

Master 651

Chapter 651

The somber mood that had enveloped the office dissipated in an instant, replaced by a warmth akin to an early spring day in March.

Max looked up, catching the gaze of the senior executive who had just walked in. The HR Director started to detail the tasks ahead with businesslike precision. Once the official matters were wrapped up, he complimented the scarf again. The compliment lingered in the air as he left, leaving behind an ambiance as balmy as a spring breeze.

Patrick had been standing right beside Max the whole time, silently taking mental notes of the cunning the old fox wielded. It was no wonder this man had managed to keep his seat as Director for so long. Even at an age where most were considering retirement, Max hadn't suggested he step down.

Beyond his evident skill, the man was truly a master of diplomacy and charm.

Patrick breathed a sigh of relief. Regardless of the events, Max was in good spirits now, and the morning's oppressive atmosphere, which had nearly crushed him, had lifted. He had been on the verge of calling Brielle for backup, but remembering Max's directive to keep this issue from her, he decided against it. Little did he know, Brielle's former colleague had already filled her in on the situation.

At the moment, Brielle was feeling anything but cheerful as she drove to the neighborhood where John had lived. She made her way down the alley and up to John's residence.

The crew was already hard at work, but Aubree was nowhere to be seen. She quickly sought out John to inquire about Aubree's whereabouts.

"Aubree's not scheduled on set today, so I told her to rest up at the hotel," John explained. "We've just got back, and the place needs a good clean. She hasn't been feeling well lately, and I didn't want to force her to stay here. Seems like she comes from a well-off family. She booked a room at the hotel. Ricardo's looking after her now."

Neither of the lead actors were needed on set that day. Aubree had intended to come and observe, but memories of that horrible night in Beaconsfield had resurfaced unbidden, leaving her pale and nauseous all morning.

John had been on the verge of calling an ambulance when Ricardo intervened, insisting he'd take Aubree to the hotel to rest.

John, a seasoned director, knew the entertainment industry was a tumultuous sea, but Ricardo seemed too pristine, hardly the type to take advantage of someone vulnerable. Given that Aubree appeared comfortable with Ricardo, John didn't press the issue and let them be with a wave of his hand.

Brielle hurriedly dialed Ricardo, but his phone lay on the table in the hotel bathroom, vibrating silently alongside Aubree's phone. Aubree retched over the sink.

Aubree, maybe I should call a therapist for you," Ricardo suggested with a frown.

"No!" Aubree protested, her face ashen, her stomach in knots. She had tried to forget that night, but it was impossible. Returning to Beaconsfield had made her unwell, and she struggled against the waves of nausea.

Both Ricardo and Aubree's phones were unanswered, leaving Brielle worried. Even though she was confident that Aubree would be safe with Ricardo by her side, she couldn't help but fret about Andrew, that mad dog on the lookout for Aubree. If he learned where Aubree was staying, chaos would undoubtedly

ensue.

In a dark wish, Brielle hoped Andrew's wounds would become infected, leaving him too weak to cause any trouble.

Back in the hotel room, Aubree sat slumped on the edge of the bathtub, her face a pallid mask of discomfort. Ricardo squatted before her, his gaze intense and earnest. Suddenly, he made an unexpected offer. "Aubree, should I take care of Tessa for you?" he asked seriously.

Aubree thought he was joking and chuckled weakly.

But Ricardo was dead serious, his usual fee for such a task forgotten. "Do you want me to, Aubree?"

His clean-cut demeanor made his casual mention of murder all the more jarring, yet somehow not out of place. He was reminiscent of a figure from Greek mythology, the youth who died clutching a narcissus flower, destined to be radiant yet tainted by shadows.

This mythological character was well-liked because his innocence was genuine, as was his ruthlessness. He could be anyone in the world but could never truly be himself.

Aubree closed her eyes, the acid sting of tears eased by his unsettling proposition. She had booked a suite in the hotel's spacious sanctuary from her turmoil. Clutching her stomach, she moved to the couch and collapsed into it, her face as white as linen.

Ricardo pondered for a moment before digging out some antacids and fetching a

glass of water, setting them beside her.

Aubree didn't particularly enjoy

Ricardo's company, especially after

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he and Brielle had accidentally witnessed her in that compromising situation. His presence was too

pristine. The cleaner he seemed, the

dirtier she felt about herself. Her

shame seeped into her bones, a stain

no amount of scrubbing could remove.

Her eyes reddened, and she covered them with her hand.

Ricardo called for some takeout.

"Have some soup. It'll help settle your stomach," he said as he busied himself with the curtains, letting the sunlight flood the room. He sat near the window, absently twirling a fruit knife between his fingers, his silhouette framed by the light.

Aubree's face was still an unhealthy shade of white. She watched the glinting

blade dance through his nimble movements and couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the incongruous sight.

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Ricardo's skin was a healthy, creamy white, like the most pristine and

outstanding teenager you'd bump into on a college campus, someone who just naturally stood out from the crowd.

Noticing Aubree looking at him, he paused his movements and flashed her a smile. "Does your stomach still hurt?"

Aubree felt a bit better, and as her phone started ringing, she tried to reach for it. She lacked enough strength, slid off the couch, and hit her head on the coffee table, wincing at the sharp pain.

Ricardo got up and came over to help her back up. Dazed from the bump, Aubree looked up at him with blurry eyes.

It was at that moment that the room's door swung open. Andrew stood there, flanked by the hotel manager. His pupils shrank as he took in the sight of the two tangled on the couch. "What the hell are you doing?"

Aubree stiffened, the dizziness in her head vanished instantly, leaving her heart feeling like it had been slashed open. Her face drained of its last bit of color.

