

Master 581

Chapter 581

Brielle wrapped her coat tighter around her as she stood outside the hospital, feeling as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders.

Meanwhile, at the sanatorium, Alivia took a moment to compose herself in the restroom. She stared into the mirror, and a cold smirk crossed her lips.

She summoned a nurse into the room, asking about Max's whereabouts. Alivia had her people placed in the sanatorium, and Martha had welcomed them. They were fiercely loyal to her. This nurse was one of her insiders.

Seeing Alivia's disheveled appearance, the nurse paled, rushing to fetch a bath towel.

Alivia's tone was icy, "Is Max still with Martha?"

"No, but he is staying here tonight. His assistant came to see him, and they're having a very important meeting. He made it clear we're not to disturb them. Ms. Alivia, are you alright? Let me take you to get changed. You're so cold; you'll catch a deadly cold if you're not careful."

Good, Max wasn't around.

A sly smile curled at the corners of Alivia's mouth as she glanced at the nurse.

"Keep your mouth shut about this. Don't tell Max."

The nurse quickly looked down, pretending she hadn't seen a thing.

Alivia left the restroom and headed directly toward Martha's room. Martha was sitting up in bed, still fuming over Max's stubbornness, feeling a sharp pain in her chest. Taking in Alivia's wet hair and purple lips, she was about to jump out of bed with worry.

"Alivia! What on earth happened to you?"

Alivia's shoulders shook, and her eyes reddened, tears silently falling.

Martha's expression darkened, "Max wouldn't do this. No matter how angry he is, he wouldn't lay a hand on you. What really happened?"

Alivia choked back a sob, wiping her tears. "Martha, I'm alright, don't worry, about

me. I just

came to see how you were."

Martha grabbed her hand and firmly made her sit down, retrieving a clean towel from her room and placing it on Alivia's head. "Alivia, I've watched you grow up,

and I consider you like my own daughter. You can rest assured. You'll be the one to marry my son."

Hearing this, a gleam of triumph flickered in Alivia's eyes, though her voice sounded even more distressed. "I know, but Max is fond of Brielle now. I won't force him."

"Why not just make Brielle disappear from this world?" Martha's eyes were sharp, but her voice was soothing as she dried Alivia's hair. "I won't let her stand in the way of you and Max. Who did this to you? Was it that bitch?"

1/2

12-23

Alivia hesitated, then sighed heavily. "It was her. I saw her outside just now. She probably thought I was here to see Max. I didn't expect her to be so strong. She pushed me against the washbasin, telling me to stay away from Max."

Martha was vindicated. She already despised Brielle, and now even more so. "How could she treat me like this! She's nothing but an orphan from a charity home. She doesn't know her place!"

"Martha, I'm fine. Let's not tell Max about this. Even if we did, he wouldn't do anything to Brielle. He would only think that I am making a fuss for no reason."

Sy 3

Alivia's eyes showed a well-timed

5 Bi)

hint of sorrow, eliciting Martha's

"

sympathy. "Go change your clothes.

)

You're too honest for your own good,

:: ,

letting that bitch bully you. You've

been raised too well just like your

"

brother. Both of you are too gentle.

Alivia's mother, Daisy, was renowned

for her good temper and stunning

beauty. Martha and Daisy were close

friends for years, but since Martha

had moved abroad, she had cut ties

with everyone, not wanting her illness

to become a source of pity.

"My mother often speaks of your health, Martha. Everyone hopes you get well soon."

Martha rubbed her temples, her

expression melancholic as she

looked at Alivia. "It's been a long time

since I've seen Daisy. With my

condition, I'd rather not see anyone

until I'm better. Then I can catch up

with them. But you... Daisy has made

you too soft, and that's why you're

being bullied by someone like Brielle,

who's nothing but a wild child from

the charity home. No wonder she

behaves so badly.” The content is on

A deeper smile hid in Alivia's eyes as she bowed her head, remaining silent.

Chapter 582

Brielle had just returned to the grandeur of the Premier Palace, her presence igniting a spark in Wesley's eyes as he caught sight of her. “Mr. Max mentioned earlier that you wouldn't be back tonight. Luckily, I had the kitchen whip up an extra dinner just in case. Ms. Brielle, have you had your meal yet? Both you and him have been burning the midnight oil lately. You've got to take care of your health.”

Indeed, the recent ordeal had left her a shade paler than usual. But with her appetite eluding her, she politely declined Wesley's offer.

Sensing her mood, Wesley couldn't help but inquire. “If you're feeling down, perhaps a good book might lift your spirits? Or a stroll in the garden to admire the flowers? You've been at the Premier Palace for a while now, but you've hardly had the chance to explore. There's even a grand private cinema here, though Mr. Max never really uses it. He rarely watches movies.”

Max was a man who seldom paused his relentless pace. His rare moments of leisure mostly involved catching up with a few friends or spending time alone with a book and a cup of coffee, occasionally indulging in a fine glass of red wine.

