

Master 701

Chapter 701

It wasn't Max who came through the door, but Annie.

Annie looked surprised to see her. "Ms. Brielle?"

Brielle nodded, watching as Annie walked straight to the desk, scooped up a hair clip, and slipped it into her purse. "Aren't you heading out, Ms. Brielle?"

"The socializing isn't over yet?"

Both asked at the same time.

Annie chuckled, "Not yet, probably another fifteen minutes or so. I got a call from my godfather, so I left early. Ms. Brielle, I passed your message on to Max. I've got to run now. I was worried you'd be waiting too long. Maybe give him a call to check in?"

Annie knew their phones were out of reach and messages couldn't be delivered, so she dared to say so. She wanted to make Brielle feel more frustrated and more uncomfortable.

"Sure, thanks for the heads up."

Brielle sat on the couch, helplessly watching the hair clip disappear into Annie's bag as she departed, leaving the office quiet once

more.

Brielle glanced at the wall clock. It was already nine in the evening. If Max was going to come back to work late, this would be the time. She started out lounging on the couch but gradually sat up straight with hands on her knees and a nervous sweat forming on her palms. Even as her back began to ache from the tension, Max still hadn't arrived.

Outside Dorsey International, not far from the building, Annie hopped into Murray's car, a grin spreading across her face as the door closed. "Murray, I've managed to stir up trouble between Brielle and Max again. Gosh, I feel like I'm just too good at this."

As she spoke, she pulled a piece of candy from a box beside her and popped it into her mouth. Murray's gaze on her was tender as if she were just a mischievous little girl. No matter how outrageous Annie's antics, Murray always thought she was an eternally youthful sprite.

Savoring the candy, Annie leaned in close, turned Murray's face towards her, and passed the sweet from her lips to his, her eyes sparkling. "Is it good? Sweet enough?"

Murray felt his heart melting, his breath quivering, and his voice growing hoarse with desire. He was lost in her gaze and, after a moment, murmured, "Miss, it's very sweet."

Maybe he was referring to the candy, or something else entirely.

Annie leaned back, legs propped up, her eyes full of mirth. "I'm in such a

fantastic mood today."

Her good mood usually meant Murray could suggest something audacious, like another round of the role-play they had indulged in the night before. But he was so meek, so cautious, that he only dared to steal a glance at her through the rearview mirror.

Resting her chin on her hand, cheeks bulging with candy, Annie caught his look and smiled. "What's up? Is there something you want to tell me, Murray?"

The man swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. Instead of driving off, he got out, opened the back door, and slid in beside Annie. She said nothing, watched him sit down, and then felt his arms wrap around her waist. "Miss, may I?"

Even in her buoyant mood, Annie had no desire for sex, so she frowned slightly. "Haven't I told you, when I want it, I'll let you good, go drive."

know? Be

Murray, with a crestfallen look, reluctantly released her. He returned to the driver's seat and pressed the accelerator. The car glided forward smoothly.

Annie hummed a tune in the backseat, her voice pure and youthful. With her delicate features and eyes squinting as she savored her candy, she might as well have been a teenager. She seemed like a girl who had grown up sheltered, but Murray knew all too well that Annie was no damsel from a sheltered tower yet she was the princess in his heart.

They got back to their place, but

Annie, seemingly weary, dozed off in

her seat. Murray gently lifted her

cradling her carefully in his arms.

Instinctively, Annie wrapped her arms

around his neck, murmuring,

"Ricardo."

She smiled in her sleep, and Murray's grip tightened, his eyes filled with a bitter-sweetness, He had been by e her side all along, and years had

passed since she'd last seen Ricardo, so why did she still harbor feelings for him?

As Annie nestled against his chest, he worried she might catch a chill. He carried her into the room.

Meanwhile, up in the top-floor office

at Dorsey International, Brielle had fallen asleep waiting the chill of the night made her stir, her brow furrowing as she pulled a throw pillow into her embrace.

"Achoo."

She felt a cold draft and realized the office air conditioning had broken down. The nights in Beaconsfield were bitter cold, and without a blanket she felt an icy numbness in her hands and feet.

It was two in the morning now; Max certainly wouldn't be coming.

As Brielle stood, her numb legs gave way, and she stumbled, a sharp pain

shooting through her ankle. She crouched down to examine it, feeling the tears on her face and wiping it away.

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Taking a deep breath to ease the pain in her legs, she steadied herself against the wall and started walking out.

At this hour, Dorsey Tower was basically deserted. She took the elevator down. Since her car had been vandalized, her only option was to hail a cab by the roadside. But catching a cab in the wee hours was tough, and the cold had turned her lips a faint shade of purple.

