

Master 611

Chapter 611

Brielle shielded her eyes as she watched his retreating figure. She realized that her relationship with Max had hit an unprecedented impasse.

The car crash the day before yesterday might have been orchestrated by Max's kin, and last night's debacle was the Rowland family's doing. It seemed like the whole world was against her.

All because she was with Max.

A fiery determination flickered in her eyes. If being with Max meant defying most of Beaconsfield, then so be it.

After freshening up, she stepped out just in time to bump into Patrick. He nodded with respect. "Ms. Brielle, I'm relieved you're alright."

It was no wonder that the president had left everything and everyone behind last night to rush to Brielle's side and watch over her all night. The scene had been too horrific, and it was difficult to imagine anyone who had been through such an ordeal not being on the brink of madness.

Patrick had half expected to find a woman teetering on the edge of collapse, thinking Brielle might break down in tears when she saw Max. But when he followed Max back, he heard Wesley say Brielle had already fallen asleep.

What woman could fall asleep so quickly after witnessing such horror? Patrick found himself admiring Brielle's strength while also pitying Max.

For every ounce of sorrow Ms. Brielle felt, Max experienced it tenfold. If Ms. Brielle's heart was slightly bruised, Max's was probably already shattered.

Perhaps it was the tragedy and greatness of this world that life rarely offered truth. Yet it was filled with so many forms of love.

Absurdities ruled, but love was the savior. That was Max for you.

Brielle didn't dwell on it much longer. Instead, she inquired about Adrian's

whereabouts, as she had some questions for him.

Patrick hesitated, then asked, "Shouldn't we wait for the president's meeting to end?"

She couldn't wait another moment. She needed to act now, or else once she had a moment of calm, she'd remember Aubree's despairing eyes, her body marred with marks, and that gruesome, bloodied tooth.

Patrick was about to make arrangements to escort her when Max's voice echoed from the study. "Don't go off on your own. Wait for me."

He had been listening to the commotion outside all along.

Brielle stiffened, thinking he was supposed to be in a meeting. Then she heard him continue to engage with the people on the other side of the camera, earning applause.

Patrick sighed somewhat helplessly. "Ms. Brielle, since that's the case, please wait for Mr. Dorsey. Otherwise, I'll have a tough time explaining things once the meeting is over."

Brielle nodded. With Max having said that, she naturally didn't dare to act on her own.

Seizing the moment, Patrick suggested, "Ms. Brielle, why don't you head downstairs for a meal? Wesley was worried you looked ill when you came back last night, and he's been brewing a nourishing soup for you since early this morning."

Wesley had a penchant for brewing soups.

Feeling hollow inside, Brielle made her way downstairs. Wesley immediately

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Sydney had played a pivotal role in the drama unfolding between Aubree and Adrian. It was clear that she was the key to understanding the whole mess.

Brielle hopped into her car and drove straight to the place where the two were

being held.

Adrian was already awake, glaring at her with such resentment that it seemed he would love nothing more than to tear her to pieces.

Brielle chuckled, "You know, I don't recall having any bad blood with you, so why don't you enlighten me on why you decided to pull that stunt last night?"

No bad blood?

A sneer crossed Adrian's face. Brielle had some nerve talking like that, or maybe she just didn't give a damn about the harm she had caused Sydney.

"Brielle, whatever you did to hurt Sydney, I'll do the same to you. I'll make sure you pay back a hundredfold for every bit of suffering you caused her."

Brielle found it amusing, and she actually laughed. "I'm curious, what exactly did she tell you? She was the one I brought up with my own hands at Dorsey International. Now she's throwing her weight around the department, and she's been hooking up with Spencer more times than I can count. She must have reaped quite a few benefits from Spencer. She should be thanking me, really. Oh, and that first night we met, wasn't she in Spencer's bed? She even gave you a call to spice things up. I felt sorry for you then, but you seem to be blindly devoted and ignoring the glaring truth."

"Shut up! How could you say that?!" Shock painted Adrian's face. Sydney couldn't be that kind of woman!

Brielle raised an eyebrow. "I brought Sydney along, too. It might be best to settle this face to face."

She glanced at Max. "I'll head over to where Sydney is."