After dating Max, Brielle had never really shared much about his past. However, tonight, with Victoria and Alivia's reminders, her curiosity was piqued.

“Wesley, do you have any pictures of him as a kid?”

Wesley paused, then shook his head with a hint of regret.

“He hardly left behind any childhood photos. No photographer enjoys snapping pictures of a kid who won't smile, and he himself was always resistant to the idea. The photo you see of him in the financial papers? They've been recycling the same one for years. That's practically the only picture of him in existence.”

Brielle felt a twinge of disappointment. She really wanted to know what Max had looked like as

a child.

Wesley's eyes twinkled with mirth, his lips curving into a smile. "However, I'd say he looked much the same as a kid—just a mini version of his current self.

Chiseled like a sculpture, he had the air of a cherubic angel. There were plenty of

young ladies who would sneak glances at him. Anyone who managed to exchange a few words with him would brag about it for days in their circles."

Brielle's heart softened at the thought, a vivid image forming in her mind. A pint—sized Max stood aloofly at the periphery of a bustling party, his icy gaze surveying the adults mingling with their clinking glasses. Dressed in a tailor—made black suit and seeming to exist in a realm of his own. Untouched by the surrounding revelry.

The regret of not having shared in his past experiences was palpable.

"In truth, there wasn't much excitement in his younger days. Ms. Martha always had high hopes for him. As soon as he could walk, he was reciting classics and poetry and even started

attending finance lectures at a tender age. When he wasn't competing in contests around the world, he was on his way to one. He was busier than most adults in their circle, and he'd often work himself to the brink of exhaustion, running fevers as high as a hundred and four degrees. Michael sometimes couldn't bear to watch Martha push him so hard, but perhaps it was her methods that shaped the man he is today."

Max's childhood had always been shadowed by Martha's presence. Now that Martha was using her own life as a bargaining chip, it was naturally distressing for him.

Wesley watched Brielle fall into contemplation and instructed the kitchen to prepare a light, soothing soup. "Ms. Brielle, you should rest after you finish your soup."

Brielle couldn't refuse. After sipping the warm broth, she washed up and settled

into bed. Just as sleep was about to claim her, Wesley's words echoed in her mind, and she couldn't resist. She reached for her phone and shot Max a message.

[Is the meeting over yet?]

(Yeah, just wrapping up some data with Patrick.)

[Could you send me a picture of yourself?]

Max froze as he read the message, a flush of warmth creeping up his ears. He rarely took photos, to the point of almost never. He had reused an old photograph for an interview with a leading international newspaper abroad. Being in front of a camera made him uncomfortable. unsure of what expression to wear.

However, without hesitation, he handed his phone to Patrick.

“Patrick.”

At the sound of his name, Patrick, engrossed in data, thought something was amiss and looked up in alarm.

“Snap a photo for me.”

Patrick's grip faltered, his pen streaking an unintended line across the paper. He gaped in disbelief, half—convinced he was hallucinating.

ux: yn :

Sir?”

Max's face was a mask of calm, but under the brilliant overhead lights, the sharpness of his features seemed to

soften. "I said, take a picture of me.

Chapter 583

Patrick certainly overheard the comment, and while such an occurrence might not have seemed out of the ordinary for someone else, it was utterly preposterous when it came to Max. Patrick been at Max's side for so many years, but he had never known Max to take a photo.

That one time, years ago, it was only after the editor-in-chief of the financial report had practically begged on bended knees that Max had reluctantly agreed. After getting Max's phone, Patrick found the whole situation rather surreal. Yet, considering the CEO had recently made video calls, breaking the routine just this once didn't seem too outlandish.

In the camera lens, Max maintained his usual expression. His face was as if perennially kissed by frost, but Patrick could sense that frost was slowly thawing. After snapping a picture, he handed the phone back to Max.

Max scrutinized the photo, and his brows knitted together. "Does it look alright?" Patrick nearly choked upon hearing that. If Max's face wasn't handsome, then no one on earth could claim the title!

How many men envied his looks, perhaps even more than they coveted his talent! There was even a time when a Hollywood heartthrob declared that he'd undergo plastic surgery in a heartbeat if any clinic could sculpt him into Max's likeness.

"Sir, it's perfect as is."

Patrick wasn't just buttering him up; as a man, he genuinely believed that face

had no bad angles, up close or from afar.

On the other end, Brielle regretted sending her message just minutes after it went out. Wesley had mentioned that Max disliked taking photos, yet she had made such a request, especially when he was already troubled with various matters — it was rather thoughtless of her.

As Max didn't reply immediately, she hurriedly began to compose another message. [Actually, I was just kidding. You don't have to send one; how about I send you one of mine instead?]

But just as she finished editing the message and before she could send it, her

phone pinged. It was Max's photo, the same frosty visage but with an obvious attempt to accommodate the camera.

Brielle's fingers froze as if the gates to a sealed valley had been flung open, letting in an endless gale. She felt the gentlest of cherishing from the world, more precious than anything else.