An hour later, she finally managed to flag down a taxi. By the time she arrived back at Pearl Estate, it was four in the morning. She paid the driver and, with a limp, made her way into the complex, only to find that the lights in her apartment were on. Her brow furrowed at the sight. She must have left in such a rush that she forgot to turn them off.

As she rode the elevator up, she reached into her bag to get her keys, only to realize with delayed awareness that she had left her purse in Max's office. Now, aside from her phone, she had nothing.

Brielle was not usually one to break down. She was often frighteningly strong. But today had been too much. All she wanted was to find a warm place to rest, yet she had left her keys behind.

Blinking back the tears, she slid down against the wall, not wanting to make another trip to Dorsey International. She had no energy left and just wanted to make do in the hallway for the night. She even tapped on her own door, knowing no one would answer, but she couldn't help but keep tapping, even as the tears fell uncontrollably.

Pain shot through her ankle, leaving her both cold and hungry.

After a couple of knocks, her palm reddened and ached, so she stopped and curled up, resting her chin on her knees and closing her eyes. Footsteps sounded from inside the apartment, and for a moment, she wondered if she was hallucinating.

She was the only resident on this floor. If those weren't her footsteps, whose could they be?

She opened her eyes and slowly lifted her head to see her apartment door cracked open, with Max standing in the light, his gaze soft upon her. The warm, orange light made him look quite unreal.

Brielle blinked, wondering if the cold had conjured up a hallucination, but before she could think further, this vision crouched down to meet her eye level and even reached out to wipe away a tear from her cheek.

His touch was moist. "Why are you crying?" he asked.

Brielle opened her mouth to speak but quickly closed it, fearing the vision would vanish. Even the Max she imagined was perfect. The apartment's lights bathed him, and for a moment, everything else faded away, leaving only his presence and the warmth from inside. He had shed his suit jacket, wearing just his shirt with the top three buttons undone. This squatting pose exposed a patch of his chest. Max looked at her, not understanding why she was crying so late at night after coming home. He watched as Brielle wiped her eyes and got up from the ground, walking past him into the apartment.

Max frowned and noticed her closing the door, leaning against the wall to change her shoes, then moving to the couch to grab the blanket he had just laid out and wrapping it around herself.

Brielle was freezing. The chill from the office had seeped into her bones, and her mind was foggy. She saw the apparition remain still by the entrance, quietly watching her. This hallucination felt so real that she could sense Max's presence. "Brielle, let's talk."

Max stood in the entryway, his heart aching a bit at her deliberate disregard. He walked up to her quickly, grasping her wrist. "Don't sleep, let's talk."

Brielle was truly exhausted, and his pull barely made her lift her groggy gaze to meet his. As Max touched her hand, it felt like ice, and any lingering sense of loss shattered. He knelt down slowly, cradling her hand in his warm palm.

With this sudden warmth, Brielle realized this was no figment of her imagination, Hargaze collided with his, and the coolness in her heart began to thaw.

Who was it that said romance in love lay in the silent yearning beneath?

Max had been waiting for her at Pearl Estate/The person she wanted to reconcile with had already been there all along.

Max held her hands, rubbed them gently, then kissed the back of her hand. "Where have you been? Your hands are freezing."

This was an instinctive gesture for

Max. Looking up, he saw Brielle

staring blankly at him. Briette?" He

called out
to her, and seeing her dazed with no response, he tucked
her hands under the blanket.

He stood up straight and turned up
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the apartment's thermostat. After setting the temperature to a cozy 80 degrees Fahrenheit, he was about to set the remote down when a pair of arms wrapped around his waist.

Chapter 703

Brielle was lounging on the couch while Max stood. She wrapped her arm around him, leaving her head resting against his midsection. Max froze for a moment, then felt her hand slip under his shirt- deliberately igniting his lust. A shadow passed over his eyes, his Adam's apple bobbing.

He chuckled the remote control, not bothering to see if it landed on the coffee table. He spun around, pinned her to the couch, and kissed her fiercely.

Brielle felt breathless, on the verge of suffocation, before he released her. Clothes littered the path from the living room to the bedroom. Max carried the faint scent of liquor-he must have had a drink here, evidenced by the small wine glass still resting on the coffee table. His eyes, slightly intoxicated with warmth, imprisoned her completely in his embrace as he hoisted her up. Startled by the vulnerability of the position, Brielle's cheeks flushed. "Hey, easy," she murmured.

Their bodies pressed close together.

In truth, she didn't want him to be gentle. She wanted him to be rougher, to completely unravel her so that she could feel his presence instead of a gesture of rejection.

His rejection was painful. His indifference drove her mad. She wanted to be entwined tightly with him, to forget everything else for a moment and focus only on each other.

Neither asked why they didn't answer calls or texts; physical communication was far more honest.