Max nodded, sitting silently in the corner, his mood visibly somber. It was evident he was not in good spirits. Even with the recent win of an overseas acquisition, his mood had failed to lift.

The wound on Brielle's wrist was like a thorn piercing his heart. He had hoped that the scar would heal over time, that maybe next time, she would learn to

come clean and tell him what happened to her.

However, Brielle's actions were like ripping open that wound again in the cruelest way possible. Max was no fool; he understood this was her way of saying that they would both go down if he tried to stop her. She would rather destroy everything than be stopped.

She didn't say a word, but he understood all too well. It was like two wounded souls, laying bare their most fragmented pains to each other.

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Brielle was blaming him, and she was blaming herself. If they had never been together, none of this would've happened..

Every time she saw Aubree, guilt would surge in her heart. How long could such a relationship filled only with heavy remorse possibly last?

The previous night, while Max was sitting by Brielle's bedside, he had pondered what she might say upon waking up. Maybe she'd suggest breaking up.

The moment she opened her eyes, he indeed saw a flicker of doubt. Perhaps for a moment, she was truly tired of their relationship.

How could this be? After all, he hadn't done anything wrong, had he?

Max closed his eyes, his lashes trembling.

Brielle went to the room where Sydney was kept, accompanied by the same uniformed man from before. He stood up slowly, giving her a nod as she entered.

Upon her arrival, Sydney's pupils shrank with fear, thinking her misdeeds had been exposed. She had been so discreet. Alivia had assured her that Brielle would never suspect her and that she'd think someone else was to blame.

Why had Brielle captured her so soon after the incident?

Before meeting Brielle, Sydney had always been a quiet, well-behaved person.

Though her heart harbored pettiness, she had hidden it well.

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She hadn't been through much, but
after getting involved with Speyer.
greed had Se was
after being brought here, and
she didn't dare meet Brielle's gaze.
She hated Brielle so much—her mockery and her success with men—it all made
Sydney feel humiliated and envious.

If Brielle didn't exist, Max would
surely fancy Sydney, and
would be er finger.
Blt It was that bitch who had stolen
the attention of both men.

Sydney clenched her teeth, convinced

that Brielle wouldn't dare her,
so she Rae you actually
nerve to grab me? Do you

realize this is illegal?"

Brielle ignored her taunt and turned to the uniformed man instead. "Pull out one
of her teeth. You guys are good at this kind of thing, right?"

Brielle had a feeling that this uniformed man and the three men from last night
were in the same line of work, and he had been trained by Max himself.

Max had his secrets, but Brielle had no intention of delving deeper into them.

The man in the uniform nodded and picked up a pair of pliers from the side, striding over to where Sydney stood.

Sydney thought she must have misheard. Was he going to extract her teeth? It would be without any anesthesia also. Sydney's face instantly drained of color, and her body began to tremble uncontrollably.

“Brielle, you're not serious, are you? You do know this is illegal, right? I'll sue you for abuse! And unlawful imprisonment!”

Brielle had already closed her eyes, her mind flooded with the ordeal Aubree had gone through the night before. Just the thought of it made a storm of fury brew in her eyes.

The uniformed man forcibly pried open Sydney's mouth, the pliers inching closer. Sydney was terrified and attempted to scream. She had never encountered such a display of force in her life.

Brielle meant business! She was truly set on tormenting her!

Sydney's legs gave out, and she collapsed to her knees. “Whatever you want to know, I'll tell you! Just please don't do this to me!”

So much for her bravado, it turned out Sydney was just a pushover.

With a subtle gesture from Brielle, the uniformed man stepped aside. Sweat beaded on Sydney's forehead. She stared at Brielle as if she were a monster.

How could Brielle be so calm about pulling someone's teeth? Brielle was nothing short of a devil! She should never have crossed a devil like Brielle.

“Brielle! You think you're untouchable because Mr. Dorsey likes you! But I see right through you! You don't care about him one bit! You're just after the power he wields!”

A flicker of impatience crossed Brielle's eyes, but she continued along the lines Sydney had given her. “You're right. My relationship with Max is all about what he holds in his hands. He can be my tool — my weapon. Like right now, if I wanted you gone, he'd clean up the mess for me. That's all I care about — Max's status. Whether he fancies me or I fancy him, it's irrelevant.”

