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Caiden wondered if the two had naturally grown apart once each had had families of their own.

"It doesn't matter. Most college students don't stay in touch with their friends after graduation. We're all going on our separate paths in life, after all..." Caiden rambled, attempting to fill the awkwardness that had descended on them.

Joan, however, knew well enough where the heart of the matter lay.

Whenever Joan used to fantasize about her dream wedding, she'd always pictured Gabriella as her sole bridesmaid. However, things had taken a sudden turn when Gabriella had fallen in love with Joan's husband.

"Jory..." Nancy moaned. She lay on the bed with her eyes shut, her mind wandering.

"Hey, wake up, hey..." Jaden said, gently patting Nancy's arm.

Nancy, however, made no response.

"Don't hit me! I'm begging you. I'm pregnant! Don't hurt my child," Nancy whimpered, waving her arms weakly. Her forlorn expression stirred up the pity in Jaden's heart as he stood by Nancy's bed watching her.

He couldn't help but wonder what crosses Nancy had to bear. He could not imagine what horrors she'd witnessed that were so unendurable they'd even spilled over into her dreams.

"Hey, wake up!" Jaden raised his voice and nudged Nancy a little more forcefully this time.

"Who are you? What are you doing? Where am I? Why are you here?" Nancy babbled. She startled awake, sitting up violently.

Jaden couldn't quite stifle the giggle that burst out of him.

Even when Nancy clearly wasn't intending to be, Jaden found her reactions endearing.

"Let me answer your questions one by one. I'm Jaden, a friend of Caiden. You're safe in a hotel. Caiden and I rescued you and Joan from a pitch-dark room," Jaden replied patiently.

So he was the one who saved Joan and I! Nancy realized with a flood of relief.

"Where's Joan? How is she?" Nancy asked fervently, clutching Jaden's arm tightly.

"Don't worry. She's doing just fine. You'll have to stay here for a few days, though. The hotel's being watched now, so you might be discovered if you try to leave," Jaden advised Nancy in a reassuring tone.

"What are you doing? Where did those people in the room go, then? Did they fly away?" Gabriella spat at two of her men, who had been diligently spying on the door of the room. She could feel her stomach knotted up in rage.

Why did I hire such useless punks? Gabriella seethed in despair. The only thing they're good for is taking money from me! They've done absolutely nothing so far.

"I'm asking you a question! What? Have all of you suddenly gone dumb?" Gabriella roared.

The two men meekly hung their heads, looking like a couple of convicted criminals.

"Ms. Ward, we haven't left our spot for a single instant. We don't know where they could have vanished too either," One of the men volunteered faintly.

What did he mean by that? Was he trying to insinuate that I'm being unreasonable? Gabriella sneered as she straightened her back and faced the two men squarely.

"Sure. Tell me, then, what should we do now that they're nowhere to be seen?" Gabriella demanded.

The two men exchanged glances. Helplessness flashed across their eyes.

"We can check the surveillance tapes in the hotel." One of them ventured tentatively.

Gabriella had to admit that it was a surprisingly sound idea. "Go on, then! What are you waiting for?" she hollered.

The two men visibly trembled in fear as they cowered before Gabriella.

"Hey, you can't just look at our surveillance footage. We have to get the consent of our manager first..." The supervisor of the security control room quickly broke in.

"Get lost! You'd better not stand in my way. If you insist, I'll get rid of you in the nastiest manner possible," Gabriella threatened meanly. She took a menacing step towards the supervisor, who shrank back and quickly retreated a few steps.

The supervisor rapidly took stock of the situation. He almost instantly came to the conclusion that self-preservation was of utmost priority. There'd be time enough to make all the reports he wanted after this crew of ruffians had departed.

"Have you found anything?" Gabriella asked through gritted teeth.

How dare you escape from me! Gabriella cursed Joan inwardly. How could she have even managed to flee in that state? It's practically a miracle, Gabriella pondered. She almost admired the wits and determination that journey must have taken.

"You'd better hurry up. My patience is almost used up," Gabriella announced chillingly.

The men could not comprehend how this woman had managed to strike such terror in them. However, they had never met such a callous woman in their lives. They obeyed Gabriella as if by instinct.

"Ms. Ward, we've already reviewed the tapes in the security control room, but..." One of the men began, but his voice died away on his lips.

