the taste of bitterness spread in her mouth.

[Book is going to take action against us. If there are important decisions to be made, we'll continue to meet like this online. Take

care of your own matters.] Mason didn't pry into Brielle's personal life and gave her space.

Brielle replied with a single word, [Okay.]

After replying, she stared at the dark laptop screen, lost in thought. It was only her first day, and she was already entangled in so

many issues that even finding the strength to explain things to Max felt daunting. She lightly massaged her temples before

grabbing her car keys, planning to make a personal visit to Dorsey International.

As soon as she reached the lobby, she saw Ricardo being blocked by Keagan. Keagan must have said something provocative,

as Ricardo threw a punch, and then Keagan was shouting about calling the cops.

Brielle's brow twitched in irritation as she strode over. "What's going on here?"

Seeing Brielle approach, Keagan's arrogant demeanor diminished, but he still sneered, "Just asking him to pay back his debt. He

took out a high-interest loan with the company. It's

\$300,000."

"Keagan, don't push me! I clearly borrowed only \$10,000, and I've already paid back \$100,000 in installments. What more do

you want?!" Ricardo exclaimed.

Keagan threw down a promissory note. "You signed off on this interest rate yourself. What, thinking of backing out now? T

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Ricardo's confidence suddenly deflated, and Brielle, standing by with a frown creasing her brow. just wanted to hurry over to

Max's place. Why was there always something blocking her path?

"How much is it?"

Keagan was taken aback and instinctively responded, "He owes a million now."

"A thousand in principal, and now you're asking him to pay back a million with compounded interest. Isn't that a bit heartless?"

"Ms. Haywood, he signed the contract himself."

Brielle stared at the document, clearly written in black and white, her expression growing cold. "Send me the account details. I'll

transfer the money to you later. And stop giving him a hard time in the future."

Keagan's gaze flitted between the two, noting Ricardo's reddening ears and Brielle's icy demeanor, and snickered, "Looks like

you've taken a shine to him, Ms. Haywood."

Brielle turned her head and glanced at a bewildered Ricardo. "Next time, before signing anything, get a lawyer to look it over.

Even if you can't find one, there's free legal advice.

online."

Ricardo understood that Brielle thought him foolish for always getting duped, and he nodded in agreement.

Brielle immediately transferred a million to Keagan, who walked away satisfied upon receiving the money. He even turned back

to snap a few photos of them standing together, sending them to a certain number. The picture had an artistic flair to it. It was

merely Brielle looking up and lecturing the younger Ricardo, but with the sunset outside the hall, the scene took on an

ambiguous hue.

After sending the photo, a dark chuckle escaped Keagan's lips, and he said no more.

And soon enough, the photo landed on Max's phone. At that moment, Max was in a meeting in the study of Premier Palace. His

expression darkened upon seeing the photo. He suspended the meeting, giving the attendees fifteen minutes to refine their

wording, while he stepped out into the hallway to call Michael.

"Max."

"Father, such tactics are beneath your dignity."

Michael let out a soft chuckle, placing a white chess piece on the board in front of him. "But you're anxious, aren't you?"

Max didn't respond, and Michael's voice continued. "When Brielle was at Dorsey International, she saw you often and didn't have

time for distractions. But showbiz is different, and it can

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corrupt the soul She's just a child raised in foster care. Who knows how much resentment she's built up over the years? When

she sees someone who's been in her shoes, she can't help but offer a helping hand. The young man's got talent, I hear. Brielle

just paid off a million for him. She's never been so generous with herself, but she's soft hearted to an outsider."

Max gripped his phone tightly, a storm brewing in his gaze. "If these are the extent of your tactics, Father, I will be very disappointed."

"Of course, there's more to come. You'll see, Max. I've said before, you and Brielle won't make it You don't really trust her, and

she's not that into you. Today, she's soft-hearted towards that boy, and tomorrow, she could be softer still. That boy is from her

world, she doesn't have to worry about being unworthy or strain on her tiptoes to reach. It won't be exhausting for her."