As if he hadn't heard a thing, Ricardo continued to help her up and guided her back to the couch.

The lobby manager outside witnessed the awkward scene and quickly made his escape. He wasn't blind. He could tell this was a lover's quarrel gone wrong.

Andrew was radiating fury, his chest aching and tingling as if thousands of insects were biting him. The pain was so intense he couldn't even think straight.

How could this happen?

He had been searching for Aubree for days, and upon learning that her information had shown up at a Dorsey International hotel, he came straight from the hospital. He thought Aubree would come to find him as soon as she returned to Beaconsfield.

They hadn't had sex for a while; she must have missed him. She always couldn't stay away from him. It must have been the same this time. She knew Andrew was getting married and hurried back.

Andrew couldn't contain his excitement on his way here, but he had never expected to open the door to this scene. Aubree was pinned down by a young guy, staring at him with a dazed and willing expression. It was clear as day - a picture of mutual desire.

Andrew's heart felt like it had been pierced, panic and rage coursing through him uncontrollably. He strode forward and yanked Ricardo away.

"Aubree!" Andrew's grip tightened in her hair, his eyes red with anger. "You... you..."

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12:09

How could she stay with another man behind his back!

This bitch!

Andrew felt a humiliation like never before, a foreign emotion that pricked his entire being.

He wanted to strangle her right there. But before he could lay a hand on her, his cheek. stung from a blow.

Aubree was barely able to stand. She trembled and glared at him as if he was some kind. of natural disaster.

Andrew touched his cheek, puzzled. It didn't hurt, but he

heart was in sharp pain. He couldn't understand this feeling, only that Aubree's actions had infuriated him.

Exactly, Aubree found another man behind his back, and he caught her red-handed. Had she been hooking up with someone else for the last two days? His tongue licked at his cheek, tasting the bitterness of blood, and he let out a cold laugh.

Aubree was shaking all over, retreating from his approach, backing away like a cornered animal.

Help. She wanted to flee from here, to go anywhere but where Andrew was.

Tears welled up and spilled over as she looked at Ricardo as if pleading for

rescue.

Andrew noticed her gaze had shifted from him, his heart skipping a beat. Uncontrollably, almost panicking, he reached out for her.

"Aubree, you-"

"Don't touch me!"

Aubree backed away, falling clumsily

to the floor. The water from the

coffee table spilled over her chest, table spilled

but she was oblivious to it and just kept retreating further, wanting to get as far from Andrew as possible.

Andrew stood frozen as if struck by a

spell. He had never felt this

Pelt this way

before. It was as if he'd been slapped a dozen times or like a giant hand

had clutched his heart.

He realized something was wrong with him, as he shouldn't have been

another

just have be

was, just Aubree with

another man. Wasn't he tired of her anyway?

However, he felt as if his bones were being crushed, the pain making his eyes

red.

Patrick furrowed his brow as he noticed the shift in the company's staff-from their initial coldness to a growing acceptance of her, and now, to outright praise. It unsettled him.

Max's phone rang shortly after. It was a call from his former mentor at Harvard, who mentioned the new secretary. She was the professor's goddaughter, Annie.

Max had been well-looked after by the professor during his time at Harvard, so he didn't decline the implied request. Max had thought Michael's move to be a minor play, but it turned out to be a significant one-Annie was his professor's goddaughter.

Rubbing his temples, Max recognized this as a hot potato he didn't want to handle.

Annie knocked and entered, placing the documents on the desk. "Hello."

There was a respectful tone in her voice, her gaze demure, "These are from my godfather. I just got back to the States this morning and have already met with Michael. I didn't expect to be placed here, but it came up in conversation with my godfather."

Her tone was casual, her every move exuding the essence of Brielle.

Max tapped his fingers lightly on the desk, not responding. Initially, he had intended to assign Annie some minor tasks to keep her away from his office. However, the professor requested that Max allow Annie to gain experience under him as she intended to teach at Harvard and take over his position. She had completed her Master's degree, and this was her first doctoral project-a test of her abilities.

Max pieced together Annie's background between the lines of the professor's words. She had been abandoned by her parents as a child, and was taken in by the professor. He had supported her education and living expenses all the way to university. He had not only adopted her as his daughter but had also made her his protégée.

Neither spoke for a moment.

"You don't need to feel pressured," Annie finally said. "My godfather sent me to learn from you and to complete my doctoral project. If it inconveniences you, I'll let him know myself."

"It won't be a hassle. Your workstation is outside. If you have any questions, feel free to ask others." Max's face remained expressionless, his demeanor cool and detached.

Annie paused, then nodded, "Thank you." With that, she turned and left.

Patrick walked in just as she exited, their shoulders nearly brushing. The resemblance-her features, poise, and aura-were too similar to Ms. Brielle's.

Shutting the office door behind him, Patrick approached Max, shuffling through some files, hesitating to speak. "Mr. Dorsey, do you think we should tell Ms. Brielle about this?"

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Annie's arrival was too coincidental. Michael's directive, coupled with the personal entreaty from Max's former Harvard mentor, meant that Max couldn't simply send Annie away on some pretext.

"No need." Max didn't see the need to discuss such matters. There was only one Brielle.

Brielle had planned to visit Aubree today. She was passing by Dorsey International and hadn't intended to go in, but a message from a former colleague caught her attention.

(One Sydney was replaced by another, even more high-profile Sydney-Ms. Haywood, when are you coming back?)

A higher-profile Sydney? Brielle's brow creased, and then she received a photo from her colleague. The woman in the photo was backlit, her face obscured. If Brielle didn't know better, she'd think it was a candid shot of herself.