Max had just reached the door and was about to push it open, but he stopped dead at Brielle's words. His lips pursed, a storm brewing in his eyes.

She really did harbor a grudge. Otherwise, she wouldn't have said such things, even in anger. This grudge must've been making her uncomfortable, hence the harsh words.

Brielle herself was beginning to doubt their relationship, albeit ever so slightly, and she didn't even realize it because she was too close to the situation.

He didn't enter the room and instead turned back to the room where Adrian was being held,

missing the words Brielle spoke next.

*Does that make you feel better now?" Brielle asked coolly, her eyes devoid of any mirth. "Anyway, no one would believe that I'm with him for him. I'm curious, though, why is that?"

Despite everything, there was more to Max than his power. He had an allure that went beyond that, but everyone seemed to think Brielle was only after his influence.

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The uniformed man stood by the window. He had seen Max approach but didn't interrupt Brielle. After Brielle delivered her line, Max stiffened and then walked away. The man in the uniform gave a small knowing smile, then composed himself once again.

Brielle had no desire to engage further with Sydney. "I ask, and you answer."

Sydney trembled, not daring to provoke Brielle any further, and averted her gaze.

Brielle stood up and instructed the man, "Take her to Adrian's room.

He nodded and grabbed Sydney by the collar of her shirt.

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Brielle led the way to Adrian's room,

where Max still sat on the windowsill,
lost in Jey as td dadedat the
sEhshin SUside. Brielle was about
to reveal another side of herself in
front of him.

Adrian, roughed up the night before,
could barely sit upright
flushed

with Urgency when Sydney was
brought in. "Sydney!" he exclaimed.

Sydney's eyes were filled with guilt. She couldn't bear to meet Adrian's gaze.

Brielle took her seat again. "Sydney, your boyfriend is here. You'd better clear up
all those lies you've spread about me."

Sydney shuddered, recalling Brielle's
methods, and dared not withhold
anything. However, she had another
card to play. She, Bald as
to Adrian.

Adrian, I'm sorry. Everything I told
you was a lie. Brielle never bullied me,
and I don't have depression. I'm sorry
for deceiving you." Her sobs were
pitiful, more so than when she faced
the threat of a tooth extraction.

This way, Adrian would only think Sydney was saying these things out of fear of
Brielle.

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Adrian leaned heavily against the wall. His eyes narrowed into slits as he glared at Brielle with venom. "Brielle, what the hell did Sydney do to piss you off that you'd go this far? You're downright evil!"

A smirk flitted across Sydney's face. Adrian clearly thought Brielle was forcing her hand.

Brielle ignored Adrian, casually tossed an unbranded health supplement from her bag, and curled her lips into a sneer.

"There's only room for one of you to walk away from this. Whoever manages to shove this poison down the other's throat first gets to live. Don't think for a second I'm joking."

Adrian's pupils contracted sharply, his chest trembling with rage. "No way! We're not falling for your sick games. I would never do that to Sydney, and she wouldn't do that to me-"

His words were cut short as he saw Sydney snatch the bottle from the ground and slowly approach him. Adrian's face turned ashen, almost believing he was hallucinating.

It was a trick! It had to be. There was no way Sydney would go for that bottle without a second thought.

Sydney realized she might have been too obvious and could not meet Adrian's gaze. She grabbed the bottle out of fear that Adrian would get to it first. If he did, wouldn't she be the one to die?

Brielle let out a light chuckle. "You have five minutes. If you don't make a decision by then, I'll make one for you."

Sydney's eyes narrowed. Brielle had already shown a clear dislike for her. If the decision was left to Brielle, Sydney was certain she wouldn't survive. But if Adrian were to die, she could live. She wasn't worried about Brielle renegeing on her word. After all, there were witnesses nearby.

Despite feeling ruffled and humiliated by Brielle in front of Max, whom she had

feelings for, the will to live was far more enticing. Clutching the bottle tightly, Sydney didn't hesitate to move closer to Adrian.

Adrian braced himself but found he lacked the strength to even shift his position.

“Sydney...”

His injuries from the previous night, including several broken ribs, left him in excruciating pain, struggling to breathe. But Sydney's current choice was like a knife to his heart. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he would never have believed it!