At a loss for words, her lips parted, but her eyes unexpectedly reddened. She quickly saved the photo, even creating a hidden folder for it. After all, this was probably the second photo of Max in existence, and it deserved to be treasured.

As Max awaited her response, the lack thereof had him frowning, wondering if the photo was indeed unflattering. Just as he moved to type, Brielle's emoji blew in. It was a kiss emoji. This was the first time Brielle had sent such an emoji.

Max pondered for a moment before turning to Patrick. "Patrick."

Patrick was still reeling from the recent shock, his mind a jumble. At the sound of his name, he braced for another bombshell. "Sir, what is it?"

"How do you take a screenshot?"

Before Max met Brielle, his phone was used solely for communication. He'd never unlocked any other functions.

Patrick quickly leaned over his

SN .)

screen, pointing to Brielle's

expression — was Max really going to

:)

take a screenshot of this? He couldn't

help but smile, Brielle probably was

the only one who could make Max do

such a thing. Swiftly, he pulled down

the screen for him and pointed at a

: : “

particular icon, “Press here for a

0) 3

screenshot, and it'll automatically

” :

save to your gallery.”

Max nodded and did as instructed, capturing the image.

Patrick couldn't help but feel a touch

envious, witnessing two romance

novices navigate love. Even a

workaholic like Max was getting into

the game. Perhaps it was time

Patrick found a girlfriend, too.

Otherwise, all this sweetness was

going to leave him feeling lonely.

Max sent back a kiss emoji in reply. Brielle laughed out loud upon seeing it, and

without a second thought, she took her own screenshot.

After exchanging goodnights, they both went about their evenings.

Max was so wonderful, and Brielle would never waver in her decision to be with him. She had to grow up fast, within half a year — no matter how exhausting, it didn't matter.

After bidding goodnight, Max dove back into his work, eager to wrap up the overseas acquisition. He needed to catch a breath to increase the chances of him and Brielle seeing each other again.

Chapter 584

In the wee hours of the morning, around 3 a.m., the doctor came looking for Max with news that Martha had refused further medication.

Max slowly lifted his head, his tone steady. "Inject her with a sedative."

The doctor hesitated. "But Ms. Martha is quite resistant. About sedatives, we need her consent."

"Then slip the medication into her food. Make her sleep through it."

Reluctantly, the doctor nodded and passed the message to the rest of the staff.

Since Alivia had her people in the sanatorium, she quickly learned of these developments. She hadn't expected Max to be so forceful, to actually lace his mother's food with sleeping agents. A flicker of spite crossed her eyes, and her lips curled in a smirk.

"Tomorrow morning, when you're tending to Martha, let slip this little tidbit. But be discreet. Just pretend you're chatting and make sure she overhears."

"Understood, Ms. Alivia. You can count on us to carry out the task."

After hanging up, Alivia snorted. This way, Max's trick would be useless. Martha would probably refuse to eat altogether, standing her ground against him.

If Brielle had the nerve to treat her like this, she'd better be prepared for the consequences.

Alivia took a deep breath and sneezed, feeling the indelible humiliation in the bathroom imprinted in her mind..

The next morning, Brielle arrived early at Stellar Stage Entertainment.

if

No sooner had she settled into her office than Keagan, reveling in schadenfreude, said, "Ms. Haywood, I heard that several executives made a beeline for Dorsey International this morning, probably to tattle."

Brielle looked up, a flicker of confusion in her eyes.

Keagan raised an eyebrow. Despite his secret mission to monitor Brielle's every move, he couldn't help but feel a surge of irritation toward her, wishing for her swift downfall.

Those execs had already made their way to Dorsey International. By now, they were likely standing in the CEO's office.

His gaze on Brielle was tinged with sympathy. Brielle had someone in her corner

at Dorsey International, but those guys went straight to Max, the CEO, which spelled trouble. Everyone knew Max was a hard man; if he got wind of Brielle's actions, she'd be out on her ear.

As Keagan eyed Brielle, greed flashed in his gaze. Truth be told, he'd been smitten with her looks from the get-go. He'd been around the block in showbiz, but her face was the one that haunted him-the cool elegance of a lily, making one wonder what she'd look like undone.

If Brielle were to be fired, especially by the CEO of Dorsey International, the fallout would be immense. Her career prospects would dim, and then, with a little favor from him, perhaps she'd be groveling for mercy under him-what a delightful prospect.

"Ms. Haywood, I reckon you'll be getting a call from Dorsey International any minute now, inviting you over in person. Of all the people they sent over, you're the only one they're hauling up to Dorsey Tower to face the music. Not sure if

that's an honor or a curse.”

He expected his words to unnerve Brielle, but she merely reached for some documents nearby. “After the cuts to the year—end bonus, how much capital can we free up?”

Keagan’s face stiffened, his frustration with her palpable. Just wait, you witch!

That call from Dorsey International would come any minute now.

“Thirty million.”