[She has already cozied up to the top brass, sharing laughs with Patrick. Apparently, she's the goddaughter of Mr. Dorsey's mentor from Harvard. Her tactics are something else. The execs can't stop singing her praises.]

No woman liked to see someone who looked like her near her boyfriend.

Brielle felt her premonition had come true. Michael had indeed prepared a major play. It wasn't an immediate assault on her relationship with Max but a more subtle approach. But if she reacted now, rushing to Dorsey International to investigate, she'd be conceding defeat without a fight.

Brielle guessed that Michael had

deliberately placed this woman in Dorsey International, likely having already made arrangements with NO

Alivia. After all, Alivia was the Dorsey

family's favored daughter-in-law candidate. Michael had promised

Alivia benefits before. and likely

offered more this time to keep her happy.

Alivia had to do nothing now but

sweetly accept Michael's plans, curry

favor with Martha, and watch as

Brielle and Annie battled it out. If Brielle and Max's relationship suffered because of Annie, Alivia

would reap the benefits of their strife.

Brielle's rational mind prevailed, but she couldn't help feeling a surge of irritation.

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Aubree was like a wounded animal, desperately distancing herself from Andrew, clutching at Ricardo's jeans as if begging for refuge. Her reason had fled, and all she sought was a place to hide.

Ricardo was indifferent to the tangled mess between the two. In fact, he should have relished their agony. He was far from a savior. However, he crouched down, grabbed a tissue from a nearby table, and gently wiped the tears from Aubree's cheeks.

Her tears were relentless, like a broken faucet that couldn't be turned off. Ricardo frowned, looking at Andrew. He was about to speak, but Aubree wrapped her arms around his waist and buried herself into his embrace.

Ricardo's expression darkened instantly, the switchblade in his sleeve twitching with anticipation. This was uncomfortable.

Suppressing the urge to lash out, he took a deep breath and offered Andrew a mocking smile, but to Andrew, that smile was a challenge. The last shred of Andrew's composure vanished, and in a rage, he grabbed Aubree's hair and pinned her down on the couch.

"Aubree, have you lost your damn mind?!" he bellowed. "Are you freaking crazy?!"

She had thrown herself at another man right in front of him.

Aubree's head hit the couch hard, dizziness swirling within her, and nausea rising up again.

Andrew's next words hit her like a stun gun. "You're so desperate, huh? Will anyone do? How slutty can you

be?"

Aubree bit her lip, tears streaming down her face. She had no energy to struggle, just like that day. After fighting back, all that remained was numbness.

The buttons on her blouse were torn open, and Andrew's teeth sunk into her skin. "You've been mine for years. How could you go to someone else? It's disgusting, isn't it?!"

Suddenly, a glass bottle shattered over Andrew's head. Ricardo had let go of the bottle, now looking with a furrowed brow as blood streamed from Andrew's scalp.

Andrew stiffened, nearly passing out from the pain. Regardless, he managed to kiss Aubree forcefully.

Aubree didn't respond with a smile as she used to. Instead, she just cried harder.

Minutes dragged by and the pain coursing through Andrew's body remained relentless. How he yearned for the solace he once found in her passionate cries, calling out his name uncontrollably. Whenever she did, the pain would ebb away, if only a little.

He closed his eyes, releasing her mouth. "Tell your lover to get lost!"

Ricardo stood behind them, a headache brewing. He truly believed Andrew had a death wish, Was a woman's allure worth all this fuss? After that hit, Andrew must've not been thinking straight, but he was still forcing kisses on Aubree.

Ricardo pulled out his phone, saw a call from Brielle, and breathed a sigh of relief. He approached Andrew and grabbed his collar, ready to throw a punch.

This guy was really a pain.

Andrew was no slouch himself, and even with injuries, he managed to exchange blows with Ricardo amidst the chaos of the room.

Ricardo's arm was grazed, drawing blood.

Aubree lay on the couch. Her eyes finally moved as she saw Andrew reaching for the switchblade, aiming for Ricardo's shoulder. Stimulated by something unknown, Aubree grabbed the broken bottle neck Ricardo had dropped and stabbed Andrew's palm.

Andrew's face turned pale, staring at her in disbelief. His head buzzed, his heart aching, struggling to breathe.

He watched as Aubree trembled, checked Ricardo's shoulder, and asked if he was okay in a hoarse voice.

"She must be blind," he thought. How could she not see that he was hurt, too?

Andrew felt heat behind his eyes. He resisted the urge to collapse and just stared unblinkingly at Aubree.

Aubree was helping Ricardo, who seemed unharmed, to sit down beside her.

Ricardo was surprised Aubree had

acted. Given Andrew's weakened

m

state, Ricardo could have dodged

Andrew's blow. However, a smile

crossed Ricardo's face, his inherent

mischief aroused.

Staring at Aubree, he feigned weakness, "Aubree, I'm scared." After the words,

he flashed Andrew a taunting smile.

Andrew trembled with rage, his mind strangely clear amidst the pain. He vividly felt the sharp agony throughout his body and his eyes growing hot.

Aubree was tending to a man she hardly knew, leaving Andrew in the cold. He bit his lip, eyes growing hotter, and managed to say hoarsely, "Aubree, are you blind? Can't you see I'm more hurt?"

The pain was too much. The Aubree

before him was no longer the Aubree

he knew. would The Aubree of tremble at the sight of his blood, anxiously inquiring about the injury,

not turning a cold shoulder as she did

now.

Chapter 654

Andrew's chest heaved with a violent rhythm, and he felt a dampness on his cheeks. He lifted a hand to touch it, but couldn't quite identify the sensation. His hands were covered in blood, so he assumed it was blood on his face as well.