Tears began to roll down his cheeks as he whispered, “Sydney, am I dreaming this?”

This had to be a nightmare. He wanted to fall back asleep and awaken to reality. Sydney was already standing before him, her voice cold and distant. “Adrian, I have no choice. You love me, don't you? If you truly love me, you'd die for me, right? I'm so sorry, but I want to live.”

Brielle, overhearing this pathetic exchange, felt the urge to vomit. Sydney was manipulating a man's feelings to achieve her despicable ends, showing no hesitation in asking him to die for her. She had thought Sydney was just foolish, but it was clear now she was both foolish and vile.

Adrian felt so weak he wanted to laugh. How did things come to this?

Brielle watched him with a hint of pity

Everything Brielle said was true. It turned out that all along, he was the biggest fool of all.

How laughable.

Adrian wanted to cry but found that when one reached the depths of despair,

tears wouldn't come. He just felt pitiful.

Sydney, firm and unyielding, forced his mouth open and poured the contents of the bottle down his throat.

Now that Adrian knew the truth, she couldn't let him live. Adrian had to die.

Chapter 615

“Ughr”

Adrian gagged as his mouth was crammed full of pills. Sydney forced him to clamp his jaw shut with fierce determination.

He passed out cold. The injuries from last night, coupled with today's ordeal, had pushed him to his limit.

However, Sydney mistook this for the poison taking effect, her fingertips quivering as the medicine bottle slipped from her grasp. She collapsed to her knees, her lips trembling uncontrollably.

Brielle chuckled softly, “You didn't hold back when you did the deed, so what's with the act now?”

Sydney cast a glance at Max, who sat nonchalantly by the window, seemingly detached from the whole affair, and couldn't help but speak up. “Mr. Dorsey, is this the kind of woman you favor? Do you really know who she is beneath the mask?”

A shaft of sunlight fell perfectly on Max's suit. Hearing this, his eyelashes fluttered, but he ignored Sydney.

He was fond of Brielle, regardless of her true nature. It was nobody else's business.

But now, there were issues between them.

A pang of pain shot through his heart, and his brows furrowed involuntarily.

Unaware of his unease, Brielle stood up. “You won't need to come to Dorsey International anymore. As for where else you want to go, no one will stop you.

You're free to leave now.”

A spark of hope lit up in Sydney's eyes. Could she really go? Was Brielle truly willing to let her off the hook? Sydney cautiously gauged Brielle's expression, which seemed sincere, so she threw caution to the wind and started running for the door.

After sprinting a good distance, Sydney leaned against a wall to catch her breath. Max was still backing Brielle, so no one could touch her for now. Damn it! Sydney was seething with frustration, yet relieved she was still alive. She had to

wait for the day Max would utterly discard Brielle.

She now had plenty of money to live well. So what if she couldn't work at Dorsey International? She could buy a house right now. Adrian was as good as dead. She'd just tell everyone that Adrian had run off with another woman, with all the blame falling on him, while she walked away with a hefty sum and into Spencer's arms.

If Max didn't want her, she might as well set her sights on Spencer.

Triumph glinted in Sydney's eyes. Brielle would regret letting her go someday.

Back in the room, Brielle glanced at the uniformed man. "Bring him around."

The man nodded, fetched a bucket of water, and doused Adrian's face with it.

Adrian jolted awake and saw Brielle's face and then his surroundings. A cold light flashed in his eyes when he noticed the absence of Sydney.

"Stop looking. She's gone. The moment she felt safe, she didn't hesitate to leave."

Adrian's lips pressed into a tight line as he knelt before Brielle despite the excruciating pain in his body.

Brielle raised an eyebrow. "Adrian, if you really died, Sydney would probably slander you even in death. Are you content with that? I can give you a chance"

He would never let Sydney get away!

"I won't kill you. You just need to pursue what you most desire"

What would a man who had just faced utter despair and had been poisoned by

the woman he loved do in his rage? She was quite looking forward to it.

After everything, she finally turned to Max. He straightened his suit, rising slowly with a distant expression, composed and unruffled,

“Max, if I move against the Rowland family, what will you do?”