“ :

Good. Reach out to our writers and directors. We're putting thirty million into production and slotting Ricardo in. The company needs a cash cow, a new A-lister. Ricardo has the looks

” :

and the charm.”

Keagan scoffed, sizing up Brielle, wondering if she really thought she could get away with favoring one actor so blatantly. He had thought her above such games, but it seemed she, too, played the sugar-momma card.

“Ms. Haywood, I fear you'll be disappointed. The company hasn't built any real connections over the years, and someone's been greasing palms—none of those directors will work with us.”

Brielle looked up, her gaze direct. "That is disappointing. Years have gone by, and not a single connection or talent has developed. Lucky for me, I've found a promising new face."

She needed to get Aubree in ASAP. With her looks, she'd be a sensation on exposure. Perhaps she and Ricardo would become Stellar Stage Entertainment's top billers.

' :

Keagan's face went from white to red, a spectacle of emotion. Fuming, he turned to leave. As he reached for f 2

the door, Brielle's voice rang out ere .

again, "Close the door gently, will you? Or next time, it won't just be out of the office."

This implied, of course, that it could mean out of Stellar Stage Entertainment.

Keagan gripped the doorknob tightly. Damn her! Where did this infuriating Brielle spring from?

Chapter 585

By the time he left, Brielle's gaze fell upon the pile of data sprawled across her desk. She had already arranged Aubree for the performance teacher.

In the world of showbiz, even a pretty face could ignite a wildfire of fame. For now, she had decided to set aside her plans to focus on grooming other talents. After all, the success of a single A-lister could propel a company to go public. As the company flourished, so would the influx of resources, paving the way for others to shine.

One star's rise could lift all those in their orbit. Her bets were placed on Aubree and Ricardo.

A smile tugged at Brielle's lips as she envisioned nurturing her best friend into a top-tier celebrity, sweeping her away from no—good men, and letting her star shine on the international stage. It felt like she had discovered her true calling within the walls of Stellar Stage Entertainment.

Her eyes sparkled with a radiant light, and she couldn't help but shoot a text to Aubree. [One day, I hope to walk you down the red carpet at the Oscars.]

At that moment, Aubree had already arrived at Stellar Stage Entertainment, forewarned by Brielle of the upcoming hectic schedule. Aubree was the kind of person who dove into action immediately, lest she found herself with too much idle time, with her thoughts drifting back to Andrew.

She met with the performance coach, who was already singing her praises. “So, you're Aubree, right? Have you studied acting before? You have excellent control over your micro—expressions, and there’s a spark in your eyes, a captivating spirit. Who signed you?”

Among the remaining artists, most had chosen to stay, captivated by the new CEO's promise of change. A woman, whose actions were assertive and decisive, had outsmarted all the executives. Could their moment in the spotlight be just

around the corner?

Aubree, eager to build hype for Brielle, couldn't help but puff up with pride. “Of course, it was Ms. Haywood. She has promised we're going to Hollywood!”

The pinnacle for local stars was to break into Hollywood, but even the most celebrated actresses in town often played second fiddle to those titans.

Once relegated to never seeing a script at Stellar Stage Entertainment, they now had a woman telling them that Ms. Haywood’s ambition was to take them to Hollywood. If word got out in the industry, they'd likely be met with laughter.

Who was this woman called Brielle to make such bold claims? Yet, inexplicably,

they believed her.

Brielle's arrival at Stellar Stage Entertainment was like a beam of light piercing through the dark, sincere and pure, banishing all shadows. Stellar Stage Entertainment was vast, a playground for countless executives to live their hedonistic dreams. It was also tiny, too small to house even a sliver of their aspirations.

12

12:22

Brielle had freed them from that cramped and gloomy corner. Perhaps they, too, could dream?

Although Aubree hadn't made a splash in her previous gigs, she had picked up a thing or two about the ways of the world from her time in the Industry, and she could tell the young hopefuls were on the brink of belief.

"If she could make such promises, then I would believe her."

The others in the room chimed in with newfound fervor.

"Yeah, we believe in her. After Ms. Haywood arrived, the sleazy boss who harassed me got the boot."

«) + . :

She's fierce and cut ties with so

) .

many. We're betting on her. One of us is bound to become an international

> » :

sensation!"

"Enough talk. Let's get back to training with the coach."

The room was suddenly ablaze with passion.

Witnessing this scene, even the coach felt a lump in his throat. After years at Stellar Stage Entertainment, drawing a meager salary and facing a parade of lifeless faces, this was the first time he saw hope and ambition in these young eyes. Could Brielle really lead them all to glory?

Strangely, despite knowing little about her, he found himself believing in her too. She was Brielle, and she

had dared where others hadn't.

Hollywood was the goal, and perhaps that day wasn't so far off after all.

Chapter 586

Brielle was blissfully unaware of the silent upheavals taking place within the walls of Stellar Stage Entertainment. She had tried reaching out to some high—profile directors, only to be met with a unanimous chorus of rejections.