Hours later, Brielle was exhausted and on the edge of sleep. Her feet pushed against him, too tired to speak. Drops of sweat beaded on Max's forehead, sliding from his jaw to her chest. The bedroom light was dim as Brielle woke, watching him through half-lidded eyes just in time to see the sweat drip onto her skin.

At that moment, she felt the heat of his sweat turn dry, then red, and finally, like a tattooed mark on her chest.

She had so much to say, so many questions, but for now, she just gazed at him with shimmering eyes.

Max's breathing grew heavy again, and he covered her eyes with his hand. "Stop looking, just sleep," he said. Her gaze made his body react and feel like she was dependent on him, that she couldn't let go. But he wasn't so sure himself.

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Brielle's eyelashes fluttered against his palm as she mumbled, "Don't leave me."

Max tensed, feeling as if his palm was scorched. All the words in the world couldn't weigh against that single plea. His heart's

bitterness and sense of loss vanished, replaced by a light chuckle. Wasn't this what he was worried about?

"I won't."

"I'm sorry for slapping you. Maybe you can slap me back to even it out?" With her eyes still closed, Brielle's willpower was the only thing

keeping her talking. She feared it was all a dream, that Max would vanish upon waking. So, while she still had the strength, she wanted

to say everything on her mind.

"I don't blame you for the scarf. I lost the rosary too, so please don't blame me. We both lost something of each other's. Let's call it

even, okay?"

Max felt a softening in his heart, but it wasn't sweet, it was more sour. How could affection be like this? They were so close. She was in

his arms, yet he wanted to be closer, to blend her into his being.

All his emotions-grievances, touches of affection, sourness-surged in his heart.

"Yeah."

Hearing his affirmative response, Brielle's lips curved slightly, and she fell into a own words when she woke up.

peaceful sleep. Perhaps she wouldn't remember her

Max held her close, noting the sunlight already streaming in, filling the room with warmth. He also hadn't rested in a long time. Now, with his worries set aside, he closed his eyes as well.

Brielle slept soundly until she woke to

see the empty room, her heart

skipping a beat. She feared last night beat. had indeed been a dream, but as she got out of bed, the soreness in her body told a different story, and her cheeks reddened.

As she wrapped herself in a robe and headed to the bathroom, she overheard Max on the phone. "Don't make the oatmeal too sweet. She doesn't like it that way. Be here in ten minutes, yeah."

After hanging up, Max continued staring at his laptop, wearing just a bathrobe, his skin glowing. Brielle finished freshening up just as the doorbell rang. She saw Annie standing outside, hesitating.

Annie gave her a small smile, her arms laden with two large food containers. "Ms Brielle brought NO some documents for Max and thought I'd bring you breakfast too. He mentioned you might be hungry."

Seeing Annie, a delicate girl burdened with both paperwork and substantial food containers, Brielle's doubts dissipated Max wasn't indifferent to

women's needs. He just didn't extend the same care to others. No other man would treat a dainty lady this way.

Chapter 704

Feeling completely at ease, Brielle took the lunchbox from Annie's hands.

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver."

Annie nodded at her and handed over some documents to Max. "These are the files for the upcoming meeting."

Max grabbed the documents and noticed Brielle holding the lunchbox. He stood up, stepped past Annie, and took the lunchbox from her. "Is it heavy?"

Brielle felt a sweet thrill of satisfaction as the corners of her mouth turned up in a smile. "You go ahead and have your meeting, and I'll set this up."

Annie stood beside them, her gaze shifting back and forth in confusion. She was genuinely puzzled. Why had these two suddenly made up?

After delivering the files, she had no reason to stay, so she tactfully made her exit. As she stepped outside Pearl Estate, her mind was still trying to unravel the mystery. She was so lost in thought that she nearly tripped over her own feet.

Why were they so fickle? Weren't they at odds just yesterday? Relationships were far too complex, she mused. It seemed she had a lot more to learn.

Upstairs, Brielle laid out the lunchbox contents

closed his laptop to join her.

a hearty chicken soup and her favorite side dishes. Her smile deepened. Max casually

"Aren't you supposed to be in a meeting?"

"The meeting isn't for another half-hour."

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As Brielle ladled soup into his bowl, she couldn't resist teasing, "Someone said I was Annie's stand-in." She locked eyes with Max, searching for any flicker of emotion.

Max's face was unreadable as he responded, "Stand-in for what?" He seemed genuinely clueless as if he had no idea what a stand-in

was.

Brielle let out a half-laugh, half-sigh. "Don't you think I resemble her?"

"Not at all. You're my girlfriend, and she's my professor's goddaughter. Once she finishes her PhD, she'll be

moving on.

Brielle exhaled a sigh of relief. So what was all that jealousy about these past few days? She decided not to bring up the scarf incident, recalling her words from the night before about them both losing something important. They were even now. There was no point in holding grudges. Besides, that rosary seemed far more precious than any scarf.