Unexpectedly, Max reached out, grasped her chin, and studied her face intently,

“I won't stop you.”

“But if you're considering breaking up with me, don't blame me for not fulfilling any of your desires anymore,” he thought,

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“If Mr. Clements makes a move on Ms. Brielle, what then? You know how protective he is of Ms. Tessa. He never wants her to face the slightest hardship.”

“I don't see Brielle coming out on the losing end.”

Even if she faced Andrew, she might not lose. Brielle wasn't the kind to clash head-on without thinking; she had a knack for finding people's Achilles heel and exploiting it.

What was Andrew's Achilles' heel? Perhaps even Andrew himself didn't know that his vulnerability wasn't limited to Tessa.

Patrick fell silent and then stood off to the side quietly.

Max coughed a few times and raised a hand to his forehead, which seemed feverish. He closed his eyes again for a moment and spoke with a hoarse voice,

“Let's wrap up the unfinished meetings in the next couple of days.”

“Sir, you can't keep this up. It'll take its toll on your health.”

Of course, Max was aware of his deteriorating condition. He almost wished he would pass out if only to garner a speck of Brielle's attention.

He pressed a hand to his temple and muttered, “It's fine. I want to conclude all the remaining overseas conferences, including the domestic ones, as soon as possible.”

Unable to sway him, Patrick reluctantly reached out to the overseas contacts to

reschedule the remaining meetings as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Brielle continued her conversation with Mason, who updated her.

“The Rowland family’s land purchase has been approved. The government has made the announcement. They were in such a rush to offload that plot that it hit the papers in less than a month. The Rowlands are celebrating as we speak, Brielle. What’s our next move?”

A sly smile curled on Brielle’s lips. The news in the papers meant the Rowland family’s whopping three hundred million had already been wired abroad. Regret was pointless now. The money was gone.

Thirty billion for a worthless plot of land was enough to weigh them down. With such a blow to their cash flow, none of the Rowlands would sleep well tonight.

“Mason, there’s nothing more for you to do. The Rowland folks will get the news soon enough.” The Rowland family was on cloud nine, having snagged the most coveted piece of real estate abroad. This deal had been orchestrated by Tessa herself, currently the most pivotal figure in the Rowland household. Such a significant move naturally required her blessing.

Now, assisted by Sophia, Tessa was settling down gracefully in the center of the grand hall. The other Rowlands were busy buttering her up.

“Indeed, we’ve plunged thirty billion into this venture, but we might just recoup a hundred billion in the coming years. It’s a savvy investment.”

Tessa’s lips curled up in pride. After trampling over kubree and taking down Brielle, she had a massive professional win and felt positively elated.

She cleared her throat, glancing at Andrew beside her. “What do you think, Andrew?”

Andrew seemed a million miles away, feeling stifled ever since being startled awake the night before. With his chiseled features and a commanding presence, his mood could overshadow everyone in the room. Right now, his silence was

making tessa nervous. "Andrew, what's on your mind?"

He looked up, his voice gravelly. "What did you say?"

Unaware of his distraction, Tessa patiently recounted her recent overseas triumph.

"Well done," he said, a smile touching his lips. However, he felt removed from the festivities, if only his body was present and his mind was elsewhere.

Austin caught the dynamic between them. He knew how Andrew had been taking care of Tessa in the Rowland family and had a thought.

"Since we're all here, why don't you and Andrew tie the knot?"

"Exactly. You two have known each other for years, and Tessa, you're on the mend."

"Let's pay a visit to the Clements today and settle everything once and for all."

Tessa's smug smile broadened. If Andrew dared to refuse, she'd leak Aubree's video online, leaving her nowhere to hide.

The crowd began to buzz with talk.

"Sophia's already got her marriage license with Spencer. As the elder sister, it's your turn to make a move."

"Right; how often does the younger sister marry before the older one?"

"If Mr. Clements makes a move on Ms. Brielle, what then? You know how protective he is of Ms. Tessa. He never wants her to face the slightest hardship."

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“Sophia's already got her marriage license with Spencer. As the elder sister, it's your turn to make a move.”

“Right; how often does the younger sister marry before the older one?”

Andrew felt a sense of unease that he couldn't shake. Everything around him was unsettling, yet he had promised to marry Tessa. Hadn't this been his pursuit all these years? What was he hesitating for now?