Each of Michael's words was heavy, pressing on Max's chest. Max felt a pang of defeat, something he had never experienced in the business world.

Would Brielle really be tired of him? He never wanted her to tiptoe to reach him.

"Max, Jose and I are playing chess, so I won't keep you. This is just the first day. There will be many more incidents to come. As

the heir to Dorsey International, the president no less, are you really going to fret over a woman? If you were with Alivia, you

wouldn't be suffering like this."

The old man's cunning was evident. Michael had successfully manipulated the psychology of a couple in love, with Alivia adding

fuel to the fire for good measure.

After hanging up, Max asked Patrick, who was standing by, "Check Brielle's accounts."

Once the meeting was over half an hour later, Patrick came in with the report. "Sir, Ms. Brielle's account is indeed short of one

million."

Max's fingers twitched. He thought he'd be angry, but he wasn't. There was no anger, no rage, just a faint sense of being

slighted. It was like his heart had been bitten by a venomous creature, the toxin slowly injecting into his body, turning his limbs

cold.

On the very first day, the very first day, Brielle had spent a million on a stranger.

She and Max had known each other for so long, and the scarf Brielle was knitting for him was still unfinished. Beyond that, there

seemed to be nothing else.

The worst thing was the comparison.

He felt his heart completely numbed by the toxin, as if a hole had been torn open and cold winds were pouring in.

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The chill emanating from Max's presence intensified, and the throb in his head grew more severe. He couldn't help but wonder if

it was the aftermath of that car crash Pyan had orchestrated, the one that left his brain marred with a stubborn contusion. At the

moment, all he could focus on was the pain that seemed almost unbearable.

He tossed his phone aside, deciding to shut out the world and its barrage of information, craving nothing but a moment of brief

respite.

"Patrick." He called out again, and Patrick, already alert to his boss' sour mood, hurried through the door.

"Sir?"

"Do we have any sleeping pills? Hand me one, will you?"

Patrick hesitated, a wave of memories bringing a bad taste to his mouth. "Right away, sir. Are you in pain?"

"Yeah, the doc mentioned the clot hasn't cleared. No clue how long it will take."

"Do you need me to get a doctor to check on you?"

"Later. I need to rest now."

With no choice but to comply, Patrick fetched the sleeping pill and a cup of warm water. Leaving his phone in the study, Max

headed to the master bedroom and succumbed to sleep.

Patrick waited outside, pondering for a moment before deciding to call Brielle.

At this time, Brielle had just left Stellar Stage Entertainment. Caught in the rush hour traffic, her car crawled to a halt at a red light

when her phone rang, flashing an unfamiliar number.

Frowning, she hesitated for a split second, truly not wanting to answer. After mentally bracing herself, she picked up to a

woman's voice on the other end, one that carried the weight of years. "Ms. Brielle, hello. I'm the new director of Sunflower

Children's Home. Today, a few children are set to be adopted, and the former director hoped you could come by personally."

Brielle's intuition was spot on; there was indeed a pile of issues waiting for her. She honked the horn impatiently, her brows

knitting together deeply.

"Ms. Brielle?"

Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she replied, "Alright, I'll be there shortly. Am I needed to sign off in the former director's

stead?"

"Yes, he said you're the only one he truly trusts."

With that, Brielle took the next turn, heading toward the new location of Sunflower Children's Home.

Having been the one to see off Mark, she felt a responsibility to be there for the children at this moment. However, the timing of it

all seemed too coincidental, as if the universe conspired to keep her from Max.

Her phone had run out of battery and shut down, leaving her in that modern-day panic model that came with a dead cell. She

hadn't even managed to send Max a soothing text. A mix of irritation and a strange sense of injustice began to bubble up within

her.

On her way to the orphanage, she tried to compose herself, and it wasn't until she was greeted by the children's beaming faces

that she felt somewhat at ease.

"Ms. Brielle." The new director welcomed her at the doorway, showing utmost respect. "These are the two kids who are getting

adopted."

