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Jory burst out into peals of snide laughter.

Does Larry take Rune for a fool? Does he really think that he'll be willing to give up the woman he loves just to help you? Jory thought contemptuously.

"In the recording, Nancy did give him some food for thought. I think Rune's a reasonable guy. He's not a bastard. He wouldn't want anything to happen to Gabriella either, so I think we can take advantage of this," Larry analyzed.

Jory had to grudgingly admit that Larry had made a valid point. Rune's heart was still soft-hearted at his core, and he did have a set of morals he adhered to. Defending Gabriella was Rune's greatest struggle.

"Rune, if you really love Gabriella, then don't let her continue in her wicked ways. You know what she's capable of. The moment she fixates on something, it's impossible to tear her away from it. You're the only one who can change her," Larry cajoled.

What the hell is he talking about? Obviously, this idiot is not aware that the only person in the world who can make a dint on Gabriella's heart of steel is himself.

Gabriella loved Larry in her own wicked way, and Rune was perfectly aware of that. It was this knowledge that kept him ensnared, however, quite unable to let go. As a result, Rune had been dragged into various evil deeds as a result of this twisted love.

To Larry's surprise, however, Rune was unexpectedly firm. "I don't want to have anything to do with Gabriella anymore. Please don't approach me about her anymore," Rune declared solemnly.

Have Rune and Gabriella broken up? Why has it happened all of a sudden? Larry wondered. It seemed unbelievable. Rune had always been perfectly smitten with Gabriella. How could he have given her up just like that?

"Did you and Gabriella..." Jory began, then paused. His face twitched as he struggled to think of a delicate way to phrase the question on both his and Larry's mind.

"I won't have any more contact with Gabriella in the future. I'm already seeing someone else at the moment. Besides, I don't wish to get involved in your affairs any longer. I don't understand what goes on in your wealthy circles, and I don't care to know either," Rune added decisively.

Larry guessed that Gabriella had finally broken Rune's heart once and for all.

Rune had, in fact, made this decision after he'd found out that Gabriella had kidnapped Nancy.

He had offered Gabriella numerous chances to repent, even committing dirty deeds on her behalf to prove his sincerity to her. In the end, however, Rune's efforts had ultimately remained futile. Wearied, Rune's tolerance had finally reached its end.

Love was a most curious thing. Once bitten, one could do absolutely nothing but to accept what fate had in store. Rune was thus determined to wait no longer nor push fruitlessly for something that wasn't destined to be. Instead, he would practice acceptance. It was a much more peaceful way of living.

"Can you bear to let Gabriella go, though? Isn't she the woman you love the most?" Larry pressed.

He wondered skeptically if Rune had merely said this to deflect Larry and Jory's intense questioning.

Rune, unfortunately, was earnest in his resolve. "I'm sorry, if there's nothing else, I'll be closing for the day. I'm picking my girlfriend up after work," he announced, turning and hurrying away.

So it's true! Larry mused, looking at Rune's departing figure. Beside him, Jory shook his head in resignation and heaved a long sigh.

If Gabriella already had a man who was so deeply in love with her, why did she have to choose Larry instead? Furthermore, why did she have to resort to such despicable tactics? What on earth is Gabriella thinking?

Does she really love Larry? Countless questions clamored in Jory's mind. The worst outcome would be for Gabriella to finally snag Larry, only to realize that all her labor was in vain. Gabriella had been so obsessed with Larry, not out of love, but because of jealousy. After all her maneuvers, however, Gabriella had ended up losing the only man who loved her.

"All right. Let's leave too, then," Jory said helplessly, walking out of the fashion boutique.

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Back at the hotel, Gabriella's men were industriously checking each room. Joan and Nancy, meanwhile, were still holed up in Caiden's.

Nancy had begun experiencing feelings of claustrophobia. It was purely fear that confined her to her room.

"Joan, when can we get out of here?" Nancy wheedled, sulking as she paced the room.

"It'll just be another few days, Nancy. Just bear with it, OK? It's for our safety. I'm fine, but I can't let anything happen to you," Joan replied as she ruffled Nancy's hair.

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"Look at that. What an image of sisterhood," Jaden proclaimed as he walked into the room, placing the bags he was carrying aside.

"What did you buy? Are there snacks in there?" Nancy asked excitedly, her eyes dancing with anticipation.