As long as she wasn't a stand-in, everything else could be sorted out.

Her mood lifted, but her eyes couldn't help welling up. These past few days had been tough.

Just as she was about to lean in for a kiss, the television news caught her attention. "The couple's wedding will take place tomorrow morning at eleven at the church. Previously released photos of the couple in wedding attire..."

The screen showed Andrew and Tessa in their wedding finery, Andrew with his arm around Tessa, who looked adoringly into his eyes.

Brielle's good morning was thoroughly spoiled. Andrew and Tessa's wedding was tomorrow!! How could she have forgotten something so important? She didn't turn off the TV but instead listened to the details.

Tessa was also listening to the news, coughing slightly before wrapping her arms around Andrew's waist. "Andrew I swear I didn't leak anything to the media. It must have been the paparazzi yesterday when we were trying on the wedding dress. I'm so sorry."

Andrew's expression darkened. Ever since their night out at Tequila Sunset, Tessa had been running into Aubree, his mood had soured, and he had rejected

her advances.

eager to get physically closer, but after

He had discussed having a low-key, private ceremony with Tessa, just with close friends in attendance. Tessa had cried a bit but eventually agreed.

Andrew had felt a twinge of guilt. What woman didn't dream of a grand wedding? But now, the media had released false information about them having a lavish

ceremony at the grandest church in Beaconsfield.

Tessa looked up at Andrew with pleading eyes, "Don't you believe me?"

It wasn't that Andrew didn't trust her,

someone he

but the photographer for their wedding was someone he trusted completely. There was no chance the photos would have leaked from there,

especially since the shoot had taken place at a private estate, far from any prying paparazzi. Who else could it be if not Tessa herself?

Chapter 705

Andrew was beginning to have his doubts about Tessa, and an uneasy feeling crept into his heart for the first time. He was always a maverick, and as long as he was happy, that was all that mattered-even when it came to Tessa. He didn't want her to oppose him with

such tactics.

Tessa knew what she was doing was risky, but what would the socialites think if they were to have a low-key wedding?

The Rowland family had just fallen from grace, and she urgently needed a lavish wedding to reclaim her place among the elite. She had been avoiding contact with anyone these past few days, fearing mockery from former friends and dreading the possibility of having to take charge on behalf of the fallen Rowland family.

The Rowland family was finished. That was a certainty. If she opposed the public, she'd be drowned in a sea of scorn. Just like Brielle had gone through the day before.

Yesterday had been Tessa's happiest day because Brielle had been publicly humiliated. Tessa hadn't missed the chance to fuel the fire, hiring a legion of online trolls to lambast Brielle. The more Brielle was chastised, the more Tessa felt at ease.

She loathed Brielle and Aubree the most. Her very existence was to see those two women trampled into the depths of hell!

Yesterday, she even resent that video to Aubree, determined to ensure that Aubree would never forget the humiliation. She planned to make it Aubree's lifelong shadow to shame her from ever appearing at Andrew's side again.

Now, her plan was nearly complete. After tomorrow's wedding, she would be Andrew's lawful wife.

Thinking of this, Tessa's eyes took on a pitiful look as she clutched Andrew's hand and placed it on her chest. "Andrew, do you dislike my figure? We're getting married tomorrow, and I really want to be with you"

But Andrew withdrew his hand coldly. "Let's have breakfast first."

Tessa suddenly panicked, fearing her last lifeline was slipping away. She mustered a bitter smile and stood up. "Alright, I'll go dish up the oatmeal.*"

Andrew remained in the living room. The noise from the television soured his mood.

In the kitchen, Tessa reached for a bottle of pills hidden in the overhead cabinet. She glanced at Andrew's figure in the living room and mixed the substance into the oatmeal.

She couldn't be blamed, after all-they were soon to be married, and such intimacies were bound to happen. If she became pregnant, Andrew and Aubree would be history.

Anxiety clawed at her, especially after the night at Tequila Sunset when Andrew had left her with Jaired and chased after Aubree. She was acutely aware that she needed a child with Andrew to sever his ties with Aubree once and for all.

She stirred the oatmeal slowly to ensure nothing seemed amiss, then carried it out with a smile.

"Andrew, dinner's ready."

Andrew, who usually let his guard down around Tessa, didn't suspect a thing about the doctored dish.

They sat down together, facing a modest spread of light dishes. Tessa couldn't handle rich foods, so they settled for a simple bowl of oatmeal, which Andrew had dutifully shared with her every morning. Though he much preferred a hearty breakfast-back when he lived with Aubree, she would wake up early to grill him a steak.

During breakfast, Tessa seized the chance to voice her concerns.

"Everyone knows about our church wedding now. Maybe we should visit the church today just to check. It's usually booked in advance, but with the Clements family's pull, I'm sure they can make room for us."