Only Ricardo could see clearly, It was tears. Was Andrew crying?

Andrew seemed oblivious to it. His nose tingled, his lips pursed and unpursed, but no complete sentence would come out. The pain was so intense he felt like doubling over, yet he resisted. He didn't want to show any signs of weakness in front of Aubree.

His palm, slashed and still bleeding, turned his complexion paler by the second. In the silence, he heard Aubree's clear voice cut through. "Just leave.*"

The pain was so acute it had become numbness. He just stared at Aubree, and it took what seemed like an eternity before he managed to utter a single question. "Are you... Are you possessed or something?"

That cruelty couldn't be Aubree's.

He turned to leave, each step an agony, his fingertips trembling uncontrollably. As he reached the door, Aubree still said nothing to stop him from leaving. His heart ached even more. He rounded the corner and couldn't help but want to crouch down.

The nervous hotel manager, witnessing Andrew's bloodied state, dialed 911 in a panic. "Mr. Clements, are you alright? Please, don't scare me."

The concern from a stranger amplified the pain tenfold, a hundred fold. He must have been in a nightmare.

He wished so dearly to awaken from it. Come on, wake up.

When Brielle arrived at the hotel room, she was greeted by a scene of chaos.

Aubree was huddled on the couch, legs pulled up to her chest, while the cleaning staff summoned by Ricardo were tidying the room. The bloodstains and the trash emitted a mixed, nauseating, metallic odor.

Brielle was taken aback. She first checked on Aubree, who was unharmed. After ensuring that Ricardo was fine, too, she let out a sigh of relief and slumped down beside them.

"What happened?"

Hearing Brielle's voice seemed to anchor Aubree back to reality, and a surge of emotions she'd held back broke free. She clung to Brielle and sobbed.

Brielle continuously rubbed Aubree's back, feeling her heart sink. Ricardo hadn't provided details over the phone, only that Aubree was in trouble. Now, hearing Aubree's heartbreaking cries, Brielle deduced Andrew must have come by.

Irritation surged within her, a part of her wishing she could confront Andrew and end it all.

Aubree was exhausted, both mentally and physically drained. After crying in Brielle's arms for a while, she fell into an uncontrollable sleep.

Brielle draped a blanket over her and turned to Ricardo. "What did Andrew do?"

Ricardo frowned, struggling to explain. Finally, he admitted, "It doesn't seem like he did much, but he's hurt."

There was a lot of blood, but it seemed unlikely he would die. The guy was built tough, after all.

Brielle, still feeling scared, rubbed her temples. "Ricardo, thank you."

He was taken aback, having felt like he hadn't really done anything. "Ms. Haywood, don't mention it. I was

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11:33

just an observer.

His tone was nonchalant, though

realizing his comment might've been O

inappropriate, he added, "The

atmosphere between those two... it's

odd, as if they're from different

worlds."

Whatever Ricardo did, he was just a bystander looking on. To Ricardo, everything

in this world was like a play, unable to stir his emotions.

Remembering the moment Aubree

embraced him, his ears inexplicably reddened. "Aubree seemed-reallyn

distraught Ms. Haywood.

Maybe we

should call a psychologist, a woman,

considering she's repelled by men

right now. Though, she didn't seem to reject me."

This surprised him, but Brielle knew why and felt an even deeper ache.

The blood stench in the room seemed inescapable, so she had them move to

another suite.

Meanwhile, at the hospital, several doctors bustled about, tending to Andrew's wounds. His head was wrapped in gauze, as were his hands.

Andrew sat motionless in his hospital room, unresponsive even when the

bandages pulled at his injuries.

The doctors hadn't administered any

anesthesia, yet he hadn't made a

sound throughout, which made them ve marvel at his endurance. Andrew truly felt no pain. He just stared

blankly at one spot until the doctors left. Only then did he quietly lie down.

It was all a dream. He would sleep it off, and everything would be better.

Chapter 655

Andrew was destined for a restless night. No sooner had his head touched the pillow than Tessa's sobs pierced the silence outside. She burst into his room, her face turning ghostly pale at the sight of the bandages wrapped around his palm and head. Tears cascaded uncontrollably down her cheeks.

"Andrew, who did this to you? Oh my god, your injuries look terrible. She clutched at Andrew's uninjured hand, her tears plopping heavily onto the back of it.

Andrew seemed numb, and his fingertips only stirred after a long pause as a frown creased his forehead. "Tessa, stop crying, please."

Tessa's sobs didn't cease. "Was it Aubree? Her voice was hoarse, and she watched Andrew freeze before he denied it. "No, it wasn't"

Panic seized Tessa, rendering her speechless. Why did her mind immediately leap to Aubree?

The same had happened when Aubree had slapped him, and he'd dismissed it, claiming he'd walked into something.

Tessa knew Andrew too well, he was not one to let offenses slide. When Brielle had slapped him, he'd wanted to lash out, to make her pay dearly, Only Aubree seemed to have the power to make Andrew swallow his pride and endure any hurt in silence without uttering a word about revenge.

A sense of dread overwhelmed Tessa, her heart pounding wildly as if she wanted to scream, to confront him with the burning question.

Did he love Aubree?! Had he ever truly cared for Tessa at all? Why was it always Aubree causing turmoil in his life when he'd always tried to win Tessa over?

Tessa felt a mix of hatred and fear as she carefully kissed his palm. "Andrew, you're still going to marry me, right?"

Andrew's eyes remained closed, silent. He desperately wanted to escape into sleep, to wake from this nightmare. Tessa's weeping, however, robbed him of any peace. It took a half-hour before he opened his eyes irritably. "Enough, Tessa."