"Of course. How could I not have gotten your favourite?" Jaden replied proudly. He fished out an enormous bag of assorted snacks and tossed it over to Nancy.

Even while pregnant, Nancy radiated a disarming beauty. If Nancy wasn't so obviously taken, Jaden would have swooped in.

"Jaden, what's happening out there?" Joan asked somberly.

"It's a mess. Someone's going door to door searching the rooms. This place isn't safe anymore. We'll have to move somewhere else," Jaden replied gravely.

In fact, Jaden had been rather astounded by the doggedness of Nancy's kidnapper. So many days had passed since Nancy had escaped, yet she was unrelenting in her pursuit. Jaden privately wondered just how great an offense Nancy had committed to warrant such a chase.

"Hey, where's Caiden? Where did he go?" Nancy asked out of the blue, as if suddenly recalling his existence only then.

"He went out to deal with some other matters. He can't be spending the whole day in here with you, can he?" Jaden remarked wryly.

He shot a glance at Joan, who was standing a little way off. Raising his voice slightly, Jaden continued, "Caiden's always busy every day. I really don't know which woman will be able to deal with that in the future," Jaden said, purposely a sigh loud enough for Joan to hear.

Nancy hesitated, then slowly inched towards Jaden.

"Are you saying that Caiden doesn't have a girlfriend now? That's impossible! He's so handsome and is such a kind-hearted man. How can he not have a girlfriend?" Nancy commented incredulously.

Everything Nancy had pointed out about Caiden was true. In fact, Caiden would have had a girlfriend by now if he hadn't been so hung up over Joan. The various girls who had lusted after Caiden while he was in college were sophisticated, pretty maidens. They stood no chance, however, against Caiden's steadfast obsession of his college sweetheart.

At least Caiden had finally met Joan now after all those years spent pining for her.

"Joan, do you have a boyfriend?" Jaden asked casually.

"Like me, Joan got married quite a few years ago," Nancy quickly supplied.

What? She's already married? Jaden thought, aghast. Did both of us go to all that trouble for nothing?

Disappointment flashed across Jaden's eyes. If Caiden finds out, he'll be devastated! Jaden thought, distraught.

"What are all of you talking about? It sounds exciting," Caiden's voice called out cheerily at that moment. He followed, sauntering in soon after.

"Uh... we were... nothing much. Why did you come back so early today?" Jaden asked, quickly shifting the conversation away from the earlier sensitive topic.

"I finished early so I came back naturally," Caiden replied smoothly.

One could almost hear a pin drop in the room, so stifling was the silence.

"What's wrong? Why are all of you behaving so strangely?" Caiden asked with a chuckle.

"It's nothing. We were just... they were just asking me about the situation outside. We are still..." Jaden frantically replied, tripping over his words in his eagerness to fill the room.

"That's right, we've got to move. They're searching for you room by room. If we don't allow them in here, that'll definitely raise their suspicions," Caiden agreed.

It looks like Gabriella's not going to give up anytime soon! Joan thought gloomily.

"Joan, isn't that person your best friend in college? She looks very familiar," Caiden suddenly said.

"What do you mean, best friend? She's Joan's nemesis! She's totally a wolf in sheep's clothing," Nancy retorted, gnashing her teeth in anger.

Nancy had meant to look intimidating but Jaden only found her grow even more adorable in his sight. His lips curved up involuntarily into a smile.

"Caiden, thank you for taking care of us for the past few days. However, I think it would be best if we head home instead," Joan suddenly said slowly, as if deep in thought.

There was no point in staying there now that Gabriella and her men had arrived, Joan reasoned. If she and Nancy remained, all they would be doing was submitting themselves into Gabriella's hands.

Beside Joan, Nancy looked rather apprehensive. "Joan, even if you go home, Gabriella definitely won't stop here," she piped up in a small voice.

It was true. To say that Gabriella was an extremely determined individual was to put it lightly.

"So it's her," Caiden gave a low whistle.

He recognized the name. Gabriella had been notorious in college for bullying the freshmen in their club. She was also extremely snooty and would only associate herself with the rich and powerful. Gabriella considered herself far too superior to mix with the common herd. Caiden had been on the receiving end of Gabriella's nastiness back in school. If it wasn't for Joan's multiple interventions, he would have quitted the club long ago. Caiden would naturally never have had the chance to win first place then.