Just as he was about to say yes, a chorus of ringtones erupted among the members of the Rowland family.

Austin, upon answering his call, nearly leaped out of his chair. "What did you say?!" After a few more words from the other end, his face turned ashen.

Tessa watched him, a premonition of dread creeping into her heart.

"Dad, what's going on?" Austin's complexion went ghostly pale and seemed on the verge of collapse.

The faces of the other Rowlands who had received calls were equally grim. The government abroad had just announced a new five-year plan that didn't include the land they had purchased. They had been duped, thirty billion down the drain. Few companies could withstand the loss of thirty billion in cash flow. Even a top-tier conglomerate like Dorsey International would have to convene an emergency meeting. So, naturally, everyone looked as if they were attending a funeral, their gazes turning toward Tessa.

Realizing that something had happened and that Andrew must not find out, Tessa kept her smile taut, still holding Andrew's hand.

"Andrew, I'm feeling much better now. You should check on your parents. I'll pay them a visit soon."

Interrupting the marriage plans seemed to relieve Andrew. He nodded, kissed her cheek, exchanged a few words with the others, and took his leave..

As soon as he was gone, the mood at the scene plummeted.

Tessa's eyes narrowed in anger as she saw the mourning faces around her.

“What the hell happened?!”

Austin approached her, his voice hoarse with emotion. “The land we spent thirty billion on overseas is worthless. The government has no plans for it.

“How could this happen?!” Tessa stood up so quickly she nearly fainted from fury.

The Rowland family had spent the past six months acquiring land for healthcare

expansion. This thirty billion was the largest liquid assets they could muster. If they couldn't recoup the funds, all their other projects would collapse. Material suppliers and contractors wouldn't get paid and would refuse to cooperate, grinding

construction on all their lands to a halt. It was a severe crisis, one that could spell the life or death of the Rowland family.

Tessa's face drained of color as she began to cough violently. “How could this be? Didn't the government promise to develop that area within five years?”

Without cash, the company would have to turn to the banks for a lifeline. But

banks weren't charitable organizations; the interest alone could be crippling. Moreover, in their eagerness to expand, they'd already borrowed heavily. Many banks had extended their maximum credit and were now likely to refuse further loans.

The humiliation she felt while playing the piano that night returned in full force, making her feel sick to her stomach. No, she couldn't let the Rowland family collapse. She had to come up with a solution fast.

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The faces of the Rowland clan were ashen, a ghostly parade of worry that only lifted when they all turned to Tessa after a series of tense calls with the bank.

“What do we do now, Tess?” they asked, their voices tinged with a dread that mirrored the pallor of their skin.

The family was in deep, with other ventures already sucking dry their resources, and hundreds of billions more needed to keep the wheels turning. If this one project didn't pay off, the financial blow could be catastrophic for the Rowlands. Tessa's lips quivered as she slumped in her chair, the weight of the world on her shoulders. Austin quickly stepped forward, giving her a reassuring pat on the back. “Look, it's not the end of the road. If you and Andrew tie the knot, we can ride the Clements’ coattails for a fundraising round. With the two families united, those venture capitalists will be falling over themselves and throwing money our way. A few hundred billion? We'll have it in no time.”

The thought of it made Tessa's head throb with pain. She was the linchpin, and she knew it.

Her father was right; the banks were getting wind of their troubles and had started their probing calls. They wouldn't lend any more to plug the gaping

financial abyss, and loan sharks were out of the question—with compound interest, the debt would skyrocket to an unpayable sum.

The Rowland family's net worth might be in the hundreds of billions, but that was all tied up in projects and illiquid assets. Market valuation was just smoke and mirrors; cash flow was the lifeblood of their empire.

Without it, their hundred-billion-dollar enterprise was like a towering skyscraper with its foundation blocks being pulled out one by one, ready to collapse.

The only way out was Austin's plan—to marry into the Clements family and keep the Rowlands afloat. And they couldn't breathe a word of this to the Clements. If they caught even a whiff of the Rowlands' financial desperation, would they still want this union?

In a high-society place like Beaconsfield, where family names were currency, it was all about the interests. Once you stripped away the pleasantries, you were

left with cold, hard transactions. Without her status, even speaking to Andrew would be a struggle.