Next, she tried her luck with renowned screenwriters, but just like the directors, the moment they heard the name Stellar Stage Entertainment, they wouldn't waste another breath. promptly hanging up the phone. It became clear to Brielle that Alivia must have tipped them off.

Alivia's brother, Kenzo, was a top-tier screenwriter, a veritable Midas of the domestic scene. Anything he penned was almost guaranteed to turn into a cultural phenomenon, dominating ratings. To collaborate with him was a dream for many directors, who would go to great lengths for the opportunity. Thus, as Kenzo's sister, they most certainly owed her that courtesy.

Offending a relatively unknown entity like Stellar Stage Entertainment was just a small price to pay.

Without a director or a script, even with talented actors at hand, Brielle was at a standstill. Rubbing her temples, she fixed her gaze on one particular name.

This director had once bagged the coveted Best Director award, only to fall from grace when allegations of domestic violence surfaced. The awards committee even rescinded his trophy. The man in question was John. Brielle knew she had to meet him. If possible, she could commission a tailor-made script for Aubree and Ricardo. It was a gamble, but since taking over Stellar Stage Entertainment, every move had been a roll of the dice.

She rose from her desk and strode out of the office, only to bump into Ricardo just outside her door. Perfect timing—she had wanted to take him along to meet John.

“Ricardo, do you know of John?”

Ricardo looked rather sheepish, his youth evident at nineteen, as he stood quietly. “Ms. Haywood, are you referring to John, the director? He had his

moment with winning an award but fell out of grace due to the abuse and infidelity scandal. He’s been blacklisted by investors, and after losing a nasty divorce, he’s left with nothing. I’ve heard he’s been haunting the fringes of the studio lots, hoping someone would give him a chance. But his reputation is in tatters.”

“I want to meet him.”

“Ms. Haywood, I happen to know where he lives.”

Brielle was surprised. John had shunned all interviews, and with the incident five years behind him, it was unlikely anyone knew his whereabouts. How did Ricardo come to know about them? A flush crept over Ricardo’s face as he muttered, “I’ve worked a lot of jobs. I delivered food to

his place once. It's in a run—down neighborhood on the outskirts, hard to find. I'll have to take you there.”

Brielle nodded, “Alright, lead the way.”

A flicker of something passed through Ricardo’s eyes as they headed to the car, with him taking the driver’s seat. “Ms. Haywood, let me drive.”

With a nod, Brielle settled in, no suspicion in her mind.

The drive to the city outskirts took two hours, compounded by traffic, so it was four in the afternoon by the time they arrived. The road narrowed, marred by the ruts of heavy vehicles. Several times, Brielle nearly hit her head against the window frame due to the bumpy ride.

At the entrance of a narrow alley, Ricardo pulled over. “Ms. Haywood, this is it. We'll follow this alley straight down to where it forks and see John's place. It's a one-story building with white walls plastered with old ads. After you.”

With a nod and a smile, Brielle said, “Thanks for your help.”

Ricardo, his demeanor still pure, nodded back, “It's what I should do.”

Brielle took the lead, walking slowly ahead. Even in daylight, the alley was dim, the setting sun casting long shadows only on the elevated parts.

Beaconsfield was a city where opulence and squalor intertwined, a place where sordid alleys clashed with urban splendor-both heaven and hell.

Ricardo silently drew a folding dagger from his sleeve, his gaze sharp, a faint smile touching his lips. He never missed his mark.

“py , .)

Ricardo, how's your sister's health

" :) .

these days?” Brielle’s question was sudden, perhaps seeking to ease the monotony of the walk with some

..

conversation. “What exactly is she suffering from? Has it been tough for”

you all these years?”

Ricardo’s hand paused, just a second away from ensuring Brielle’s fate. This was a mission he had to complete.

Ricardo, I'm seeking out John to craft a script specifically for you and Aubree. I want to make you stars. A young man like you belongs in the

spotlight.”

Ricardo’s movement halted, his eyes flickering. In the spotlight, huh?

Chapter 587

The folding dagger in his hand snapped back into its sheath as a smile bloomed across his face. “Ms. Haywood, do you really think my day will come and I'll become a superstar?”

Brielle stopped in her tracks and turned to face him, her gaze resolute. “I don’t know, but I'm going to try.”

His three—hundredth mission in life had again ended in failure. Ricardo looked down, a hint of amusement flickering in his eyes. “Hmm, I believe you, Ms.

Haywood.”

Brielle offered him a small smile in return. “You should smile more, you know.

When I first noticed you, your demeanor was elegant, yes, but too hollow. It felt like there was no soul. You know Max, the CEO of Dorsey International, right?

You remind me of him.”

He's perfect, so perfect it lacked any warmth of life.

“How could I compare myself to someone of Mr. Dorsey's stature.”

Unbeknownst to Brielle, she had just been dancing on death's doorstep. She turned and continued walking forward, her tone lighthearted. “There will be a chance. Everyone will know your name, they will like you, and they will idolize you.”