Brielle recognized a few familiar faces despite the change of address. The children saw her and cheerfully called out, "Brielle!"

"Brielle, it's been so long since you visited."

"Brielle, where did Mark go?"

She patiently answered their questions and assessed the two prospective families. Both appeared to be from stable, happy

homes, and she confidently signed the paperwork.

As the families took the children away, the remaining kids bid their farewells, and Brielle couldn't help but remember her own

adoption by the Haywood family amidst similar blessings.

"It's him! He's here. Is he coming to see us?!"

"Yay!"

The children's excitement reignited as they dashed toward a young man stepping out of a taxi.

Ricardo, too, seemed surprised to find her there, his eyes lighting up with delight. "Ms. Haywood."

Brielle forced a smile. "What brings you here?"

Ricardo's face flushed with embarrassment, "I and my sister were adopted from this place. After you sorted out the company's

finances today, they paid me the back wages they owed. I wanted to come and see the kids."

What were the odds?

He had brought along a myriad of gifts, bags brimming with goods. Brielle was about to leave but now felt compelled to help him.

Ricardo was flustered by the offer. "Ms. Haywood, please, I can manage

"I was also adopted from this place."

Her voice was flat, but Ricardo's eyes widened in surprise, and he no longer resisted. "Ms. Haywood, you look so young, nothing

like..." Nothing like him, still exuding a whiff of poverty. Once released, three years' worth of wages amounted to a significant

sum. Ricardo had spared no expense on food, clothing, and toys for the kids.

And so, their act of kindness was captured in photos.

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Brielle greeted Ricardo and they stood amidst a gaggle of giggling children, with smiles plastered on their faces. Later, they

moved and unpacked items together. All those

photographs landed on Max's phone.

Max was out like a light, the sleeping pill having taken quick effect. Even in slumber, a "light frown creased his forehead.

Exhausted from helping unpack, Brielle could barely lift a finger. She hadn't eaten since noon and was now sprawled on the

couch, panting with her eyes closed, devoid of any energy.

Driving back to Premier Palace was out of the question at this point; she couldn't even muster the strength to stand up. She

leaned back and succumbed to sleep right there on the

couch

Ricardo glanced at the still-excited children, now playing with their new toys, and placed a finger to his lips in a hushing gesture.

The children immediately caught on and quieted down

"Will Brielle catch a cold sleeping like that?"

"Ricardo, why don't you give her your jacket?"

Instead of undressing, Ricardo found a soft throw blanket and draped it over Brielle. It was as if cameras were always lurking

around them, ready to snapshot any closeness between the two and send the images at lightning speed to Max. The innocent

act of Ricardo covering Brielle with the blanket while she was oblivious in her exhaustion seemed sweet and tender

to an outsider.

In her dreams, Brielle knitted a scarf snug in Max's embrace during the holidays while he read her poems by Borges, word by

word. The corners of her lips curled into a smile as she shifted to a more comfortable position in his arms.

When Max woke up, it was eight in the evening, and Brielle hadn't returned. She had said she'd come home every night, even if

she visited the company branch, instead of renting a place nearby.

Rubbing the center of his brow, Max was alerted by Patrick's voice at the door. "Mr. Dorsey. are you awake? There's an

emergency meeting needed for the international acquisition case."

After freshening up and donning a suit, Max opened the door.

In his study, he saw his phone flooded with new pictures. With each swipe, his expression turned icier. In the last image, was

Ricardo covering Brielle with the blanket. Max's knuckles whitened, and the phone was hurled against the wall, shattering into

pieces.

The air turned heavy, biting cold.

Michael's tactics, though unbecoming of his status, were devastatingly effective.

Standing behind his boss, Patrick witnessed Max's fury for the first time. He'd seen the photo, too, and besides being

incredulous, he was stunned. Ms. Brielle rarely let a man get that close. No wonder Max was livid

He wanted to ask if the meeting was still on, but seeing Max's dark mood, he tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

Max's lips pressed together, his voice icy, "Patrick, call her."