The frustration in Andrew's expression deepened, but out of consideration for

Tessa's frailty and how it might look to others, he suppressed his irritation.

"Tessa. You know I indulge you in everything. I said I'd marry you, and I will-you don't need these schemes. You're the one I've always

loved."

Tessa felt a surge of emotion, but unbeknownst to Andrew, her phone was recording their
the side

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After stopping the recording, she sent the audio to Aubree. Any

chance to needle Aubree was an

opportunity Tessa would never pass

up.

Chapter 706

After finishing his oatmeal, Andrew was supposed to head to work, but he felt a feverish warmth coursing through his body and a general sense of malaise. He unbuttoned a few buttons of his shirt. His brows furrowed as he slumped onto the couch, tilting his head back to reveal a prominent Adam's apple.

His appearance was undeniably attractive, and this gesture was filled with an alluring charm.

Tessa had never had sex with a man, so the sight alone was enough to send a blush spreading across her cheeks.

Andrew stretched his legs onto the coffee table, feeling his body grow hotter by the minute, and Tessa slowly approached, placing her hand on his chest.

"Andrew, did you have a rough night? Do you think you caught a cold?"

Andrew squinted his eyes. Not only had the previous night been restless, but the past couple of nights had been choppy at best. It never crossed his mind that Tessa might have slipped something into his oatmeal. He thought his body was weak, making him believe he had caught a cold.

He stood up to leave, but Tessa would not let him go, quickly wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Andrew," she whispered.

Andrew's breathing became labored instantly. The hands wrapped around his waist seemed to be dragging him into an abyss. He placed his hand over Tessa's.

A glint of determination flashed in Tessa's eyes, her cheeks reddening even more, ready for what was to come. This frail body of hers was not exactly eager for pleasure, but she had to persevere.

She quickly shed her clothes and closed her eyes, not daring to look at him but guiding his hand across her skin.

It had to work.

Even the corners of her mouth couldn't help but curve into a faint smile.

Andrew's eyes reddened instantly at the stimulation. He grasped her chin and pushed her onto the couch.

He was about to take off her pants after leaving her breathless from his kisses, but his phone rang at that very moment. It was a call from the church, cautiously inquiring if he really intended to reserve a spot.

The church had found out through the news, but Andrew himself hadn't placed any order with them. They were free the following day, and if Andrew wanted to have his wedding there, they had to prepare overnight. After all, a high-profile wedding could not afford to look shabby.

"Mr. Clements, we have several marital packages available; you're welcome to come and see for yourself."

Andrew felt even more breathless, grinding his teeth. "Pick the most expensive one."

He hung up and was about to proceed with Tessa when the phone rang again. Sweat was beading on Andrew's forehead. He felt a mounting irritation with the incessant interruptions. Yet, he couldn't ignore the call, and suddenly, he snapped to attention-it was Aubree's special ringtone.

He let go of Tessa, restraining himself at this crucial moment. He fastened his belt, still feeling an unbearable heat throughout his body, but the ringtone was like a spell, briefly bringing him back to his senses.

He took a deep breath and answered. "What is it?"

But the call wasn't from Aubree herself. It was from a hotel attendant. "Hello, are you Miss Clement's brother? Miss Clements left her phone at the hotel, and we can't reach her at the moment, so we had to contact the emergency contact she listed."

Andrew was taken aback, and with that reminder, he suddenly wondered where Aubree was staying now that her place had been sold.

He remembered her mentioning sleeping with four men, and he felt a burning rage. Taking a deep breath, he responded, "Please keep it for now. I'll come by shortly."

The hotel attendant nodded, gave him an address, and hung up.

Andrew grabbed his coat to leave and saw Tessa lying naked on the couch. Tessa was shaking all over, feeling utterly humiliated. They had come this close, just one step away. How could Andrew hold back?

She bit her lip so hard she could taste blood.

Andrew covered her with a blanket and left a kiss on her lips. "I'm going to pick something up. I'll be right back."

Just that kiss made him feel like he was on fire, longing to have her, but the last shred of sanity in his mind pulled at him.

He got up, his voice hoarse. "Tessa, I'm afraid of hurting you."

Tessa wanted to cry. She wasn't afraid of getting hurt. She just wanted Andrew now. But before she could say anything, Andrew was already out the door.

10-11

He had intended to drive himself but

was suddenly aware of the unusual

heat in

heat in his body Andrew's brows knitted tightly, and he immediately suspected the cause, feeling a twinge of disappointment.

In such a short span, this was the second time Tessa had resorted to such

means.

When he arrived at the hotel, he retrieved Aubree's phone and inquired which

room she had checked into.

Normally, hotel staff should not give

out room keys to anyone but the

guest, but after hearing he was but after

Aubree's brother and only wanted to return her phone, they made an exception.