She looked up at him, her eyes bloodshot. "Andrew, I love you. We'll be together, get married, and have kids."

"Uh-huh,"

A tidal wave of emotion swelled in Andrew's eyes. One moment, he was numb with shock. The next, he was wracked with pain so fierce he felt like doubling over to catch his breath.

This was no dream. Aubree really had struck him because of another man. She had betrayed him!

The logic that had long since vanished was slowly returning. He sat up, feeling a sharp pain in his palm. Fury prickled through him. The shock had been too great before to properly punish Aubree.

His lashes drooped in a mix of resentment and pain. Hadn't she claimed to love him? Hadn't Aubree always

said she adored him?

Deep down, he'd always known of Aubree's affection and just chose to ignore it. He'd let her orbit him like a lovesick fool, asking him night after night if he harbored even the slightest affection for her.

Of course, he didn't care for her. She was nothing more than a convenience, and he'd always been clear about that. So, without a hint of guilt, he'd let Aubree wait on him for years while he always spent his birthdays with Tessa instead.

Indeed, he'd never celebrated Aubree's birthday with her, which, inconveniently, was just days apart from

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Tessa's

Andrew's mind flashed back to the

cruelest thing he'd ever done -

ordering a birthday cake on Aubree's day, only to have the card bear Tessa's name. He had realized his mistake only when Aubree opened it. He had unconsciously instructed the bakery to write Tessa's name, since he had never ordered a cake for Aubree. The air had been thick with awkwardness that evening, yet

Aubree had let him fuck her. She

seemed to have no boundaries with him as if she were spineless in his presence.

A buzzing filled Andrew's head. Could

that pretty boy make her happy? If she sought a new thrill, shouldn't she air for someone on his level?

Unaware, Andrew was just jealous

so jealous his eyes reddened.

"She'll come back," he thought. "Just like before."

Chapter 656

had intended to spend the night at the hotel to keep Aubree company, but she was politely turned

After a brief meltdown, it seemed like Aubree had collected herself. She just momentarily lost control because she had run into Andrew unexpectedly and without preparation.

Aubree gathered her composure, announcing that she would stay with the other crew members. Brielle wanted to persuade her otherwise. After all, Aubree was a lady of privilege, unaccustomed to modest lodgings, but Brielle's words fell on deaf ears, and she could only ask Ricardo to keep a closer eye on Aubree.

Once Brielle had seen them settled, she met up with John. A cigarette dangled between John's fingers, his face alight with joy. "Ms. Haywood, rest assured, they're both immensely talented. Aubree even slimmed down significantly to better fit the image of the character she's playing. She was too glowing before, too rosy and healthy."

Brielle chose not to mention that Aubree's weight loss hadn't been intentional for the role.

"How soon till we wrap up?" she asked.

John's face beamed with confidence at the question. "In a month and a half. I thought Aubree and Ricardo, being new to the game, would need considerable time to gel. But ever since we've started shooting, every scene has been sheer perfection. I haven't come across actors of such natural talent before, Ms. Haywood. You have quite the eye."

John was almost nostalgic as he spoke, the cigarette burning down to his fingers unheeded.

"Isn't your ex-wife named Amelia?" Brielle interjected. She had done her homework. Amelia, the hottest female director in the biz, had garnered a wave of sympathy and a following after news of John's domestic abuse had surfaced. Now, she was thriving in show business.

At the mention of Amelia, the smile vanished from John's face, replaced by a dark scowl. Just the thought of that woman made his heart feel like it was being gnawed on by countless insects. His fingers trembled so much that he didn't even feel the burn of the cigarette on his skin.

Brielle plucked the cigarette from his hand and tossed it into a nearby trash can. "Just focus on making a great film. I'll handle the rest," she reassured him.

John's breath shook with emotion as he watched Brielle, eventually patting her shoulder. With a raspy

he said, "Thank you."

voice,

"John, that's what I promised from the start, isn't it?"

John cast his eyes downward. Falling from the pinnacle of success to being an outcast had given him a firsthand taste of the world's fickleness. Every time he saw Aubree and Ricardo on screen, he half expected to wake up to the same old struggle, staring at a wedding photo on the wall and letting his bitterness ferment in solitude. He was determined to create a masterpiece as a token of gratitude to Brielle.

As he was thinking this, his phone rang. Brielle saw his expression flip the moment he caught sight of the unfamiliar number flashing on the screen. John knew the digits all too well; they were seared into his memory, impossible to forget.

Brielle got it immediately. It was Amelia, John's estranged ex-wife.

"John, take the call." Her voice was a balm, and after quivering lips and a long pause, John finally closed his eyes and answered.

Amelia's polished voice came through. "John, I hear you're shooting a film again?"

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11:34

Despite John's fall to the slums, living in cramped quarters, Amelia could never shake her und tabs on him at every turn.

Her informants had relayed that John

seemed to be busy with a substantial

crew, apparently shooting a film. But

rented out

the location had been rented out entirely and was now off-limits. Her spies couldn't get in anymore. Surprise filled Amelia's eyes. Who at

this point would invest in John's films and risk being drowned in the vitriol of netizens?

Across from Amelia sat the impeccable Kenzo, a script lying beside him. Clearly,

Amelia was discussing a collaboration.

Kenzo gazed out the window with

indifference, his coffee gone cold. They had been talking for a while, and their conversation was Dearly at an end, Many directors coveted the script at Kenzo's side, but as the most accomplished female director at the moment, Amelia was the perfect fit for this script that centered on female empowerment. Hence, she had arranged to meet with Kenzo.