Patrick's head hung even lower. "I've tried Ms. Brielle's phone, sir, but it's turned off."

Panic struck Max's heart like an arrow, even bordering on terror. Could Brielle actually be falling for someone else?

He had known her for so long, yet she had never taken him to the orphanage, but now she had taken someone else.

Was it because they were from the same world? Was he worried that his presence would pressure the kids? Either reason was

unbearable.

His breath turned hot as he lowered his gaze, a storm brewing in his eyes.

In the past, he would have worried if something had happened to Brielle, if someone had set up those photos deliberately.

However, the laughter in her eyes couldn't lie—it was a long-lost sense of ease and contentment.

With him, she was always under pressure. Everyone was pushing her to reach higher, as if slowing down meant she wasn't

worthy of him. So, she was always alert and composed. She had just spent one day with that young man, paid off his million—

dollar debt, and taken him to the orphanage.

Max had every reason to be jealous.

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"Mr Dorsey, don't worry. Ms. Brielle is bound to come back tonight. Patrick's statement hung in the air as he fell silent, fully aware

of how Michael's tactics went straight for the jugular.

Indeed, Michael was the one who knew Max best, and thus, he knew exactly how to twist the knife to make it hurt the most. And

Ms. Brielle wasn't answering her phone, leaving everyone clueless about what was going on with her.

"Yeah." Max's tone was indifferent as he opened his laptop, seemingly having gotten his emotions under control.

Patrick had the housekeeper sweep up the fragments of the broken phone and equipped

Max with a new one.

The overseas acquisition had drained a lot of manpower and resources, and after a heavy initial promotional push, it required

Max's personal touch on many decisions. He couldn't afford to drop the ball now, not with the hard work of several branches on

the line for the past six months.

After pinpointing several issues and reviewing the report one last time to ensure there were no mistakes, he declared the meeting adjourned.

The meeting had stretched on for two hours. Later, Max left his study to sit on the sofa in the ground floor living room, quietly

waiting for Brielle's return.

First, it was the rosary, then the million-dollar issue, followed by her trip to the orphanage with someone else. Max wondered

which issue Brielle would tackle first when she explained herself.

As long as she explained, he couldn't bear to be angry with her. He had never wanted to be angry with her.

Brielle woke up on the orphanage's sofa to see that it was already eleven o'clock. She was suddenly anxious and quickly stood

up..

The kids had all gone to bed, and Ricardo was playing with his phone on another sofa, seemingly busy texting someone. When

he saw her wake up, he put his phone away. "Ms. Haywood, you're up? Are you hungry?"

Brielle did feel hungry. She had been both tired and hungry before falling asleep. She was no longer tired, but her stomach was

painfully empty. "Ricardo, why haven't you gone home yet?" "I was worried about you. So I thought I'd wait until you were awake

before leaving."

Brielle, usually oblivious to others' feelings, didn't think much of this nineteen-year-old boy's concern for her. She got to her feet

and saw that he had somehow produced a bowl of oatmeal. "Ms. Haywood, have this before you go."

"No, it's too late. I need to get back, and someone's waiting for me at home."

at pad the Pud down and followed her can "Abight. Til walk you for

Streethe didnt really does an esp pit, but it was hard to refuse the gesture (ince she was in her

she saw Ricando standing by waiting for a nah But at this hour, finding a taxt near the piphanage was a fost comes the didnt

know how long he would wait there alone,

As fidelle qhove away, she said flatly. Til drop you off where there are more people so you can get a cab back. Sorry, I really

have an emergency tonight. Someone's waiting for me at home

"Mi Haywood I don't need a ride. If someone's waiting for you, then you should get going"

Ricardo's gaze was clear and innocent. Brielle, rubbing her temples, relented, "Get in"

He couldn't refuse and got into the car. When they reached a bustling crossroads, he spoke up. "Ms. Haywood, you can drop me

off here."