She had to marry Andrew and fast. A wedding would smooth the path to fundraising, keeping the Rowlands troubles at bay.

With a deep breath in and a smile plastered on her face, Tessa reassured them, "No need to panic. Everyone knows Andrew wants to marry me. I'll just drop by the Clements* home, chat with his parents, and we'll set a date. Once the news is out, Dad, you, and the uncles can start the fundraising in secret. We'll get the money."

Austin's features softened with relief as he gave Tess another supportive pat.

"Tess, we're all counting on you now."

Tessa lifted her head high, the de facto leader of this worried pack. "Don't worry, Dad. It's as good as done. Andrew's been eager to marry me. We'll set the date for next week, and the Rowland family will be free from any threat."

Sophia was eavesdropping on every word. She had been in cahoots with Mason

and was brought into the fold by Brielle herself. The offer had been too tempting to refuse. Joining now meant a place at the core of the company.

The Rowlands, William—all would soon be beneath her.

She trusted Brielle, so when Mason revealed the plan, excitement, and anxiety warred within her. Excitement for the Rowlands impending doom and anxiety for what could go wrong in Mason and Brielle's scheme.

If the government did indeed develop that piece of land, and if the information Brielle received was incorrect, what should they do? The Rowland family was unaware of this information, so where did Brielle herself obtain it from?

But, ever the rock, Mason simply said, "Trust her."

Sophia had chosen to work with Brielle for exactly that reason—Brielle's uncanny ability to inspire confidence.

As Sophia watched the Rowlands* troubled faces, she couldn't help but feel a sense of schadenfreude. Without even trying, Brielle had backed them into a corner, and proud Tessa was ready to barter her marriage to save them.

Sophia wasted no time relaying the Rowlands* plan to marry into the Clements family to Brielle.

Brielle, unsurprised, knew this was the Rowlands* only shot at survival. Andrew would probably be willing to marry Tessa. With this, Brielle's gaze darkened.

The Clements were in the jewelry trade, and if Brielle wanted to keep Andrew too busy

seemed to be a plea for assistance, and that made her feel uneasy.

After a minute's hesitation, she dialed his number.

The faces of the Rowland clan were ashen, a ghostly parade of worry that only lifted when they all turned to Tessa after a series of tense calls with the bank.

"What do we do now, Tess?" they asked, their voices tinged with a dread that mirrored the pallor of their skin.

The family was in deep, with other ventures already sucking dry their resources, and hundreds of billions more needed to keep the wheels turning. If this one project didn't pay off, the financial blow could be catastrophic for the Rowlands. Tessa's lips quivered as she slumped in her chair, the weight of the world on her shoulders. Austin quickly stepped forward, giving her a reassuring pat on the back. "Look, it's not the end of the road. If you and Andrew tie the knot, we can ride the Clements' coattails for a fundraising round. With the two families united, those venture capitalists will be falling over themselves and throwing money our way. A few hundred billion? We'll have it in no time."

The thought of it made Tessa's head throb with pain. She was the linchpin, and she knew it.

Her father was right; the banks were getting wind of their troubles and had started their probing calls. They wouldn't lend any more to plug the gaping financial abyss, and loan sharks were out of the question—with compound interest, the debt would skyrocket to an unpayable sum.

The Rowland family's net worth might be in the hundreds of billions, but that was all tied up in projects and illiquid assets. Market valuation was just smoke and mirrors; cash flow was the lifeblood of their empire.

Without it, their hundred-billion-dollar enterprise was like a towering skyscraper with its foundation blocks being pulled out one by one, ready to collapse.

The only way out was Austin's plan—to marry into the Clements family and keep the Rowlands afloat. And they couldn't breathe a word of this to the Clements. If they caught even a whiff of the Rowlands' financial desperation, would they still want this union?

In a high-society place like Beaconsfield, where family names were currency, it was all about the interests. Once you stripped away the pleasantries, you were

left with cold, hard transactions. Without her status, even speaking to Andrew would be a struggle.

She had to marry Andrew and fast. A wedding would smooth the path to fundraising, keeping the Rowlands troubles at bay.

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Busy