Chapter 707

As Andrew entered the room, he was immediately engulfed in Aubree's essence. The drug-inducing calm he'd managed to wrestle into submission roared to life, his blood coursing with a fierce heat. He ripped off his jacket and shucked his shirt, making a beeline for the bathroom.

Aubree was on set, still engrossed in her role, oblivious to the fact that she'd left her phone behind.

The set was a whirlwind of activity; everyone was fueled by the buzz from yesterday's headlines.

John was his usual stoic self, but it was clear he felt lighter today. In his downtime, he was deep-diving into the works of other directors, keen on honing his craft.

Aubree was caught up in the fervor, and her spirits lifted.

As they wrapped up the morning's scenes, John announced they were heading to Stellar Stage Entertainment for some location shots.

The script might tell a story of the everyman, but a few scenes demanded the backdrop of a bustling office building, and Stellar Stage Entertainment was just the ticket.

Aubree's visit there would inevitably lead her to Brielle.

Brielle had rolled into work just after noon, still reeling from a night of indulgence with Max and feeling the after-effects. It wasn't until sunlight flooded her room that she managed to rise.

The news had her seeing red, but Max, ever clumsy with words, simply assured her Andrew would regret his actions and urged her not to be upset.

Duties called, and they parted ways. Brielle longed for more time with Max, but with Stellar Stage Entertainment still settling from recent upheaval, she was needed to steady the ship.

Max had driven her in, stealing a few tender moments in the car before she staggered out on wobbly legs, only to stumble upon the film crew's arrival.

Brielle tugged at her collar, trying to cover up, but it was too late - Aubree had seen everything.

Aubree had noticed the lovebites on Brielle before but was still puzzled. "Bri, has Mr. Dorsey never laid eyes on a woman before?"

Brielle, flushed and wide-eyed with kiss-bruised lips, was a sight that easily fueled gossip.

Aubree had always known Brielle was stunning, so seeing her like this elicited an involuntary tsk. "You might want to check yourself in the mirror."

Brielle was embarrassed, knowing she couldn't resist Max. She had simply closed her eyes as his face neared hers in the car, not bothering to wonder what Patrick in the front seat might think.

"You're the boss now, Bri. Keep up appearances. John might come looking for you later. Let's go to your office."

Aubree led her to the private elevator that whisked them to the executive floor.

After freshening up, Brielle's cheeks cooled down. She eyed Aubree, curious if the day's news had affected

her.

"Bri, I've wrapped my scenes for today. Ricardo and the others are up next. I want to go somewhere."

"Where to?"

"Radiant Light Church."

Aubree's eyelashes fluttered as she mentioned the church, and then she

looked up with a smile. "Remember the wish you made for me? That me and Andrew would be tied together forever? You were so sweet to do it. You probably did hang that wish up there. I want to take it down now."

Brielle's heart ached at the request. "I'll come with you."

"No need. You must be swamped,

especially with the company's recent

shake-up and all then

online

to

storm about you. Have you seen today's trending topics? Amelia is practically hiding at home. We may have won this battle, but you're in the

public eye now. You've got your hands full."

"Aubree, I'll come with you. If we leave now, we can be back by tomorrow.

Besides, I hung the wish. I know exactly where it is. Without me, you'll be

searching through hundreds of wishes. Do you really want that?"

Aubree had indeed intended to

search on her own. She turned away, her eyes brimming with tears Brielle didn't know how to comfort her, especially with the news of Andrew and Tessa's impending wedding still fresh on TV and the media circling like vultures for details on the Clements family's plans.

She wrapped her arms gently around Aubree. "You can cry now. I'm here for you. But once that wish is down, no more tears for him, okay?"

Hearing this, Aubree's tears fell freely, and she clung to Brielle, sobbing without a sound.

Chapter 708

How long had Aubree known Andrew? It must have been twenty years by now.

Her secret crush, her first love, her open yearning-all of it had been for him. Even now, as she found herself mired in disgrace, too tainted to be touched, she couldn't remain indifferent to the news of his marriage.

Perhaps that was the terrifying nature of affection, like ants consuming an elephant, little by little, day by day. Unbeknownst to herself, she became a slave to love, forever debased in his eyes.

At eighteen, she had thought that if only Andrew could love her back, she'd be content to remain in humble adoration forever, even if it meant stripping away her pride and risking her life. But Andrew had a heart of stone, only showing a glimmer of tenderness while looking at her in the intimacy of the bedroom.

"Alright, then you're coming with me."

Brielle didn't trust Aubree to go out alone in her current state and immediately called Max. The phone connected, and his voice came through, "What's up?"

"I need to borrow your car. Aubree wants to visit Radiant Light Church. We're heading out now and will be back tomorrow."

"Drive safe."

"Will do."