Bielle pulled over and advised him, "The company will negotiate with production crews soon. Your new agent will handle it, so

remember to keep fit and, now that you have a salary, get yourself some proper clothes. You'll need to meet some directors

soon."

"Got it, thanks."

Without further conversation, Brielle drove straight to Premier Palace. Her phone was beside her but had been off for a while.

Halfway there, her stomach pain became unbearable, and her vision blurred with hunger. She pulled over, clutching her

abdomen tightly.

Once the cramping eased, she drove the rest of the way to Premier Palace. When she got out of the car, her fingers trembled,

and a fine sweat broke out on her forehead. She felt. nauseous but couldn't vomit because her stomach was empty.

She stood still for a moment, then slowly made her way inside. Premier Palace was quiet, the holiday decorations still up, except

for the fairy lights that had been taken down.

Brielle chuckled, unlocking the door. Inside, the great hall was dark and silent.

Had Max gone to bed already?

She frowned as she flicked on the living room lights, her eyes settling on the silent figure lounging on the couch. An inexplicable

twitch pinched at the center of her brows.

“Max?”

Her voice came across the room as she stepped out of her shoes at the entranceway and slowly approached. She was wearing

her favorite pair of white slippers today, while Max’s feet were adorned with his usual black ones.

With each step, Brielle felt the gnawing pain in her stomach grow more unbearable. Yet, she could sense the minutiae of

emotions radiating from Max even the ends of his hair seemed to broadcast a message: he was sulking.

She had told herself during the company meeting earlier that day that she wanted to be the face of the operation – the idea

person, the talker, the one who wasn’t afraid to network.

A relationship, she mused, was akin to starting a business together. Max was the hands-on type, accustomed to working and

giving in silence. He hadn’t believed in affection at first, but now that he did, he was at a loss about how to salvage or deepen it.

He was always one to act more than speak, his negative emotions something he preferred to digest alone.

In this partnership, Brielle still wanted to be the outward-facing one. If issues weren’t immediately addressed, they festered into

knots in Max’s mind. Perhaps his fondness for her could overlook these knots, but if a bigger storm erupted one day, those knots

would spread and strangle them both.

Brielle sat down beside him and tentatively reached for his hand. Max pursed his lips, his anger still present, but he didn’t pull

away. He knew well enough that there was nothing between Brielle and that young man, and that it was all his father’s

manipulation, but if one were to remain utterly rational in matters of the heart, it couldn’t truly be love.

Logically, he trusted Brielle, but emotionally, he needed to wallow in his jealousy.

As she took his hand, she began to explain. “That young man was Ricardo, and Stellar Stage Entertainment has been exploiting

him. They've only paid him about ten grand over three years. I had Finance increase his base salary, and he probably got a bit

too emotional. He's just a teenager; he couldn't control himself, really. I pushed him away immediately."

Max's dark eyes lightened slightly with relief, but the thought of that rosary, the million-dollar transaction, and their last photo

together at the orphanage were too glaring to ignore. Her soft spot for Ricardo, borne out of shared experiences, was

undeniable. Even her smile was too sharp, so sharp it caused him discomfort. And then there was the issue of her late return. If

he forgave her too easily this time, would she take it as a license to stay out all night next time?

"A woman mustn't be spoiled," Andrew had said.

This time. Max resolved to teach Brielle a lesson, and he pulled his hand away with a cool,

Get some rest."

His tone was indifferent, laced with a chill that sent a shudder through Brielle. She couldn't help but follow him, although Max

didn't look back at her. However, he smiled slightly when he caught a glimpse of her trailing behind him.

Brielle's stomach was in knots, the pain almost unbearable now, but she knew how to handle

Max.

Persistence was key. Max was the type who could be worn down by a persistent partner, They needed to clear the air first, then

slowly unravel the misunderstandings.

Max headed to the study, intending to work overtime, and Brielle, despite her agony, followed close on his heels. Even when Max

went to the master bedroom to retrieve a forgotten document, Brielle was right behind him.

Realizing she still cared, Max's tone softened considerably. "Aren't you going to sleep?"