It was notoriously difficult to get an appointment with Kenzo. Amelia had tried for half a year before finally securing a meeting today. If she hadn't connected to Kenzo through Beaconsfield College, he probably wouldn't have given her the time of

day.

However, out of expectation, Kenzo had gently, yet firmly, turned her down.

At this stage in her career, it was rare for a screenwriter to refuse Amelia's advances. She was nearly forty but well-maintained and beautiful. The world tended to be kind to beautiful women.

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Getting shot down by Kenzo really lit a fire under her. Then she heard through the grapevine that John was still scrapping by and couldn't help but dial his number.

John's voice was cool, 'Yes, I've found someone willing to invest in my company.'

Amelia let out a scoff, surprised that John now seemed to handle her call without losing his cool. It seemed that the boss of the new company had given him a solid confidence boost.

"Well, I'm all eyes. I mean, you're my ex-husband. Even though your past deeds were quite scandalous, it wouldn't be a total waste of our marriage if you're willing to pick yourself up."

Hearing her hypocritical words made John feel sick to his stomach. After all those years together, he never really saw through her until she showed her true colors. The domestic abuse allegations stuck after the divorce. She transferred all the funds to her account, and he was cleaned out, leaving his reputation in

tatters.

And there she was, climbing over him, even taking over the network he had built.

How could he accept that?

His eyes reddened, but looking up into Brielle's serene gaze, he found his resolve again. "Don't worry, I won't disappoint you. As for you, I bet you won't sleep a wink tonight." With that, he hung up.

Amelia clenched her teeth in anger. Where was he getting his confidence?

She grabbed her purse. She needed to find out who was backing John.

She turned to Kenzo with a polite smile. "Mr. Kenzo, I hope you'll reconsider me for the role. A woman understands a woman best, and I believe I can truly capture the essence of the script."

Kenzo's pale fingertips stirred his coffee absently. "Was that call to John?"

Kenzo, being somewhat of a figure in the entertainment circle, was well aware of Amelia and John's notorious split.

After Amelia downplayed John's worth, she smirked. "Some company's backing his movie. I wonder who'd dare provoke the wrath of the internet. That film will tank. No one will touch it."

Kenzo's face remained gentle, though his stirring slowed a bit. "Stellar Stage Entertainment, ever heard of

it?"

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Amelia paused. She had heard of them, but weren't they nearly bankrupt a few years back? They were saved only by a mysterious benefactor's funds. Despite being around for years, they had no noteworthy talent.

The worst part was Stellar Stage Entertainment's terrible reputation. Executives from other companies had recently been picking 'pets' from them. The 'pets' meant Stellar Stage Entertainment's female artists.

John must've been desperate. His stubborn pride had sunk so low as to work with such a notorious

company.

Amelia sneered inwardly. It was high time to pay a visit to Stellar Stage Entertainment. "Mr. Kenzo, how do you know about this? I thought you weren't interested in showbiz."

Kenzo just smiled, placing down his spoon. "I'm not interested." But that didn't mean he never was.

already found someone you like, I hope we can collaborate another time."

Thanks for the info. If you'r

Amelia left politely after paying the bill.

Kenzo sat a while longer, noticing people snapping photos of him. His brow furrowed slightly.

11:34

Chap

A group of starstruck girls nearby whispered excitedly about his looks and charm

as they admired their photos.

The calm in Kenzo's eyes faded as he read a message on his phone, smiled softly, and left.

When Brielle returned to Stellar Stage

Entertainment, she found Donny

pacing anxiously outside her office.-

"Ms. Haywood!"

Donny looked

see her. "Ms. Haywood,

you've got to see what's trending

online!" Brielle's expression turned curious as she checked her phone. In

just a short time, Amelia and John. had become hot topics.

Amelia had posted a photo of Stellar Stage Entertainment's entrance on social media with a caption.
[Stellar Stage Entertainment backs John's film. Wonder if it's about domestic abuse?]

That single line dragged up the sordid past of her divorce due to alleged abuse,

sparking discussions about Stellar Stage Entertainment.

Amelia, a well-known director with a knack for creating stars, had set the internet

ablaze. Her usual collaborators retweeted, and the topic soared to the top of the

trending list.

The public lashed out at John again,

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and Stellar Stage Entertainment's skeletons tumbled out of the closet,

including accusations of mistreatment, withholding salaries,

crushing young dreams, and more.

In no time at all, reporters swarmed the entrance to Stellar Stage Entertainment's

offices.

Chapter 658

by was pacing the room like a caged animal, clearly at his wit's end. "Ms. Haywood, what are we gonna

Stellar Stage Entertainment was in the dumps after being smeared left and right in the media; its reputation

tamished as a forgotten silver heirloom. And now they were tangled up with the notoriously shady John. The whole crew took a verbal beating that could strip paint.

Donny thought Brielle would be equally frazzled - after all, their movie was still in production, and with a reputation as sour as spoiled milk, who in their right mind would pony up for a theater ticket?

But Brielle just glanced at the latest barrage of bad press. "Tell the PR folks to spread the word that Stellar Stage Entertainment is under new management. We've done a full housecleaning. If there's any muck to rake, it should be flung at those execs who've been shown the door." She wasn't about to carry the can for someone else's dirty work.

"But will people buy that?" Donny asked, skepticism wrinkling his brow.

Brielle's smile was a thin slice of cunning. "Just have HR release all the staff changes. That'll speak for itself."

A lightbulb went off in Donny's head - why hadn't he thought of that? With about half of Stellar Stage Entertainment's staff handed their walking papers, it was as obvious as a billboard that a major shake-up was underway. He wasted no time getting the PR department to broadcast the HR movements.