Max's car arrived swiftly. Brielle took the wheel while Aubree settled into the passenger seat. Seeing how attentive Max was to Brielle, Aubree couldn't help but feel a bit emotional. "I always thought Mr. Dorsey was a player, leading you on. I never imagined he'd be the most devoted of them all."

To others, Max seemed indifferent to the world. Aubree even wondered if everything in Max's world was a monochrome of cold whites, so dull and colorless, allowing him to dedicate years to his work without a change of heart.

But with Brielle, he was moved, his emotions in disarray

As Aubree glanced at the swiftly passing cityscape outside the window, the corners of her mouth twitched in a faint smile. Mr. Dorsey and Andrew were, after all, not the same.

In the hotel room, Andrew took a cold shower but still felt uncomfortable all over. When he smelled Aubree's lingering scent in the room, the fire he had managed to suppress flared up again.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he rummaged through the room, eventually finding Aubree's personal clothing. He felt like a creep at that moment, lying on the bed Aubree had slept in, inhaling the scent of her garments.

Even then, he couldn't understand why Tessa had to go to such lengths to entice him. She used drugs and undressed to give him physical stimulation. But Aubree only needed a single piece of clothing to get a rise

out of him.

Afterward, he buried his face in the pillow, his breath shaky, his body sweaty. If Aubree were actually there, he'd make sure she couldn't leave the bed for three days.

Thinking of her, the desire Andrew had just quenched seemed to boil over once again. "Damn it!" He cursed under his breath, his Adam's apple bobbing, a sense of frustration building within.

Ever since he'd hooked up with Autres, he'd never let himself offer like this.

"Son of a bitch" He swore again, then hoarsely called out, Then name seemed to spil from the depths of his heart, lingering on his tongue, tugging at his very fech

It wasn't until the evening that he irritably massaged his temples. What was he

doing? How was he any

different from some perverted stalker

Andrew tossed the clothing into the trash can in a fit of disgust, but no sooner had he done that than he imagined Aubree's scolding voice in his head.

Standing tall, his lean, muscular body was a sight to behold, but he was in no mood to appreciate it. Instead, he bent down and retrieved the clothing from the trash, taking it to the bathroom himself

Andrew had never washed clothes in

his life, but he scrubbed the garment

that was stained with his essence vigorously and

and lathered it with soap. Once clean and back to its original state, he fetched a hanger from the closet and hung the clothing out to dry. The thought of Aubree wearing the garment again made his throat itch anew. His reason told him to stop thinking about it.

Damn it!

He truly felt uncomfortable everywhere. The thought of washing clothes in a hotel was just plain awkward. He took another shower, trying to wash away the unease.

Aubree's phone lay on the bed. He was tempted to find out who the other men were that had been with Aubree. So, his hand reached for the phone

Chapter 709

Frankly, Andrew still couldn't fathom how, in such a short time apart, Aubree managed to have sex with three different men, and bear such deep marks on her body?

Aubree wasn't the Clements family's own flesh and blood, but she was raised in luxury, coddled and cared for. A mere paper cut on her finger would have her wailing in pain. So, when Andrew lost control for the first time, he ended up receiving several stinging slaps and learned his lesson the hard way. He had to comfort Aubree with sweet nothings until she agreed to sleep with him again. From then on, he made sure never to leave a single scratch on her skin.

But the marks he saw that day were too harsh, too telling of the ferocity behind them. How much it must have hurt.

Aubree couldn't stand him being so unrestrained with her, yet she tolerated it from others.

Andrew was seething with rage. Gripping Aubree's phone tightly, he entered her birthday as the password. It was incorrect.

He tried his own birthday next. Still wrong.

His frown deepened, and he finally keyed in the date of their first passionate encounter, a day that should have been memorable.

Wrong again.

Three attempts, and now he was locked out for an hour. Damn it!

His temper flared in an instant, and he was about to use his own phone to call someone who could crack the code. But then he paused, the exhaustion weighing on him as he slumped onto the bed.

Forget it. He wasn't up fa

It was then that his
another slap in the face.

he'd be back. "Andrew buzzed to life. Tessa's tearful voice echoed through the speaker, asking when he'd be back. "Andrew, I'm feeling a little scared at home. Can you come over and keep me company? Plus, the makeup team

alled. They wanted to start prepping me for the wedding at five in the morning. The dress has arrived, and your suit's here too. Don't you want to come over and try it on?"

Her voice was tentative, probably guessing that Andrew knew she had tampered with his food. "Andrew, you're all I have left."

Andrew rubbed his temples, suddenly recalling that he was supposed to marry Tessa tomorrow. He had seemingly forgotten about the wedding the moment he stepped into the hotel.

Tessa's eyes brimmed with resentment when he didn't immediately respond. "Andrew, I've heard people say that Aubree's been with several men. They say she's been taking them to hotels, reveling night after night."