Brielle's face was pale, and her voice strained as if the next word would be accompanied by the torment of her stomach pain.

Her fingertips trembled uncontrollably.

She leaned closer to Max, resting her forehead against his back in a muffled voice. "My stomach hurts. How can I sleep? If you

ignore me any longer, I might just pass out, and then you'll be sorry."

Max felt a jolt in his heart, almost dropping the documents in his hand. Then he remembered the last time he was upset, and she

had used the same excuse to reconcile. He felt something like disappointment. It seemed as if she didn't realize she had done

anything

wrong.

urge

He took a deep breath, fighting the to forgive her, determined to make her recognize her

mistake.

She came home so late, turned off her phone, used the same excuse as before, and visited the orphanage with someone else.

He hadn't even been there himself, despite the fact that he had helped secure the land for the orphanage, owing a favor to the

Hatfield family. Why should an outsider benefit from his efforts?

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He grabbed the paperwork and turned to leave the master bedroom.

Brielle's arms wrapped around his waist. "I really have a stomachache."

"Brielle, enough." Max shrugged off her hands, deliberately avoiding her gaze, knowing that one look would make him go soft. "You tried this same trick last time." With that, he walked straight out of the bedroom.

Brielle wanted to follow, but a stabbing pain in her stomach anchored her to the spot. She quickly crouched down, beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

It wasn't that she blamed Max. If she put herself in Max's shoes and had seen Max hugging someone in a video, then going offline and returning home so late, she'd be livid, too. Trust was one thing, but in matters of the heart, even saints could be petty. If Max didn't fuss over it, she would actually worry that he didn't care enough about her.

Brielle sighed, torn between thinking he was being ridiculous and acknowledging

the genuine pain in her stomach.

Oh, the irony. Was this her own “boy who cried wolf” moment?

She didn’t have the strength to chase after him anymore, feeling like she might pass out at any moment. She buried her head in her knees and curled up by the side of the bed, trying to ease the agony.

Love, oh, what an affliction it was, like a bitter, rusty needle. One slip, one prick, and it was unbearable.

She couldn't help but snuffle, pushing back the heat of impending tears. The position only made her urge to cry more pronounced, so she slowly lifted her head from her knees, trying to look at the ceiling.

Her gaze fell on the figure standing less than a meter away. Max was there, with a warm glass of water in one hand and antacids in the other.

The tears she had been holding back now surged forth. She hadn't wanted to cry. It was like a child who fell; if no one was around, they could brush themselves off

and get up, but the moment someone offered comfort, it was as though the sky was falling, and the pain became unbearable. In the end, it was just human nature.

Max glanced at her, then crouched down, his voice softening completely. “Take the medicine first.”

Brielle’s crying was heart-wrenching. She wasn't sobbing loudly but biting her lip as tears silently fell.

Max cupped her chin, momentarily at a loss. He even forgot about a handkerchief and just awkwardly used his suit sleeve to dab at her tears, creating damp streaks on the dark, smooth fabric.

He forced a few pills into her mouth and brought the glass to her lips. Brielle glanced at him, then, with a hint of defiance, crunched the antacids and swallowed them dry,

Max's expression darkened. “Aren't them bitter?”

“My heart's more bitter than this. Now you're worried?”

His grip on the glass tightened, then relaxed as he offered a truce. “Have some water.”

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Brielle finally took the glass, washing

away the bitterness in her mouth,

Handing back the glass, she seized

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the opportunity to make a request. “I

” :

want to eat.”

Max resignedly took the glass. “I've asked the kitchen to prepare something.”

He hadn't intended to leave but had gone to get her medicine and give orders for a meal. Brielle’s tears kept streaming after realizing this.

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From morning to night, she was

swamped with obligations that kept

her from returning home. She didn't

want to deal with any of it, but it was

her responsibility, and she had to see

it through

It was her fault for being so tired she fell asleep at the orphanage, but at the time, she couldn't even move her fingers.