The public, in the midst of their bashing frenzy, was suddenly gobsmacked by the chart of personnel changes, especially since the reasons listed were all "terminated" - not a voluntary walk-off, but a forced exit.

The PR department, usually as silent as a mime, was finally handed a task and was so eager they might as well have been glued to their chairs around the clock. The team was buzzing with a rare excitement. They had been benchwarmers for years and were finally called to play.

The PR manager, with a flourish, rallied the troops. "We've been waiting years for a moment like this. Let's show some gumption!"

At his command, the whole department willingly burned the midnight oil. When they wrapped up, they were each buzzing with energy, itching for another round in the online fray,

Brielle hadn't been at the helm long, but the atmosphere at Stellar Stage Entertainment had already shifted dramatically.

The old, unspoken rules of the game, the injustice had everyone feeling powerless against it and swallowing their grievances. But times had changed under Brielle's watch. She had an opinion box installed in the lobby of the main building. Any senior staff caught misbehaving could be anonymously reported with evidence, and she would deal with it the next day. This decree led to another round of dismissals.

The PR department was in perfect sync with Brielle's actions, updating the latest staff movements on the public platform as soon as another head rolled.

The internet onlookers, initially smirking at the drama, started to grow curious about this enigmatic CEO.

"Whoever has the guts for such sweeping reforms must have some serious clout."

"With so many firings, Stellar Stage Entertainment's stocks are nosediving. Are they really okay? I get they want to improve, but isn't this a bit drastic?"

"It's all for show. I bet this CEO is no saint."

11:34

"Pit I think this so-called CEO is just trying to save their own skink

Those remaining at Stellar Stage Entertainment were almost universally won over by Brielle's tactics. wouldn't want a boss who focused on getting things done? Who didn't want a more promising job, better pay, and benefits? What self-respecting adult wasn't sick of the cutthroat office politics?

So the PR department, finally dusting off their social media accounts, clapped back at the criticism, "Our CEO is fantastic, a real gem of a person. Only those still with Stellar Stage Entertainment know her worth. Perhaps the peanut gallery should refrain from speculating about what they don't understand."

The post garnered support from the company's loyalists, with hopeful artists retweeting en masse.

"Our CEO is a great leader. I have faith in her."

"Right on! If I were a guy, I'd marry her!"

"Ms. Haywood, my hero!"

As more and more of these once-dormant artists took to social media, verified with their own official tags and Stellar Stage Entertainment prefixes, the tide of public opinion began to shift. Those who had been jeering were suddenly silenced as the online battle turned.

Before turning in for the night,

Brielle's heart warmed at the sight of these comments. She considered joining the social media fray herself when a pair of arms encircled her. Her phone was gently taken away, and as her nightgown's sash slipped, she let out a suppressed gasp.

Looking up, she met his stormy gaze, and her heart skipped a beat, her resolve

melting away.

Max's movements were rough, a

stark contrast to the polished gentleman the world saw. Briellen blushed reaching up to encircle his neck, but was interrupted by the ring. of Max's phone. His brow furrowed in rare irritation, a shadow of annoyance flickering across his face.

Chapter 659

Brielle watched as he ignored the persistent ringing of his cell phone, silencing it again amidst the nearly suffocating kisses between them. Finally, she reached for the phone herself.

It was an unknown number. Taking a deep breath, she pushed him away, worried that she might be keeping him from something important.

After pressing the answer button, she held the phone to his ear. Max shot her an annoyed glance before hearing Annie's voice on the line. "Hey, Max."

Brielle caught the female voice, her eyebrows arching in curiosity.

Max's hair was tousled, and he wrapped his robe around him as he walked over to the window. "What's up?"

His voice, rough with lust, came out unintentionally seductive.

Annie paused, then said casually, "I received a file this evening that's missing a crucial piece of evidence. I called Patrick, and he said the material is in your office. But you've always said your office is off-limits without your permission, so that's why I'm calling you now. Can I go in?"

Considering the professor had specifically asked Max to provide tasks that would assist Annie with her PhD research, he had no reason to refuse her request for materials.

"Go ahead."

"Is it in the drawer on your left or your right?"

"On the right."

Annie opened the cabinet and immediately spotted the document she needed. "Got it, thanks. Sorry for disturbing you this late."

Before she could finish, a thunderous sound came from outside the office, like a large pane of glass being smashed. This was followed by a startled cry from Annie.

Max's brows furrowed. "Annie?"

There was no response, and the call had been abruptly disconnected.

The room's previously charged atmosphere vanished in an instant. Max made a call to the building's security, instructing them to check the top floor, and began dressing in a dark, heavy coat.

Brielle quickly changed as well. "What's happening? I'm coming with you."

"You should get some sleep. You have an early day at the company tomorrow."

But sleep was the last thing on Brielle's mind at that moment.

Realizing he couldn't dissuade her, Max reluctantly agreed, and together they headed to Dorsey.

International.

The security team called to inform him they hadn't seen Annie. Max's frown deepened. "Check the top floor's surveillance."

Only a couple of night-shift workers in the surveillance room, who hastily scanned the footage, only to find images of Annie leaving the CEO's office in a panic, followed by a cell phone being hurled against a wall, shattering on impact.

"Work with the police. Find her!"

Max's voice was icy as his team scurried to trace Annie's last known whereabouts. It was clear that the

Intruder at Dorsey International had come prepared, evading all cameras from the start and even employing a top-tier hacker to disable the surrounding cameras in a split second.

This was no ordinary kidnapping.

Max quickly reached out to the professor. The professor was elderly and had been retired for several years, but upon hearing his goddaughter was in trouble, he insisted on catching the first flight over.