"But what!" Gabriella shrieked at the top of her lungs. Quite a number of doors opened and a few guests peered out, evidently displeased by the ruckus.

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"There's a crazy bitch yapping outside! She has no sense of propriety at all!"

"Eh, forget her. Let's just go to sleep. If she doesn't want to sleep, that's her business. If she goes overboard, we'll call the police," a couple murmured faintly to themselves in the distance. The doors soon shut after a while.

"Ms. Ward, the footage has been erased," the man timidly replied in a small voice.

Alas, the surveillance tapes had been doctored. Gabriella's plans were momentarily thrown into disarray. Wait a moment. I've practically disabled both Nancy and Joan! It's impossible that they could have accomplished so much within such a short period of time. Unless... they got help! Realization dawned upon Gabriella.

The heart of the enigma remained, however. Who were they getting help from? And where had they gotten the key? Gabriella had confirmed that there were two keys to the room in total. One was with the receptionist while Gabriella held the other in her hand. There had been no visible damage to the door or the lock. The only reasonable deduction Gabriella could draw from this fact was that Joan and Nancy's aid had gotten the key from the receptionist.

"Quick, go to the front desk. They're going to change shifts soon. We have to seek out the receptionist who worked the front desk at that time!" Gabriella raged.

The two men sprinted out of the security control room as if their lives depended on it.

"What do you mean? I don't understand what you're saying," the receptionist said, frowning in response to the harried demands of the two men standing before her.

"Come on. Are you saying that no one came to take the key?" the men yelled, unleashing all the fear and anger he'd kept pent up within him from enduring Gabriella's abuse.

The receptionist's no-nonsense face immediately grew white with rage.

She had no clue what these two madmen were going on about. The receptionist took pride in her professionalism and would never have handed the key to any stranger who demanded it. After all, the hotel greatly valued the privacy of its guests.

"Forget it. You won't be able to get anything out of her," Gabriella scoffed, sauntering over.

The two men whirled around and looked at her in bewilderment.

"Ms. Ward, what do you mean by that?" they asked curiously.

Gabriella almost boiled over with exasperation. Utterly disregarding her pathetic lackeys, she walked up to the receptionist and inquired politely, "Hello, may I ask who the receptionist on duty was just now?" The two men gaped in astonishment. They'd never heard such a gentle tone issuing from Gabriella before.

"Oh, were you referring to her? Her shift already ended, and she should be home by now. She'll be coming back to work tomorrow morning if you can wait until then," the receptionist responded with equal courtesy.

"Sure, thank you," Gabriella replied. She turned and walked away, beckoning for the two men to follow.

"I strongly suspect that those two bitches are still within the premises. Tonight, no matter what, I want you to thoroughly search every room," Gabriella said confidingly to the two men once they were out of the receptionist's earshot.

"Got it. All right, we'll do as you say, then," the two men willingly assented.

Having thus agreed, the three of them proceeded on their separate ways.

Nancy and Joan's disappearance had left behind a whirl of turmoil in its wake.

"It's all because of you, Larry! How many things have happened ever since you got married to Joan? Those that I can recall offhand are already far too many to count!" Jory said, glowering.

Jory's outrage, however, was perfectly reasonable, given that his wife had suddenly gone missing without a trace.

"Calm down, Jory. Let's put our heads together and come up with a plan. There's no use you kicking up a fuss. It'll only waste more valuable time," Larry explained.

Where's his presence of mind? Doesn't Jory have any sense at all? Larry wondered disdainfully to himself. At a time like this, shouldn't he be finding ways to solve the problem instead of assigning blame?

Larry shook his head, heaving a sigh of despondency. It baffled him as to why Nancy even bothered fraternizing with such a pathetic bunch.

"Fine, what do you say we should do, then? Where should we start looking?" Jory taunted, leering at Larry.

They had last seen Nancy at the fashion boutique. Larry guessed that Rune was aware of something, at least. He had been consistently denying everything, however. It was outrageously evident that Rune was covering up for Gabriella. Larry cracked his knuckles, the cogs in his mind turning feverishly.

Rune hadn't been lying. He'd told Larry and Jory that Nancy had been to his boutique and that he'd personally seen her off onto her ride. Both of these facts were true. What Rune was blissfully oblivious to was that the car Nancy had been traveling on was hijacked by Gabriella's gang of ruffians.

"I think we can make use of Rune to convey a message to Gabriella," Larry said thoughtfully.