Max put down the glass and lifted her in his arms, removing her coat and placing her on the bed. “How did you get a stomachache without eating?”

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5 . . ,

Brielle felt a twinge of guilt. She'd had

a busy morning with back—to—back
meetings at Stellar Stage
Entertainment and then reviewing
new company policies before

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tackling her own company's agenda.

There had been no time for food.

Seeing her evasive look, Max's anger flared, and he stood up, ready to storm
out.

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Brielle clutched at her stomach, wincing. "Ugh, it hurts. Don't mind me, just go."

Max's body tensed, a mix of frustration and helplessness washing over him. He
closed his eyes, taking a moment to quell the anger, before resuming his seat at
the edge of her bed. His hand reached out, resting gently on her abdomen, and
he started to rub softly. "Does this help a
bit?"

Brielle, whose spirits had already lifted, wasn't in as much discomfort as she let
on. She had exaggerated a bit for effect, but now she quickly seized the chance
to praise him. "So much better. You're more useful than a doctor."

She sneaked a glance at his face, noting the stormy expression hadn't quite
cleared, and pressed on. "Max, you're such a sweetheart. I thought you'd left, but
you were actually getting medicine for me. You're so good to me. I'll work hard,
and when I'm richer than you, I'll take care of you. All the money will be yours—I'll
keep just enough for my expenses."

Max's hand paused, a flicker of reaction in his eyes. Brielle hadn't realized it, but
she had inadvertently addressed the issue of the million dollars. She'd only set

aside a million for others, but for him, she was willing to leave almost everything.

Max's expression softened noticeably. He found her flattery quite charming.

Brielle kept a covert watch on his face, and seeing the dark cloud lift, she breathed easier and shifted slightly, pushing her luck a bit. "And my back, could you...?"

His fingers trailed to her lower back, sending a shiver through her. Lying there, she looked up at his face, her lips curving into a smile. "Still mad at me?"

Max looked down, his hands gentle despite his stubborn tone.

"You saw some marks on me and acted like the sky was falling. But when someone else holds you, I'm not supposed to be mad? Brielle, don't be so hypocritical."

Brielle reached out from under the covers, tugging at his suit sleeve. "It's my fault. I didn't expect him to pounce. I'll be more alert next time."

The issues with the orphanage and that rosary still stung like a thorn in Max's heart.

Brielle placed her hand over his, their fingers interlocking. "No one compares to you."

It sounded like something a player would say. Yet, these simple words pleased him. He suppressed the faint bitterness in his heart, his gaze detached. "The scarf."

He'd been promised a scarf for Christmas, and it was still only half-done.

Realizing what he meant, Brielle scrambled to get out of bed. "I'll knit it now.

Even if it kills me, I'll finish your scarf. Max, you better not stop me."

Amusement flickered in Max's eyes, and he decided not to dwell on the matter.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, gently pushing her back onto the bed.

"Rest if you're in pain. No need to

Brielle glanced at his face again,

reassured by the smile in his eyes,

and settled back comfortably. "Once I'm better, knitting that scarf will be my top priority."

When Brielle wanted to charm someone, she was effortlessly effective. Max didn't want to admit how easily he was manipulated by her simple stratagems.

There was a knock at the door, and Wesley came in with a tray of chicken soup and oatmeal. "Ms. Brielle, are you feeling any better? We saved some dinner for you, and it's been kept warm. Mr. Dorsey didn't eat either. He was waiting for you."

Brielle felt a pang of guilt. "Wesley, I'm sorry for the trouble. I've kept you all up to cook so late." Wesley set the tray down on a nearby cabinet, his tone deeply meaningful. "You still should've called, you know. Mr. Dorsey's stomach isn't great either; if he keeps this up, he'll have an attack himself."

"I'm sorry, my phone died on me. Right after the call from the orphanage, it just went off."

Knowing Max hadn't eaten either, Brielle felt even more concerned. She propped herself up and began to stir the oatmeal. "Let's eat together."

Max shook his head. "I'm already full from anger."