Brielle stood aside, feeling the chill of the drafty corridor. She heard Max soothing the professor while the old man on the other end seemed agitated.

It took half an hour for Max to promise that he would find Annie. As he ended the call, looking utterly exhausted, Brielle saw him rub his temples, directing his staff to scour every street corner. They didn't return to Premier Palace and waited at Dorsey International for news.

During this tense wait, Michael called, quietly asking if Max had orchestrated all this to sideline Annie.

Max's gaze turned frosty. "Father, she's my mentor's goddaughter. I would never stoop to such lows."

"Once Annie completes her doctoral

thesis, she'll be eligible to teach at

the unive

Om

You know how

important she is to them. I entrusted

her to you; you're responsible for her

safety."

"I've been negligent."

He hung up as dawn broke, and his phone rang again-this time with news of

Annie's whereabouts.

Max stood, and noticing Brielle beside him, he tenderly tousled her hair. "You go

handle your stuff,

sweetheart."

Brielle couldn't help but worry. Max

had just finished an overseas acquisition, been tangled in the m Clements family affairs, and now had this situation with Annie. How much could he take? He had been running a fever just days before. Was Michael intentionally pushing Max to the edge?

Since they'd agreed to that

six-month arrangement, their time together had dwindled. They were

constantly interrupted by various

obligations, leaving them both exhausted and without a peaceful meal together.

Was it all worth it?

Max kissed her lips, lightening the mood until a hint of color returned to her cheeks, and then chuckled softly. "Come home early tonight. I'll make us dinner."

Chapter 660

Even the so-called grabbing a bite was something she squeezed into her hectic schedule.

Brielle nodded, the lack of sleep evident in the faint shadows under her eyes.

Max watched her swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing as he pinned her against the wall outside the elevator. He kissed her for several long minutes before striding away.

With a sense of loss, Brielle's lashes drooped. As she lifted her hand to wipe her lips, she looked up to find several colleagues from the executive floor staring in shock not far away.

Oh, crap.

Not only were her colleagues from the top floor there but so were several executives from Dorsey International. Everyone seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move.

They must have exited the elevator in the wrong place-how else could they have caught Max and Brielle kissing?

The usually stoic Max had one arm around her waist, the other cupping the back of her head, looking like he hadn't had enough of the kiss. His usual aura of unapproachability seemed to have dissipated somewhat. He even bent slightly to whisper something to Brielle.

Her face turned beet red. She had forgotten the time. It was Dorsey

International's office hours, and though it was still early, her top-floor colleagues were always diligent and the earliest to arrive.

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The scene had clearly stunned everyone; they were frozen in place, unable to snap out of it even after several minutes had passed.

The man hugging and kissing a woman couldn't possibly be their CEO. And the woman, smiling as she wiped her lips, calmly greeting them-that couldn't possibly be the same Brielle who had been a director at Dorsey International.

Were their eyes playing tricks on them, or had the world gone mad? Wasn't Brielle Mr. Dorsey's nephew's ex-fiancée?

Brielle calmly stepped into the private elevator, and only once the doors closed did she slump against the elevator wall, boneless.

Well, it was over.

Sure enough, no sooner had she left Dorsey International than the company's staff chat exploded with a photo of Brielle and Max kissing. Although it was just a blurry silhouette, the morning sun's golden light, the clouds outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the titanium-white overhead lights all made the photo breathtakingly beautiful.

What drew the eye most was their CEO pulling someone into his embrace, and his whole dignified and fierce demeanor seemed to dissipate.

The photo was only circulated internally at Dorsey International. Nobody was indiscreet enough to leak it to the media.

When Brielle arrived at Stellar Stage Entertainment, she was still burning up. It was her first time being caught red-handed by so many people. Though she managed to greet others, she wished she could just crawl into a hole!

Donny walked in just as she was about to leave. "Ms. Haywood, where are you off to?"

"Discussing a new script."

1/2

Donny was surprised. Were there still screenwriters willing to sell their scripts to them? Stellar Stage Entertainment was slowly improving its reputation, but everyone was still taking a wait-and-see approach.

The place Brielle was heading to was off the beaten path, an area she remembered was nearly set for demolition years ago. There were a few famous local eateries there. She had eaten at one during her college days, and the memory was fresh in her mind,

"Kenzo." She called out as she entered, seeing Kenzo sitting at the far end.

The eatery was in a remote location, akin to the alleys in the slums, twisting and turning. If not for her good memory, she probably would have gotten lost.

It was a corridor-style eatery with private rooms on either side. The corridor's end led to other restaurants or hotels, a real hodgepodge.

When Brielle first came here, it was

with classmates who said Kenzo had personally recommended it, insisting that they try it. At the time, she thought it was a joke, a way to claim a connection with Kenzo. It was only after seeing the message from Kenzo today that she realized he was serious.

"How's it going at Stellar Stage Entertainment? I saw the trending topics. The

staff seem to trust you."

Brielle shed her coat, revealing a loose-fitting, grey cropped sweater. The room

was sufficiently heated, and she didn't feel cold at all.

The owner had already served up some dishes, all homely fare.

"Are you really willing to sell that

script to me?" she asked, still somewhat incredulous after reading En Kenzo's text. After all, his scripts were priceless.

Anything with Kenzo's name guaranteed a box office hit and critical acclaim.

Even a TV drama adaptation could become the year's champion in ratings.

"It's just a script," Kenzo said, his tone gentle as he poured her some fruit wine.

"Thank you."

Brielle sat cross-legged and smiled

at the familiar dishes on the table.

"The menu here seems to be the same as always. as always. I came here once with classmates and thought it would be demolished by now. I never

expected this place to still be here.