Despite being cloaked in shadows herself, she still hoped to bring a sliver of light to others. Brielle, what an odd character.

“Ms. Haywood, we're here.” Ricardo pointed ahead to a modest bungalow that, sure enough, was plastered with ads all around, with garbage even spilling out at the entrance.

A few older ladies were sitting on the side of the alley, rolling their eyes skyward at the sight of Brielle.

“Look at that, such a young girl getting into the game. Are jobs that hard to find out there?”

“Keep it down, will ya? I bet this slut's here to steal our business.”

“She must be looking for that drunk inside, huh?”

Brielle frowned, momentarily confused by their words.

Ricardo stood behind her, casting a glance at the ladies. Their faces stiffened, turning pale with fear, and they quickly lowered their heads, falling silent. That look he gave them was terrifying as if the Grim Reaper himself had fixed his gaze upon them. They felt like reaching up and checking if their heads were still attached to their necks.

Brielle ignored them and knocked on the door. A hoarse voice came from inside.

"It's open. Come on in. The delivery sure is slow today!"

Brielle pushed the door open, half-expecting to find a mess to match the alley, but the inside was surprisingly tidy.

There was a small bed, a window that framed the sky, and an array of scripts scattered across the bedding.

John's face was buried in a beard, and on the table were several opened bottles of the strongest kind of whiskey.

When he spotted two strangers enter, his forehead furrowed. "You folks must have the wrong place?"

Ricardo pulled up a chair for Brielle, who nodded her thanks and then settled down slowly. "Mr. John, we've come to see you. I hear you've been looking for investors?"

John sized up Brielle from head to toe. Her clothes weren't high-end, but they looked effortlessly comfortable on her. The clarity in her eyes, like glass dipped in water, was oddly persuasive.

"Yes, but no one's willing to invest."

Brielle's gaze caught a wedding photo on the wall, the bride's face marred by several slashes from a knife, a sight that made one's heart skip a beat. The hatred John held for the woman was evident.

"Mr. John, I've seen the movie you directed before. It was good. But I want to know about the most controversial thing you've been criticized for. Did you really commit domestic violence and cheat?"

If John's character were truly despicable, she would have never chosen to work with such a man. A person devoid of morals could at any time become a backstabbing blade to their partner.

) : >

Instantly, John's face twisted with rage, followed by a deep bitterness, as if he wanted to grab the knife beside him and carve a few more lines into the face of the woman in “ : the photo. “No, I never laid a hand on ” . her.” “What's the truth, then?”

John closed his eyes, rubbing his temples as if he had aged years in a “ moment. “She cheated on me. I 5) caught her in the act. She's a top director back home and one of the few women in that position. She feared I would expose her infidelity and ruin her.career, so she accused me of domestic violence. She conspired with her lawyer to leave me with nothing. Everything I had » worked for over the years... gone.

His voice grew hoarse, and his eyes dimmed. “That bitch even carried

someone else's child. If I hadn't caught them, I might have ended up raising the kid, none the wiser. I'm here because of her! All her doing! Now she's still a top director, untouchable, while I'm treated like vermin, scorned by everyone!"

The injustice of it all was unbearable. His life had turned out to be more tragic and dramatic than any film.

Chapter 588

Brielle's face showed little emotion as she took in her surroundings. She had seen the dark underbelly of high society and was not shocked by the depths people could sink to. "You can trust a person's heart," she mused, "but never their nature."

"John, are these scripts strewn all over your bed, your work?"

John's face was a map of decay, his eyes brimming with a forlorn hope as he nodded weakly. "Yes, they're all part of a single script, penned by my protégé. He passed away last year... leukemia. I had no money for his treatment and couldn't borrow any. I begged my ex-wife for help."

But the help he sought came at the price of his dignity. She demanded he kneel, promising financial aid if he did. John did kneel, only to be met with her laughter and a hundred-dollar bill thrown at his face as a cruel joke. "Can't believe you actually did it. I was just kidding! Here's something for your troubles. It probably won't even cover the cab fare. Consider it a token from me."

John was humiliated beyond words, but any thoughts of retaliation were futile, given the group of bodyguards that shadowed the woman.

"John, how could I possibly let you stand back up? No, you stay right there in that filthy, stinking hole you call home."

Brielle didn't dwell on the turmoil in John's eyes. Instead, she picked up the script

and began to read. It was a story of life at the bottom rung: a brother and sister struggling against a relentless fate, a stark and profound narrative.

The script caught Brielle's attention immediately. It had a raw authenticity that

outshone the convoluted plots that required explanations to comprehend.

"Your protégé had a real talent," she said.

John's eyes welled up with tears, his body shaking with silent sobs. The script was indeed a gem, filled with the solidarity of the downtrodden and the tragedies of the insignificant.

"John, would you like to bring this script to life? I'm sure you wouldn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. Tell me, how much investment would it take?"