Hearing this, Andrew felt a surge of anger. Recalling the foolish things he'd done at the hotel filled him with shame. He yanked the clothes off the rack and tossed them straight into the trash.

So, Aubree and her lover had been in this room, too? How low could she stoop?

His blood boiled, then cooled abruptly, leaving him feeling like the whole room was tainted with impurity.

Hadn't he vowed never to seek out Aubree again? Why had he come here once more? Without another thought, he strode out the door, leaving it all behind.

"Andrew, are you still listening to me?"

Tessa's frail voice was like a faint whisper, easily swept away by the wind.

"I'm here, on my way back. Tomorrow's wedding will be at the church, and Kve booked the grandest package. You'll have the wedding of your dreams.*

He spoke without a trace of emotion, only the raw anger from the news still fresh in his mind.

Tessa's eyes reddened with excitement as she wiped away tears. "I knew you wouldn't let me down. I love you, Andrew."

After hanging up, Tessa's heart pounded with the intensity of her emotions. After some time, she dialed Alivia.

*Alivia, have you seen the news? I'm

getting married tomorrow. The invitations have been sent, and it's at that church. Make sure you come.
I

owe it to you for your strategies that helped me be with Andrew."

Alivia had advised Tessa to go after Aubree, knowing it would also be a strike at Brielle. Tessa had done just that employing the cruelest of methods.

Chapter 710

When Alivia heard the news, she wasn't the least bit surprised. Everyone in their circles knew that Andrew had a real thing for Tessa. The Clements didn't need strategic marriages to boost their family's status anymore.

"Congrats, Tessa," Alivia said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Tessa's eyes sparkled with joy. "I hope you and Max can tie the knot soon as well."

At the mention of Max, a chill ran through Alivia's heart, and the recent headlines flashed through her mind. She'd pushed Amelia to take Brielle down a peg but never expected Amelia to crash and burn so spectacularly. Amelia was now a pawn off the board, having fled the country under the cover of darkness to escape the backlash and try her luck abroad.

Alivia gritted her teeth in frustration, unable to fathom how public opinion had turned against them so swiftly when their plan had seemed flawless.

The more Brielle's influence grew, the more unsettled Alivia felt. Annie's progress was still too slow for her liking. She had paid a hefty sum fifty million and heard about Max and Brielle's argument. But as of this morning, they were back on good terms.

How did those two manage such unwavering trust in each other? It made Alivia's skin crawl with envy. If Michael hadn't advised her to sit tight and wait for the right moment, she would have taken matters into her own hands by now.

Though she didn't fully trust Annie's capabilities, Annie and Martha were the only chess pieces she had to play. Now that Annie was proving useful, it was time to strategize with Martha.

After hanging up the phone, Alivia turned to Martha, who was sipping on her meds.

Martha's health had taken a nosedive in recent days. Despite her tantrums and tactics, Max hadn't budged an inch. It seemed he was resolute in staying with Brielle.

"Martha, you've got to stop getting worked up over Max."

Just the sound of Max's name made Martha's face flush with anger. She looked as though she wanted to spring out of bed, but a simple movement left her gasping for breath. "Alivia, you're the only one who gets it. You've been here for me all in the last few days."

"It's the least I can do," Alivia said sweetly. "Did you hear? Andrew's getting married. You've met him before."

"That Clements boy, huh? I can't believe he's settling down. How wonderful. If only you and Max could get hitched. I could die happy! "Martha, I wish. But Max doesn't see me that way. All the news lately has been about Brielle. Still, he insists on being with her. I think Max... might never let her go."

Apart from work, Max rarely showed interest in anything else. His one passion seemed to be Brielle. How could Alivia accept that? She wouldn't give up on even the slightest chance.

As expected, Martha was livid, her cheeks burning with rage, nearly passing out from the intensity of her emotions

"Martha, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have told you, but I'm just being honest. To split them up, we'll have to make Brielle back off herself." "You're right," Martha gasped. "I must talk to Brielle!"

Martha clasped Alivia's hand in her own, her cheeks glowing with maternal

affection. "Don't worry Alivia. Even if it costs me my life. Ill make sure you end up with Max."

A sly glint passed through Alivia's eyes.

"Okay, Martha. But I think a direct

threat to Brielle won't do much. Do you know about Aubree? The Clements' foster daughter? She's just been through a Tot, and Brielle is

probably dying to protect her. Unfortunately, Brielle doesn't have

the means to even protect her friend

right now. We can use that to our

advantage, use her to pressure Brielle."

Alivia had learned the hard way just how tough Brielle could be. That woman was stubborn to the core, her e pride interwoven with her very being. To truly break her, they would have to strike at her Achilles heel, just like she had advised Tessa

Control the weak spot, and you control the battle.