John looked up in disbelief, hope flickering in his eyes. Could it be possible someone still believed in his vision?

"I've been studying this script for years. I know it inside out. I need twenty million, not inclusive of the stars' salaries. You know how expensive A-listers are; this might barely cover their fees." Brielle's lips curled into a smile. "I have no intention of hiring A-listers. What about this young man to play the brother? And I already have someone in mind for the sister. If they don't meet your standards, you can replace them anytime. We have plenty of fresh talent at the company." John's excitement was palpable, but doubt soon clouded his eyes again. "Will audiences still pay to see a movie of mine?"

"That's why we need to clear your name before the film's release. You focus on the script and the actors; leave the rest to me." Brielle glanced around the modest room. "I'm glad to see such a clean space. It shows you've been waiting for a chance. Now it's here, and I hope you seize it. Ricardo here is a great kid. I'm sure he can play the brother and nail it."

John swallowed hard, his gaze settling on Ricardo before nodding in

“ i

agreement. “Okay, but I'll need to see

5 Ais » 5

him audition.”

Alright then, John. Come with me to

the company. We've got plenty of

rooms where you can sleep. It's

better than staying here.”

John's hands trembled with emotion

as he tried to fold his clothes, a futile

effort as they remained disheveled.

Ricardo stepped in to help. “John, let me do that for you.”

John offered him a shaky smile. “I can manage. Just give me a moment.”

Chapter 589

Ricardo remained silent, standing quietly to the side.

John really didn't have much to pack. Everything he owned wouldn't even fill a

small suitcase. His gaze lingered on the wedding photo by his bed, perforated

with holes, and he pursed his lips tightly. He'd never imagined the day he would

walk out of this place.

Seeing that John had finally mustered his courage, Brielle stood up. “John, let me

lay it out straight for you. By joining Stellar Stage Entertainment, you'll become

an exclusive director under our banner. We'll back movie after movie for you, but

the only condition is you give first dibs to actors from our own roster. Of course,

I'll allow you to choose the ones you're most satisfied with. If none meet your

standards, I won't stop you from looking elsewhere, but our talent must be your

first port of call.”

This requirement actually gave John complete freedom. At least it didn't limit him to choosing actors only from Stellar Stage Entertainment.

"Alright, I agree."

Brielle then extended her hand. "I'm Brielle Haywood, the current president of Stellar Stage Entertainment. This here is Ricardo, one of our signed actors without a major work to his name yet. I hope you'll guide him well in the future."

A tremor quivered through John's lips as he grasped her hand, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Thank you, Ms. Haywood. This is a momentous day for me."

Years later, when John would recall this moment, he'd still feel a profound sense of gratitude. By then, he'd have an Oscar for Best Director under his belt, a pioneer among filmmakers. He'd always say the person he was most thankful to was Brielle, who pulled him out of the mire. She's his close friend, his confidant. Her timely help would be something he'd remember for a lifetime.

Walking out of the alley, John tried to memorize every detail of the place. In truth, aside from a narrow passage and the moss climbing the walls, there was nothing much to remember. It was the most desolate scene he'd ever witnessed, yet it was etched in his heart.

Perhaps this very experience drove him to focus on the underdogs in his later works, stirring a deep resonance in his audience. He captured the lives of the

unknown, turning himself into a celebrated hero.

The three of them stood by the car. Brielle heard Ricardo say, "Ms. Haywood, I've got some other matters to attend to, so I won't be heading back to the office just yet."

Brielle nodded, ready to take the driver's seat, but John stopped her. "I'll drive."

Without objection, Brielle got into the car, and as they drove off, she caught a glimpse of Ricardo in the rearview mirror.

Standing still, he slowly shrank into a tiny dot as the car drove away and around

a bend,

disappearing from view.

Ricardo looked up at the orange-hued sky, which seemed particularly beautiful against the backdrop of decay. The allure of standing in the sunlight was indeed a tempting thought.

Footsteps approached from around the corner, and a man's voice rang out.

"Ricardo, this is your first failed mission, isn't it?"

Ricardo didn't turn around but instead looked at his palm. His hands were stained with blood, and he's a man burdened with sin. Could he truly stand in the spotlight?

The man had stopped right behind Ricardo, chuckling coldly, "So, the infamous Chameleon, the master of disguise, has a soft heart after all?"

The clean aura around Ricardo shifted, becoming ominously dark as if he were a man who had emerged from a mountain of corpses. "So what? Whether I fail a mission or not is none of your business."

"You better keep that backbone when you're facing the boss."

The mention of the boss caused

.).

Ricardo's expression to freeze. Then,

a dagger slipped from his sleeve and

flew towards the man. It grazed the

). Cer TO

man's cheek, leaving a thin line of

blood before embedding itself in the

mottled wall behind him.

The man lifted a finger to his cheek, wiped off the blood, and tasted it.

Salty, metallic, like the taste of rust.

"Had you done that just now, Brielle would be dead."

"I'll take my punishment on my own terms. Say one more word, and I'll kill you right here!"

It seemed the man truly feared Ricardo as he kept silent.

Ricardo's eyes seethed with murderous intent as he pulled the dagger from the wall, plaster crumbling with it. He slid the dagger back into his sleeve. "You've dirtied my blade."

The man was agitated. His chest was heaving as he spat out, "Do you think Brielle would still believe you belong in the spotlight if she saw you like this? Give it up. How could a normal person ever pity a monster? Don't forget how your sister died. You were already deceived once. Do you really want to be fooled again?"

Ricardo laughed softly, his fangs bared. "If she deceives me, I'll use this dagger to slice off her flesh piece by piece and feed it to the stray dogs on the streets."

Chapter 590

The man fell silent. After all, this was hardly a shocking request to "Chameleon," the moniker that had been bestowed upon him due to his uncanny ability to slip into any persona without arousing suspicion.

Ricardo was known for his knack for playing any part perfectly. His relentless drive stemmed from a desire to avoid the violent urges that consumed him if he didn't witness death regularly. Thus, he took on countless jobs, never once failing

to complete his assignments.

Psychologists had once analyzed Ricardo, branding him as inherently wicked and a natural-born pretender. They claimed he could be anyone he wanted to be, provided the inclination was there. The task of eliminating Brielle should have been a breeze, especially since Ricardo had earned all of her trust.

He could have easily thrown his dagger, ending Brielle's life and her presence in this world for good. Yet, the words Brielle spoke halted him in his tracks, words no one had ever dared to utter to him before.

The man observing from a short distance arched an eyebrow at Ricardo's moment of contemplation. "I bet the first time you got played, they promised to stick by you, too, right? But after she witnessed your ruthlessness, she couldn't wait to scream for the cops. No matter how good you were to her, she saw you as nothing but a monster without a conscience. Brielle's no different. You're not seriously considering taking the fall for her, are you? With your skills, you could easily take her out at Stellar Stage Entertainment without breaking a sweat."

The corner of Ricardo's eye twitched as if tainted with venom. "The people I want dead don't live to see tomorrow. I try my hardest to ensure the ones I don't want to kill see the light of day."

The man snorted coldly, leaning against the wall before striding away, leaving behind a parting shot. "Suit yourself, but if you fail, the boss won't be forgiving."

Once the man left, Ricardo's demeanor shifted again, reverting to that pure and unsullied character smitten with just a smile from Brielle.

The Chameleon was so adept at his masquerade that he could even make himself forget who he really was. Now, he was Ricardo, the man who needed Brielle's hand to pull him out of the mire.

She'd better be there to lend it. And she'd better not let go. Otherwise...

Brielle's car was already parked in the underground lot of Stellar Stage Entertainment. Upon reaching her office floor, she summoned someone,

arranging for John to be taken to a secluded, spacious room to rest. From now on, John could sleep at the company, and the cafeteria would provide three square meals a day.

John's face was too recognizable in the entertainment industry. Brielle worried that revealing him too soon could alert his wife, so it was best to keep him hidden until everything was ready.

The person she called upon was a man of few words, often seen around this floor. While most of the executives had initially treated her with condescension, this man always respectfully addressed her as “Ms. Haywood.”

After leading John to his new quarters, Brielle instructed the man. “This room has a private lounge, kitchen, and bedroom. From now on, it will be John’s room. If he needs anything, you'll be the one to get it for him. Remember, don’t mention John's presence here to anyone.”

The man eagerly nodded, a spark of excitement in his eyes. Ms. Haywood had finally noticed him!

“I'll complete the mission!”

Unaware of his excitement, Brielle finished delegating the task and then turned to John. “Do you find the room to your liking, John?”

John had never imagined that such a space existed within the walls of Stellar Stage Entertainment.

Brielle chose not to delve into the origins of the room, alluding only to the fact that former executives who had been let go had been too indulgent with company funds, creating several such suites for their entertainment.

“I'm very satisfied,” John said, looking around the 80-square meter space, which was ample for one person.

. os “

Brielle nodded, explaining, “I could go

out and find you a place, but as you

B i

know, we can't expose your face right

now. If the media gets wind of it,

3 ' 5

people will know you're planning a

:)

movie, and we don't want to spook

fl

anyone prematurely. Here, you'll have

”

someone to look after you.”

John's eyes welled up with gratitude,

at a loss for words on how to thank

Brielle. All he could do was delve

deeper into the script, thoroughly

understand it, and stun everyone with

his debut film!

After settling John in, Brielle returned to her office. The man she had pointed to earlier followed her, prompting Brielle to ask if he needed something. “Donny, is there something on your mind?”

Donny was taken aback. Ms.

Haywood knew his name? His lips

trembled, struggling to form a

coherent response. He was genuinely

grateful to Brielle for restructuring

Stellar Stage Entertainment and

giving him hope for a better future

there.

“Ms. Haywood, you know who I am?”